



RIVALS^{OF}MORRIS
PALINDROME'S SAGA

PEARSON MYLES

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SAMPLE

NOT FOR RESALE

ONE

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

Explosions of color lit the city. Different shades of crimson, orange, and ebony complexions filled the streets. Night fell once again. The black veil of the sky augmented the lights below. Throughout the streets, laughter rang, echoing all around; other sounds drowned out by the merry mood. Except none of these images were true. Clouds of smoke and ash blocked out the sky, and instead of laughter, screams and cries vibrated through the streets, mingling with blood, fire, and debris.

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

Fire consumed the city of Villhiliium. Plenarie men, women, and children alike screamed while trying to flee the destruction. Their city's buildings and streets exploded into piles of brimstone and fire. Plenaries scrambled down the crumbling town square, taking

refuge inside underground shelters. The chaos outside cracked the largest shelter's foundation, dust falling from the roof as the room shuddered. Sitting in the center of the room, a projected image of the city phased in and out of focus. Gathered around the map, the triad of Descended Eldersons—leaders of the Plenarie Assemblage—witnessed the rapid deterioration of Villhilium.

Desmond Viridian, one of the Descended Eldersons, turned to his peers on the council. "We have another breach in the east wing of the city," he grimly informed them.

The people huddled in the room cried out as the building shook once more. Chamber doors burst open as a wounded man limped in. His face scarred and scorched, the plenarie's right arm dripped tears of blood. Hobbling up to the Descended Eldersons, he weakly gripped Desmond's robes. "They have us surrounded, sir! The city is under heavy fire from the enemies' missiles and artillery. Most civilians were evacuated, and we are preparing a shutdown of the portals in the arch tower."

Desmond waved to his wife, Penelope. "Summon the city's sentinels. Tell them to meet me at the vault."

Penelope nodded as she ran into the chaos outside. When he glanced one last time at the map of the city, his stern expression grew darker watching the black pinpoints of the invaders swarming the city. The vault room wasn't far away. Desmond wasted no time sprinting out of the shelter and into the archives building across the town square. Standing close together in the

building's desolated foyer, the remaining sentinels of the capital looked to their leader.

"With all due respect, sir, shouldn't we be at our posts to help evacuate the city?"

Desmond locked eyes with the speaker. Felicity Chiffon, a young mother but a fierce defender, had only recently been appointed the honorary rank of sentinel. She and the Darkthistle family were the guardians of Villhilium's armory district. A loyal friend of Desmond, Felicity awaited his response with vigilant eyes.

Desmond cleared his throat. "Where are Erick and Steven?"

This time an older, balding man stepped forth. "The market place and barracks have all been destroyed, sir. Along with all their inhabitants, including Erick and Steven."

Desmond exhaled his grief. Wiping his brow, he walked over to Felicity and laid his hand on her shoulder. His gaze softened with more compassion than he could express in words. "Felicity, find your family and the Darkthistles. Head to the arch tower and seal the portal to one of the old outposts behind you."

Felicity clutched his hand before leaving. The archives building shuddered a little as the screams outside grew louder. Gazing up, Desmond's eyes turned to slits as he watched the sky grow blacker. The city's purge would end soon.

"Alizarin, Fuchsia, and Bazaar, with me." Desmond gestured to the last sentinel. "Marigold, same as Sentinel

Chiffon. Retreat to the arch and take anyone you can.”

Desmond and his three followers dived deeper into the wrecked building toward the secret vault. It wouldn't matter, though. Within hours, any secrets this building had would either be revealed or destroyed. Filled with hidden relics and objects of immense power, the raging war above somehow left the room unaffected, with only dust and cobwebs to pester it.

“Dismantle everything you can,” Desmond ordered as he overturned a crate.

Unless nailed down, the sentinels crushed, smashed, and destroyed everything in the room. Various inventions, weapons, and tools lay scattered across the floor in fragments while they hurried. They could not let their enemies claim any additional assets, even a single object from the room could help them advance their weaponry.

The task almost completed, Desmond signaled them to stop with only one package left untouched. Some relics, more powerful and dangerous than others, could not be destroyed. He never intended to destroy this small box; its purpose outweighed the sensible notion of smashing it before others could steal it. Strange how an object so small and delicate could be so important, but Desmond knew that its size did not matter.

He handed it to Bazaar who had a bag ready. Checking one more time to make sure they had destroyed every box and device possible, everyone rushed out of the room as Desmond sealed the door for the last time. Their timing had been almost perfect. Almost. Just as the final lock

clicked, the walls and roof shook again as rocks came crumbling down.

“Take cover!” he yelled.

A shower of rocks and pieces of roof rained down as everyone tried to shield themselves. When the dust settled, Desmond struggled to his feet and helped Alizarin up. Scanning the caved-in hallway, his heart stopped at the sight of Fuchsia’s crushed corpse under the pile of rubble behind them.

“Keep going,” he said, his voice thick and strained. “We need to reach the tower before it’s too late.”

They picked their way through the wreckage and climbed out of the stairwell. After Desmond checked to make sure Bazaar still had the bag, he turned right into what remained of the building’s foyer. The front doors of the archives opened to a direct path to the tower where they could make their escape.

“Come on!” he encouraged.

The room shook even more as something moved in the shadows. Its atmosphere was eerie with no other sound except their own heavy breaths. Over the sound of their breathing, a new noise echoed. A deep, rattling voice that cackled in the darkness.

“*Relegator!*” Desmond shouted, calling the hidden enemy by its name.

Alizarin let out a bloodcurdling scream, his cries silenced by the gruesome popping sounds of his body being stabbed over and over. His armor torn apart, he dropped to the floor twitching as the dark voice laughed.

Before they joined their friend, Desmond and Bazaar sped out of the room and into the desolate outdoors. Just a block down, the arch tower stood out like a beacon of hope. Grabbing Bazaar, Desmond spat, “Get to a portal and seal all the arches! I’ll distract him.”

He had no time to argue as the shadow leaped from behind and impaled Desmond. Bazaar bolted with the bag and disappeared into the cloud of smoke that flooded the streets. Dropping his head to see a clawed hand coming out of his chest, Desmond fell to his knees and choked. The crimson-stained fist turned and then pulled out, leaving a gaping hole in the center of him. His head dizzier by the second, Desmond used all the energy he had left to twist around. Standing above him loomed a relegator—not *a* relegator—the relegator! The first one.

Relegators in general had identical, black armor. But their leader separated himself with his one-of-a-kind, fear-inspiring suit. A sable pillar of foreboding, Solon Blak towered above everyone. The armor widened at the shoulders with stocky arms and legs ending with barbed claws on the tips of his fingers and toes. His face, a horrible mask resembling a skull, bore the vivid details of a fleshless face, emphasized by black, empty-looking eyes and the absence of a nose. All the light around him seemed to vaporize into darkness as he stood there with smoke and energy ebbing off him.

Solon reached down and ripped Desmond’s pendant out of the center of his chest. Without the device, the last of Desmond’s armor melted away in a flash of light as

Solon crushed the oval ornament in his claws.

“Traitor,” Desmond spat at Solon, coughing up more blood. “You will never win.”

The murderer tilted his palm, letting the remains of Desmond’s pendant scatter across the ground. “You should have listened to me when you had the chance, Viridian. Because of their ignorance, the plenaries who sided with you and the other Descended Eldersons will be slaughtered.”

Desmond struggled to stand. The first relegator loomed high above him, but he would not show any fear. He knew what came next. “The plenaries will survive. You and your relegators will pay for what you did.”

Growling, Solon Blak slashed him with a final and intense stroke. The Descended Elderson’s body fell limp to the ground as his killer stepped over him, the pathway to the arch tower reflected in his helmet’s eyes.



Bazaar would never know that Desmond didn’t make it. A lone relegator tackled him from behind and decapitated him so fast that the assault hadn’t registered. His headless body slumped forward as the bag was ripped from his lifeless grasp. The relegator shook it upside down, the case inside tumbling across Bazaar’s bent arm. Clutching the box in his bloody hands, the relegator gurgled a shriek as a blade pierced through his throat.

Pulling his sword out of the relegator's neck, Leonard Blu, one of the city's defenders, kicked the relegator's body away from the box. Hastily grabbing the item, Blu tucked it within the bundle in blankets he cradled in his arm. He ran back toward the tower, tucking and rolling just as another relegator sailed above him. Blocking the entrance, Solon's fingers still dripped with Desmond's blood.

"There is no escape," he hissed.

"You're a fool if you think you can win. The humans will crush you once you're no longer any use to them!" Blu roared.

Solon stretched a pointed finger at the bundle. "I will slaughter your child first. Everyone in this city will taste my vengeance."

Clutching the bundle tighter, the protective father raised his sword. "I will kill you before you touch her!"

Solon snarled as he charged at Leonard. The plenary leapt to the side and stumbled through the entryway, barreling into the tower. Built in the center of the city, the arch tower was the only connection from Villhiliium to the old outposts. The ancient plenaries created the arches to travel throughout the realm. Only a few arches remained in this world. Because of the Excretion Act, most of them were destroyed.

The circular room on the first floor of the tower housed the seven arches—portals that accessed the outside world. Lined against the back wall in a semi-circle, two arches resembled nothing more than rubble,

and four portals were shut down. The last portal slowly closed as Leonard ran toward it. He cried out in pain after getting knocked off his feet. His baby and the box tumbled out of his arms and rolled next to the arch. On the ground, the baby cried as Blu felt Solon's grip snake around his foot.

"No!"

Thrown off the ground, Leonard flew into the wall with a sickening crack. He crashed to the ground motionless, his still face drenched with blood. Kicking at the corpse, Solon seized the box and examined it. The killer's gaze shifted as the baby's loud cries drew his attention. He nudged her with his foot and tilted his head at the infant. She would never see her father again. The last thing the infant would see was the foot that crushed her mercilessly. Solon raised his foot to stomp when the last portal flickered. A flash of green and silver exploded into the room as a man zoomed out of the arch and rammed the relegator, knocking him down.

Like every plenary, Alton Malachite wore silver armor with an oval pendant; the letter P centered on his chest plate's device. His face covered, the helmet concealed the anger that blazed in his eyes. Green light glowed under the plates and throughout the cracks of the armor as well as on the coat of arms. With a quick jerk, Alton kicked the box into the arch behind him as it vanished into the portal.

"No!" Solon shrieked. "What have you done with it?"

Holding his thrashing enemy down, Alton pulled

his right fist back while pinning his left hand on the relegator's throat. A narrow blade slid out of his armored right wrist, extending to Solon's chest.

"This purge ends tonight with your death," he spat viciously.

Solon laughed. "Humanity has already made its choice. Even if you kill me, they will finish what I started. Fear has turned them against you."

Alton punctuated Solon's statement with his sword.

Pulling his blade out, he watched it shrink away back into his wrist. Solon's body remained on the ground limp, as Alton walked over it and to the sprawled plenarie. He pressed his fingers against Leonard's neck. Nothing. The man's sword lay beside his corpse, an heirloom of an old plenarie family. Alton picked it up, untying the dead man's scabbard and tying it around his own waist.

He stepped over Solon, reached down, and lifted the baby into his arms. As he peered through the entrance, he watched a cloud of fire blow the city apart, soaring toward the tower in a giant orange wave. Alton had one foot in the portal when he heard a choking cough behind him.

Solon Blak bent his head up at him. "This... is far from over. I will find you and kill you both. You hear me! I'll... find... you."

Solon's helmet hit the ground with a metal clunk. His threat meant nothing. At least not today. Alton clutched the child and ran through the portal just before it closed. The fire consumed everything, and then all of Villhilium

vaporized into smoke and ash.



Running through a portal was strange; pure energy of white light surrounded the rider zooming across the void between the dimensions. A lack of concentration on the destination would send the traveler into the void dissolving into nothingness. Plenaries never worried about this; they could bend the power of the portals to their will with the help of their pendants. If trained enough, they could even access a portal without an arch.

After Alton teleported and tumbled through the other side of the portal out of an arch, he righted himself and stretched to his full height. After concentrating on his helmet, it faded away. He ducked his head and inspected the baby; she'd fallen asleep in his arms. Holding her in the crook of his elbow, Alton turned around and watched the portal blink out of existence. No one would be using it to make a return trip.

The outpost housing he'd traveled to appeared vacant. This was the last escape route. Other survivors would have made it to one of the other outposts. In a hall filled with blank doors, Alton wandered around until he found a bedroom. He laid the baby on the bare mattress tucked in a corner to rest. Once he unstrapped the scabbard, he leaned the sword against the wall by the bed.

It belonged to her father, and now it was the only

thing she had left of her legacy. He didn't even know the infant's name. When he inspected the hilt, he recognized the coat of arms with a lapis lazuli jewel carved in the center. The Blus were an ancient family line of warriors and fighters. Perhaps one day she would learn of her heritage. His back pressed against the wall, Alton slid down until he sat on the floor and rubbed his eyes with fatigue.

"Hello, do you require my assistance?"

Alton jumped as he grabbed the sword and swung around. At first he noticed nothing, and then the figure materialized into view. *A felera*, he thought. One of the servant keepers of this place. Spirit-like creatures, *felera* served as humble caretakers under the orders of designated masters. As a *plenarie*, this made him her superior by default.

"Is anyone here?" he croaked, his throat cracked from dehydration.

The *felera* smiled. "No one other than you two."

"Can we reach out to the other outposts?" Alton asked.

"All communications have been cut off," she answered.

Setting the sword back down, he sat on the edge of the bed and turned to look at the baby girl. With a fuzz of hair just visible on her head, she couldn't be more than a year old.

"You will be taking control?"

Alton blinked in confusion. "What?"

The *felera* hovered closer. "As the eldest *plenarie*

here, you are by default the appointed protector of this outpost.”

Not for long, he thought to himself. Once he could reach out, surely more survivors would take refuge here. How many made it? Who escaped the massacre? *Not now*, Alton thought. Now was not the time to depend on others. He needed to step up and take control. The future of the plenary race could depend on him. It *did* depend on him. Right here, sleeping before him, lay the future of his people.

Looking at the wall across from him, Alton saw his reflection standing in the mirror before him. In dirty, battered armor, his orange hair spiked up, streaks of premature gray had already started to sprout. Wrinkles of stress circled his eyes and across his soot-covered brow. The last few years of the purge had certainly done a number on him.

With a quick twist and pull, Alton removed the oval pendant off his chest plate. His armor began to glow as it faded away, a unique ability plenary armor possessed. Their pendants could summon their own armor or make it vanish at will when they removed it. When they placed the pendant coat of arms on their torsos, protective armor appeared and covered their bodies completely.

When his armor disappeared, Alton brushed his bare fingers across the child’s soft brow. “I want a full tour. Show me everywhere and everything there is to know about this place.”

“Of course. And how would you like to be addressed?”

Gazing at the child, he replied, “I am Alton. Alton Malachite. The appointed guardian of the Sacrarium until deemed otherwise.”

“Sacrarium?”

“Yes, a Sacrarium,” Alton repeated. “A place of sanctuary and a home to the remaining plenary people.

The spirit dipped her head once more. “As you wish, Alton Malachite.”

Leaving the baby to rest, Alton followed the felera out of the entrance chamber. If he was going to run this place, he would have to make-do with the company he had.

“I will have to give you a name,” he said.

The felera turned to smile at him. “Very well. Is that yours?”

Alton looked where she pointed. A few feet away from the arch sat the bloodstained box the infant’s father had been holding. He hadn’t thought much of it, possibly just a treasure the man tried to save. Picking it up, Alton had no trouble opening the beaten-up box. The object inside glowed brightly in multicolors.

Impossible, absolutely remarkable.

Alton didn’t dare touch the orb bare-handed. Closing the box, he offered it to the felera. “Take this and place it in the safest chamber here at the Sacrarium.”

Following his command, the felera vanished with the box. Just then, Alton heard the crying of the baby echoing down the hall. *I am not just survivor*, he thought.

RIVALS OF MORRIS

Looks like I am a father as well.

TWO

After the destruction of Villhilium, the plenarie population all but vanished. As the years went by, more survivors were discovered and then never seen or heard from again. Over time, most of the world learned to ignore and forget about the plenaries altogether. Nearly two decades after the last city of the plenaries was destroyed, the clocks struck three o'clock on a Friday in Newark, New Jersey.

With school out for the weekend, students abandoned the premises without a second glance. As middle-schoolers flooded out of the building, two kids lagged behind their friends. One of them shoved red-marked pages of homework into his backpack while the other walked alongside him. The results from his latest math test did nothing to remedy the boy's sour mood. As he walked with a glum expression, his friend kept trying to engage in conversation.

“Austin. Austin! Are you even listening?”

He barely was. “Hm?” he replied.

Today marked the third week of Austin’s bad streak. One more low score on an exam, and Austin Bennet would be in for it. Detention sounded reasonable compared to the consequences of his next screw-up. A twelve-year-old with the common distaste for studies, Austin didn’t consider himself an academic prodigy at all.

In general, he kept a low profile in school and with his classmates. This left him few people he personally called friends. He didn’t mind it because he had Kate. Kate Summers, his best friend since childhood, was turning thirteen next month but already had the persona of a mother. She helped him with schoolwork and often critiqued him in a maternal way. Coming out of his self-pity, Austin turned to her and flinched. Kate’s emerald eyes narrowed and burned into his.

“Jeez, Kate! Quit burning holes into my head!” he exclaimed.

Kate had a friendly personality, but everyone knew to stay on her good side. She could be ferocious when she was pissed. Hands on her hips, she raised one of them only to start knocking on Austin’s head. “Hello, McFly! Did you hear me?”

“Okay, okay. I’m listening,” Austin reassured as he backed out of her reach.

Giving him one last death glare, Kate smiled and folded her arms. “So, do you want me to come over and help you with that assignment or what?”

Austin shook his head. “Not tonight, I’m going to the movies with my mom. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“All right. Tell her I said hi!” Kate shouldered her backpack and bounced off, waving back as she went. When he noticed the battered sedan pull up, Austin threw his bag in the back seat and rode shotgun.

“So, how was school?” Denise Bennet asked him.

Austin avoided her eyes and stared out through the window. “Good. Nothing new, really.”

For a while, no one talked. He glanced at his mom once and found her hands strangling the steering wheel. Not a good sign. Driving up to the exit that led to the plaza where the movie theater was, Austin frowned when they missed the turn.

“Uh, Mom? We missed the turn back there.”

Her voice even, Denise said, “We’re not going to the movies tonight.”

“What?” Austin swiveled around and gawked at her.

“Your principal called me at work today.”

The knots in Austin’s stomach tightened. “He did?”

Now they headed home as his mom merged into a different lane. Frustration ebbed off her like steam. “Apparently a couple—no, a lot—of your teachers have expressed some concerns with your grades and homework. Why didn’t you tell me you were failing Social Studies?”

“It was one paper! I already told Mrs. Hennig—”

“And you talked back to Mr. Colt in his class yesterday?” she added.

Austin tried not to explode. “Mr. Colt kept going on and on about the Excretion Act and how great the relegators are! I just asked him why the world thinks the plenaries were so bad.”

His mom swerved the car as a truck cut them off. “Austin! You know you can’t talk about plenaries, especially not in school. Are you trying to get yourself arrested?”

“No. I just think they really weren’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re never going to bring them up again, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Austin sighed. “Am I grounded?”

“I don’t know yet, Austin,” his mom huffed impatiently. “I have too much to worry about right now. Just go to your room and do your homework.”

“What about the movie? You promised we could go!” he protested.

“We’re not going anywhere until your grades pick up and *stay* up.” Denise peered over at him. “I mean it, Austin. I’ve let it slide too many times. Not anymore.”

“You always do this,” Austin snapped at her. “You always cancel stuff at the last minute. You never have time for me!”

His mom spluttered and blinked away angry tears. “I am trying to take care of us. Paying for the mortgage is expensive, and I have to work double shifts at the hospital just to pay for your education.”

“I wish I was with Dad,” Austin muttered.

Denise wiped her eyes, her chin trembled as she stared

PEARSON MULES

straight ahead. After she cleared her throat, she croaked, “Austin...”

Austin ignored her. His arms crossed and blue eyes stormy, he kept his back facing her. She reached out to touch him when the truck ahead of them blew a tire. It sounded as if a gunshot punched through the air as the vehicle spun out of control and crashed into them. Both cars collided, metal crunching against metal, and they tumbled across the road. By the time the ambulance and police cars sealed off the accident, fire surrounded the vehicles and both drivers were dead. In the remains of the sedan, they pulled a young boy out of the car. Unconscious, Austin’s crushed body heaved as he struggled to breathe.

THREE

Reuel never expected the purple glitter.

Today's patrol had been slow, and Reuel wanted nothing more than to head back to headquarters. Before he could call it a day, someone made a call about a disturbance downtown. Probably a prank call, but as a relegator officer, Reuel needed to check it out anyway. Taking some on-duty enforcers with him, he traced the call to an alley between a diner and a boutique shop. Crowds quickly parted around them, avoiding eye contact with the group as they approached the location.

Staring at the empty strip of road, he shook his head, unsurprised. Reuel wanted to call it when a canister flew out of the air and bounced against his leg.

"Get down!"

BANG!

Glittery purple paint splashed everywhere as chaos

shook the street. While citizens scattered from the commotion, the relegators scrambled around, their visors blinded from the blast. Reuel threw off his helmet, his black armor sparkling with paint. No casualties or injuries this time, if Reuel didn't count his pride. Looking around, his eyes froze at the words painted on the wall. A giant purple flower glistened on the bricks with a phrase written beneath it.

The Alliance Is The Real Monster

A symbol of the insurgence, Reuel recognized. This one belonged to an elusive plenary who dubbed himself "The Orchid." For the last eight months, purple flowers had been painted where he'd targeted relegators. Some attacks ended with casualties, others just victimless call signs to other plenary stragglers. Reuel's new mission was to bring this revolutionist down. When he stumbled out onto the curb, Reuel caught a glimpse of a hooded figure fleeing the scene before vanishing into the crowd.

"He's getting away! After him," he roared at his squad.

The relegators continued to slip and crash into each other, trying to get the ridiculous paint off. Cursing as he bolted down the street alone, Reuel shoved past bystanders with his target barely in sight.



There was no pain when Austin accidentally smashed his toes against the door. Straightening his wheelchair, his second attempt to pass through the doorframe succeeded. Outside the diner where Kate worked part-time, he wheeled himself down the sidewalk to get some fresh air. Parked on the sidewalk, Austin checked his foot while he waited to cross the road. If anything was bruised, he couldn't tell.

After the accident, he lost all feeling in his body from the waist down. According to the doctors, he would never walk again, bound to the stupid chair for the rest of his life. But his legs weren't the only loss. This September would mark the fifth year since the car crash, the same month his mom died. Their final moments together had been wasted, arguing about Austin's grades and school. And the last thing he'd said to her was that he wished he was with his dad. Guilt rotted inside Austin like cancer. The hollowness overflowed the emptiness stretching from his waist down.

He watched as his left hand trembled again. *Another irreversible injury*, he thought bitterly. Austin tried to hold it still, but the effort proved pointless. After he crossed the road, Austin was thinking about trying the vintage vinyl shop when an explosion shook his chair. A shower of purple paint doused with glitter erupted out of the alley ahead of him. People screamed and shoved past Austin, trying to escape the mayhem.

When Austin spotted the relegators, he laughed. Drenched in the stuff, the relegators bumped and tripped

over each other comically. No one offered to help them; everyone feared and respected them too much. One of the relegators shouted at his associates, commanding them to find the culprit.

It's The Orchid. Austin grinned. A defector of the United Alliance, someone who fought for the plenaries in a society fearing them. When it came to flipping it at the relegators, Austin loved The Orchid's style. Back in his room at Kate's, Austin had a wall of pictures capturing the rogue's handiwork, but he had never been so close to an actual paint attack before. Adrenaline boiled inside Austin as he tried to take a video. In the confusion, someone crashed past him, knocking the phone out of his hand. It cracked on impact and skidded on the concrete pavement.

When he reached down, a stranger's knee flew out of nowhere, smashing into Austin's face. He cried out, his eyes watering, swelling quickly following the pain. Gritting his teeth with one eye shut, he tried again to grab his phone, but nobody noticed him struggling to keep himself from falling out of his seat. A second before he lost the fight, someone caught him and pushed him back into the wheelchair.

"My phone," he groaned. "I've got to get my phone...."

His Good Samaritan snatched up the device and returned it to him. Rubbing it against his jeans, Austin frowned at the cracked screen.

"You should be more careful, dude. You're lucky all

you got was a black eye.”

“Yeah, I will be,” Austin mumbled, returning the phone to the safety of his pocket.

The helpful stranger rolled his chair away where the crowd wouldn’t hit him. Austin glanced at his helper, but his good eye couldn’t focus on the girl’s face. A relegator, the one who was yelling, caught her attention. She slipped on Austin’s jacket hanging on the back of his chair and yanked her hood down. The relegator rushed past them without a second glance, and the girl relaxed with a long exhale. Her guilty behavior evaporated after she checked their surroundings, her hand clutching something in her pocket. When she slipped her hand out, Austin noticed the purple stains on her fingers.

“Take care now,” she bid him farewell.

Austin blinked and she vanished. Rubbing his good eye, he turned left and right. The citizens returned to their own business, as if the attack never happened. The relegators blocked off the alley but the girl’s chaser hadn’t returned. When he double-checked himself, Austin realized she had stolen the jacket.

“Hey! I liked that jacket!” he yelled at no one.



The next day, Austin’s routine followed the same old pattern. He got up, ate breakfast, then took a bath. Kate helped him into his chair and pushed him back to his

bedroom. Even handicapped, Austin always managed to create a mess. His piles of old clothes and crumpled papers covered the floor, and his blankets were pushed to the edge of the bed with his pillows scattered around the place. Kate tidied the bed in seconds, then piled up his dirty clothes and threw them into the laundry basket. Austin always joked that she'd make an excellent maid.

Kate worked fast, helping him dress nicely and forced a comb through his rowdy hair. Ignoring Austin's pained protests, Kate looked him over and gave her nod of approval. After she steered him out to the car, they drove together to the cemetery. With a promise of coming right back with a tight hand squeeze, Kate dropped him off to run a couple of errands.

Today marked the ninth of June, the birthday of the late Denise Bennet. Weeds grew around the small tombstone. While they obscured it, the name carved on the stone would always be etched into Austin's mind. Rolling his wheelchair closer, Austin tried to set a bouquet of flowers by the grave, but he dropped them clumsily. He cursed his shaking hand. Returning his attention to the stone, Austin wet his lips before he managed to speak.

"Hey, Mom." He paused for a moment. "I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday, wherever you are. What else, um, I'm done with school for the summer. My math teacher said I finished really well. I think I got Bs and some As in my other classes too." Austin blinked hard, his vision blurring in his good eye. "I know you would've been proud."

The wind rustled around him. In the past few weeks, the dreary skies with their iron-gray clouds and musty winds reflected Austin's mood. Looking at the sky, he spotted even darker clouds forming. Today had been surprisingly clear, but now something in the sky intrigued Austin. Thunder boomed like a cannon as the sky grew blacker.

Crack!

Lightning accompanied the sound of teeth-rattling thunder; something about it bothered Austin. Instead of striking the ground, they seemed to bounce off each other in the air.

Crack! Crack!

“What the hell?”

As the lightning beat against itself again, it exploded in a shower of yellow and dark purple light. Austin dismissed it as fireworks until two large bolts hit the ground past the trees on his left. The lightning strike lit up the cemetery in a colorful spectacle, then the thunder silenced and the lightning storm instantly vanished.

Turning his chair around, Austin craned his head to see where the lightning had struck. A tiny voice at the back of his head warned him against checking it out, but curiosity got the better of him. He passed more tombstones to where the energy burst had struck beyond the trees. When he approached the spot, he scanned the perimeter for any seared surface, yet there was no sign of any odd lightning or impact marks.

Shaking his head, Austin was turning to leave when an

explosion hurled him out of his wheelchair. Wind howled in his ears as the booming of thunder returned with the crackling lightning. His ears rang and his vision blurred when he opened his good eye. For a moment, Austin thought a tornado had appeared as the trees next to him creaked and shook. Storm clouds spiraled down around the open area. When the ringing in his ears subsided, he heard an outcry from an indistinct voice mixed with the vocals of the storm. The outcry was drowned out by another ear-popping blast. A burst of purple and yellow lights blinded Austin as he tried to shield himself from the danger.

Everything around Austin went eerily quiet. He no longer felt the wind whipping around him, or the ground shaking from the freak storm. Peeking through his trembling hands, he couldn't stop shaking as he glanced around. The storm had vanished. Crawling back up into his chair, he took a few raspy breaths to calm down. After steadying himself in the seat, he checked his right side and then his left.

Austin cried out, disoriented by yellow light when the force of energy collided with him, flipping him high into the air. Lightning pierced his body, tearing through every fiber. His blood boiled and burned under his skin, smoking in agony. As the strange power surged through him, his skin regrew and knitted itself back together. Austin's body glowed with yellow energy as he crashed to the ground unconscious.

Available for purchase in digital and print formats.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pearson Myles has been writing stories since he was sixteen years old, drawing inspiration from his childhood adventures across the United States with his family. He especially loves the mountains in Colorado, where he wrote his first draft of *Rivals of Morris*. Pearson is a huge fan of books and has read *The Hobbit* and the *Harry Potter* series far too many times to count. When he isn't reading, writing, or listening to music, Pearson is training as a martial artist in Tae Kwon Do. *Palindrome's Saga: Rivals of Morris* is his first novel.

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