

Mac Duquene led a bad life, and then he died. Only, he did not expect to find himself in The Bare Dirty, a place for lost souls, redemption, and war. All is not right in the afterlife, and Mac finds himself caught in a battle between the Irelings who reject redemption and the angels and demons who seek to save or destroy them. When Mac finds himself with a demon's soul-destroying gun, he takes redemption into his own hands, flees his pursuing Redeemer, Sasha, and finds his own soul to save back in the world of the living. But the Irelings want the gun for their own purposes, and will be more than happy to kill the woman he must save to get it.

Chapter One

Don't take a life unless you are willing to give up your own. Mac Duquene wiped at the sweat dripping down his face, and stared at the red smear on the back of his hand. It must have come from the exploding door that had nearly taken off his head. The mantra repeated itself over and over in Mac's brain while he stared ten stories down to the intersection of (??? And ???), where a fourth NYC police car came to a screeching, flashing stop. One had conveniently parked itself beneath the fire escape.

Who had he told that to? The thought had come to him spontaneously at the time, trying to impress upon the boy just how unfailingly stupid it was to seek gainful employment in the business of killing people. Ah, yes. Freddie McAllister, barely old enough to grow a fucking beard. The boy had looked up to him, wanted to be just like him. Who in their goddamned right mind would purposefully choose to be a cleaner? Psychopaths perhaps and idiots named Freddie.

Killing people had not been on Mac's job list, but if you stay connected with the wrong people long enough, bad things tended to happen to bad people. Freddie McAllister had wound up sucking on the wrong end of a .45. Sadly, even smart people could fuck up. Best laid plans went astray, and forgettable, small coincidences caught up to you and kicked you in the ass. Today things had caught up with Mac Duquene.

Melinda Dillon had promptly left for her job as hostess at Bartolo's at 9:30 a.m., leaving her embezzling, drunk of a fiancé, Marcus Redwood asleep at home, and apparently, her iPod too, still hooked to its charger on the bedroom nightstand. It was something Mac should have noticed upon entering the bedroom and rendering Mr. Redwood unconscious. Melinda had returned at 9: 51 a.m. to retrieve her precious piece of technology, which apparently was required for effective hostessing.

In one of those small coincidences of unfortunate timing, Mac had just finished hanging Marcus Redwood from the shower head and slit open both (?) arteries in his legs. In the silence, Melinda had heard the peculiar sound of dripping blood on the porcelain tub, glancing over at the cracked open bathroom door just in time to catch Mac attempting to move back into the darkness.

In a credit to hostesses everywhere, Melinda had the .38 in her purse out and firing before Mac could be surprised by the fact that a hostess needed to carry a concealed weapon. The hollow-core door exploded inches from his face, while he pulled the silencer-equipped Ruger from its holster. He caught Melinda square between the shoulder blades as she ran from the room. Occasionally, cleaning just wasn't so clean.

Those were the deaths Mac regretted, when Karma snickered at you with demonic glee. The sirens sounded before the apartment could be truly wiped clean. A neighbor had knocked on the door moments after Melinda's attempt to have him breathing through a third nostril, and Mac knew then time was short. Too short as it happened. Three emptied clips later, Mac found himself running for the roof, only to find the growing audience of NYC's finest swarming at his feet.

Jump, jail, or hail of gunfire. Mac sat on the protective wall surrounding the roof's edge, pondering the possibilities. Jumping was for cowards. Jail. Well, that was a familiarity Mac could live without experiencing for the rest of his life. Hail of gunfire was the obvious and most notable

Some desiderata on The Bare Dirty.

This is chapter one of my new novel. It is a work in progress, so the chapter before you is NOT the final version. I thought it might be interesting to post things as I go, and it allows for feedback as I move along in the never-ending process of novel creation. I'm not one of those writers who can't show my work around until I feel it is complete. I enjoy the interchange, which often gives me ideas on how things should be different or could be improved.

In these sidebars, you will find additional information, most of which is to provide content beyond the printed page: character bios, commentary by the characters, expanded details on various aspects of the story, and so on. I might even put in some notes on the writing process for particular parts of the story. This will hopefully be an evolving document over the course of writing this book. I hope you enjoy, and feel free to comment on it at my livejournal blog:

Jimnduncan.livejournal.com

way to go down if that was what it came too. Getting lumped into that pathetic batch of losers throughout history was not how Mac wanted to be remembered either.

Empty Ruger held loosely in his bloody hand, Mac raised his arm, pointed it at the rooftop door and waited.

He realized, while his hand began to tremble ever-so-slightly with fatigue, that he had been expecting this day for a long time. When you dealt in death, its specter perpetually lingered over your shoulder, paranoid whispers constantly in the background just beyond hearing. After a while, you either accepted the fact or drove yourself insane, finding your impending demise in every hand that reached into a pocket or car that happened to slowly drive by.

When the rooftop door finally burst open, Mac involuntarily pulled the trigger, smiling at the sound of empty "click" of the trigger. It would have been more apropos if he had been trying to kill the cop who whipped around the doorframe, finding in his moment of need, that fate had kicked him in the balls, but this was perhaps more fitting for Mac Duquene, cleaner and lover of all things "Sinatra."

In another spot, Mac would have found himself full of 9mm shells, but the force of the first shot caught him square in the chest, rocking him backward and over the lip of the building's roof.

Nice shot. I might just be dead before I hit the ground. His somersaulting body gave him a brief flash of the ground below, a gathering parking lot of flashing red lights and the curious. Perhaps some were even now pointing with surprised fingers at his tumbling body.

Mac felt his heart stop, ruptured by the spinning slug, now lodged somewhere against his spine, but fate is not kind to the cruel, and death met him in the form of the roof of a blue, double-parked, Dodge mini-van.

Or not. Mac opened his eyes to a sky hanging low with dark, misty fangs, thick with the smell of ash and decay. Daring to look to each side, he found himself lying on smooth, featureless stone. Low lying buildings a short distance away faded in and out of view through the dense cloud cover, all smooth slabs of stone with lifeless, hollow eyes in their walls that stared back at him unblinking. Mac reached up with ginger fingers and probed at his chest, finding nothing but taut, unblemished fabric.

"What the fuck?" He propped up on his elbows to find his shirt wholly intact, and after yanking it out of his pants to exam the skin, there was nothing but rippling abs and the soft fuzz of chest hair. No holes, no blood, no nothing, just whole, grey skin.

Mac held up his hand, turning it over and then back. The pallor of his skin left something to be desired. Perhaps he really was dead. He sat up, flexing his legs, his arms, and generally found nothing at all wrong with his body, short of being decidedly the wrong color. Mac got his feet under him and stood up. His initial view extended in all directions, an unending sea of gray, stone slabs, erected into a variety of squares and rectangles, piled and squashed together in haphazard fashion. Everything faded into the oppressive gloom of the low lying, foggy shroud. It looked as though someone had turned off the switch on the color palette.

At the edge of what was apparently a rooftop, Mac looked down to see the gray scabble of a dirt road. There were a few people down there, shuffling along, kicking up small clouds of dust with each step. They moved at a turtle's pace, walking by one another without a glance, oblivious to anything except the barren road before them. No cars, no sidewalks, no streetlights, or signs

On trying a different process:

Unlike my previous two novels, which were plotted out excessively before I even began to write them, I began this one with only a few things. I had a place, a character, a beginning, midpoint, and ending. Part of this was just the urge to begin the story. I've had this idea floating around in my head for a year now, and I finally found a story to wrap it around. The other part was to try something different with my writing process. I've always envied the pantsers's ability to write on the fly. What I don't envy, is the increased amount of editing required. I'm not fond of nor particularly skilled in this aspect of writing, which is why I like to plan everything out in advance.

So, I've altered my process for this to attempt to incorporate beneficial elements of both. I'm creating plot as I go, working somewhat ahead of my writing. I began with the first few chapters. My outline now extends through twelve chapters, and I am beginning chapter five. Will just have to see how it works in the end.

demarcated the scene below with any hints of civilization. It was nothing more than the shuffling crawl of people through a lifeless stone cityscape.

“God,” Mac said, rubbing at the black stubble on his chin. “Where the hell am I?”

“Might wanna to get your dumb arse down off a’there before some Redeemer spots ya and decides you be good target practice.”

Mac nearly jumped out of his shoes. Directly below, a walkway stretched along the edge of the building. A man leaned out over the stone rail, his head turned up to look at him. He looked like something out of a Romero zombie flick. Stringy black hair, hanging limp over a threadbare, black overcoat did little to mask the gaunt, withered face and black lips pulled into a thin slice of a smile.

The notion of a Redeemer meant nothing to Mac, but he decided it better to make no assumptions about the danger he might be in, and sat down on the edge of the roof before pivoting around and dropping down the walkway. “Who are you?”

The smile flattened. “Might be I should ask you the same, Mister, seeing as you be walkin’ ‘round on my rooftop. Thinkin’ maybe I had me an Ireling sneakin’ ‘round up there.” His black eyes squinted as he looked Mac up and down. “Not no Ireling though.”

“Mac,” he replied, hesitating to extend his hand, but then decided being impolite might not be wise. “Mac Duquene, and no, I’m not an...uhm, Ireling?”

The man transferred a rock from one hand to the other and grasped Mac’s hand. His flesh was cold and chalky, as though covered in the dust from the streets below. “New to the BD are ya then? Haven’t seen a fresh one in...” He cackled, a scraping wheeze of a sound. “Well, could be a day or a century. Don’t have much sense of time no more.”

With an eye on the rock, Mac casually wiped his hand off on his pant leg. He couldn’t help the thought that the man might have infected him with something. Being called a “fresh one” did little to soothe his unease. “Seeing as I have no fucking clue what the BD is, I would guess that makes me new.”

He cackled again. “Indeed it does, Mac Duquene.” The rock got stuffed into a half ripped pocket, and he turned toward the shadowy door behind him. “Come on in for a few. We’ll have us a little pow-wow. Expect you got yourself a few questions about the ol’ Bare Dirty.”

“The Bare Dirty?” If anything, it was an appropriate name.

“Purgatory. Hell. Call what you will, but it’s where us lost souls come to make our peace.”

“Not sure I like the sound of that, Mr....?”

“Barstow. Anyone around here who calls me anything at all just calls me Barstow.”

Mac took a look down at the street below, where the endless parade of dead shuffled along with purposes unknown. “Guess I could use a little pow-wow, Barstow.”

“Yep. Come on in. All the comforts of home.” He laughed once more and vanished inside.

Inside, Mac found the comforts of home consisted of two rooms, with a stone slab in the middle of the first. The only light filtered in through the single window or rather the hole, since there was no glass to be seen. On the slab, the familiar squares of a checkerboard were etched into its surface, light and dark stones lined up on either side.

“You’re living in the lap of luxury here, Barstow.”

“Needs of the dead are few.” He sat down next to the slab and motioned for Mac to sit across from him. “Humor your friend here, and play me a game.”

Mac watched him move a stone onto one of the squares. Not exactly what he had in mind,

The Bare Dirty:

The name and place came to me in a dream, albeit a rather surreal one as my remembered dreams tend to be. It is a barren cityscape, an endless maze of stone buildings, no more than three stories tall, built in random stacks, with walkways and stairs all over. There are dark alleys and hidden courtyards, and in the center of it all is a giant tower.

The denizens of the BD are dead, souls who cannot move on yet to that next place of existence, who are waiting to say goodbye to loved ones or to see if justice prevails against those who caused their death. There are almost as many reasons as souls. Then there are those who are needing redemption. They led bad, unethical lives; they murdered or raped or caused undue suffering to others. They are given tasks to perform back in the living world, such that they understand their wrongdoing and make amends. And then there are the irredeemable, who have no desire for redemption, and seek only to destroy those who would help them.

but then he needed info. He shrugged and sat down, picking a piece at random to move. "So, we're friends now are we?"

"Knowin' people is all you got here," he replied.

"Fair enough." Mac countered Barstow's next move. "Who do I need to know?"

He laughed. "Getting' ahead of yerself there, Mac. How 'bout you start with what brought ya here?"

"How the hell do I know that? I splattered myself on the roof of a fucking minivan and woke up here."

His mouth tightened into a razor-thin crease. "Ah, killed yerself did ya?"

"What? No. Cop buried a 9mm slug in my chest, knocked me off a ten story tenement."

Barstow's eyes widened and the smile returned. "You're a redeemable one, then. Tell me your story, Mr. Duquene. I haven't had me a good, sordid tale in a long time."

"Huh? Redeemable?"

"Means you'll be getting' a chance to fix yer soul," he said. "Me, I'm just one o'the lost ones, waiting for things to sort themselves out."

"Barstow, you're losing me here."

"Meanin' my little girl watched her daddy drink his self to death, and I gotta few words to be saying to her before she moves on."

Mac nodded. "I see." He didn't see, not really, but it was better to play this out and see what came of it. "So, how do I get a chance to fix my soul?"

"Getting' ahead of yerself there, Mac, and that's not somethin' I can decide for ya. I'm sure a counselor will be over this way before long, and get ya set straight. Meanwhile, tell me yer story, friend. We got nothin' but time."

He sighed. Something told Mac that roughing the guy up would serve little purpose. Hard to be motivated when you were dead. He moved his piece and began to tell Barstow his story, painting the broad, violent strokes of his life. They were into their second game when he returned to his swan dive into the minivan.

Barstow simply nodded. He looked pleased. "Lived yerself a rough life there, Mac. Pope won't be nominatin' ya fer sainthood I expect."

He chuckled. "No. I wasn't what you'd call, 'a good man.' Only killed those who had it coming to them. Mostly." Mac decided he liked this gray, withered man. It took something to not pass judgment on the kind of life he had led.

"Ever kill a child?"

Mac shook his head. "You were safe from me until you passed eighteen. After that you had better have kept your nose clean."

"Fair enough." He double jumped Mac. "King me. For a man in yer profession, you don't pay close enough attention."

He realized he hadn't even been looking at the board. "Come on, I just died. Give me a break." Barstow laughed and Mac kinged him. "Pow-wow from the other side, Mr. Barstow. Why am I here? Just where the hell am I? And who is it that I should be expecting?"

"Not a very patient man, are you Mac?"

"When I know what I'm doing, I'm the definition of patience," Mac said. "When I'm a clueless fuck, I find the quickest route to knowledge."

Angels and Demons:

The names may change but for now that is what they are. They are the keepers of the BD, each in their own way. The angels patrol the vast wasteland hunting down those needing redemption and sets them upon the proper path. They are guides, counselors to the afterlife. They have the power to compel, which is why the irredeemable fear them so much. Once in their clutches, you are on the path to redemption whether you want it or not.

The demons seek out and destroy those in the BD who are there for redemption. They do not believe these humans deserve the chance, and roam the city with their chaos guns, incinerating all redeemables who come in their path. They are creatures of nightmares, skeletal abominations that come on the screeching caws of a thousand ravens.

“Patience in all things Mr. Duquene, specially in the Bare Dirty. Otherwise, you be findin’ yerself starin’ at the wrong end of a chaos gun.”

Mac sat up straight. “You’ve got guns around here? No electricity or fire, but you’ve got guns?”

The line of his mouth curled up again. “Oh, not us, Mac. No, we lost ones don’t have nothing.’ It’s them demons that got the guns.”

“Demons.” That was an unexpected twist. “Real live demons?”

The bony points of his shoulders raised a hair. “Not sure I’d be callin’ them livin.’ His mouth twisted into a look of disgust. “They walk and talk like the livin,’ but rest assured, you don’t want to be meetin’ one, Mac. They smell you redeemables a mile off. Step foot in the wrong part of the BD and it’ll be the last thing yer poor soul does.”

Mac nodded. Not someone to be messing with it sounded like, but it was hard to deny the potential of obtaining a gun. He was pretty sure The Bare Dirty didn’t get its name from skanky hookers.

“Ok. Demons bad. I’ll stay away from them, but what’s all this redeemable shit? You said I can fix my soul.”

“Ya can,” he said, “assumin’ of course ya find yerself a counselor. These days that ain’t so easy.”

“Demons?”

“Nah, though they don’t like each other much.” Barstow went about replacing the stones in their rightful places after double jumping Mac yet again to end the game. “Kinda like two sides of the same coin. They both workin’ fer the same guy, just one has faith in ya and the other don’t.”

“Guy?” Mac was perplexed for a moment but then it dawned on him. “God. The counselors are angels.”

He nodded. “Yep, something like that. White, albino bastards all of them, but they’re on yer side, Mac. Ya need ‘em. It’s them or the Irelings, and that’s the path to hell, my friend.”

“Great. And these Irelings are?”

Barstow jumped another of Mac’s pieces. “Really, Mac. The least ya could do is pay attention. I don’t get much chance to entertain. Anyways, Irelings be the irredeemable ones, those folk who gone past carin’ or just too plain stubborn to think movin’ on is the right thing to be doin.’ Most of ‘em mean as spit, and their only purpose in life be makin’ everyone else’s miserable, includin’ the livin.’”

“Wait a minute,” Mac said, absently moving one of his pieces into position to be jumped. “They can interact with the living? We aren’t all dead here?”

“Oh, yer dead, rest assured. We all is dead ‘round here. King me,” he said, waving his hand in disgust. “Ain’t ya ever seen a ghost before, Mac? Heard of them vampires and ghouls sneakin’ about in the dead of night, driving fear into the heart of good, living souls?”

“Sure, I heard of them, but can’t say I’ve had opportunity to chat with one.” Mac licked his lips, feeling the cake of dust upon them. It seemed to be collecting on him like iron to a magnet.

“Well they be real. Irelings love nothin’ more than takin’ out there rage upon the living world. That and killin’ demons. You need to be careful out there, Mac. They’ll want ya, and life in the Ire can be mighty temptin.’ This place can fill ya with rage without much effort, and if ya don’t want to be redeemed, centuries here will warp yer mind.”

Mac Duquene:

The hero of my story. Mac is a cleaner, cleaning up the messes the criminal elements tend to make of things. A selfish and lonely man more out of necessity than any inherent flaws, Mac has done his job because it is what he is good at, and the fact that leaving such a line of work, once chosen, is an untenable option. For Mac, he has made the most of the choices made in his youth, when pride and arrogance doomed him to poor decisions.

Mac is not all about killing however. He loves astronomy, or at least appreciates the humility derived from understanding the vastness and wonder of outer space and our rather infinitesimal place in it. He has never killed a child, understanding the people should be free to be idiots until such time that they should know better. His callousness has not lent itself to much of a love life, and his views of it and women in general have not lent itself to any sort of relationship beyond the transient. He is a man unto himself.

“This doesn’t look like an ideal vacation spot.”

“That it ain’t, Mac. Some folks be afraid of movin’ on. Some stay outta sheer spite, but there be lots o’them Irelings, and it’s mighty temptin’ to be doin’ somethin’ instead o’nothin.’”

Mac nodded in agreement. “Can’t say I’m one for sitting around doing nothing.”

Barstow’s face sagged. “I guess you’ll be headin’ out here then?”

“Sorry, Barstow. I need to figure out what I’m doing here. Can’t say I was prepared for this.” He jumped one of Barstow’s pieces. “King me.”

“No one is, my friend,” he said. “Finish the game with me, would ya? Might be years ‘fore I get someone else in here to play.”

“No problem. You’ve helped me out, and I don’t come across that much in my line of work. When I figure out what the hell I’m doing, I’ll be back by.”

Barstow jumped Mac again and smiled. “I’ll be countin’ the days.”

Mac kicked up dust with each step while he walked along a narrow street, a jumble of stone rising two to three stories above him in haphazard chaos. Someone with a giant bucket of building blocks had come along and shook out buildings to form in whatever fashion they deemed acceptable. It was Bedrock run amok. There were no street signs, no indication of any kind about where Mac might be. Barstow had pointed out to him when he left what the direction of the center was, where folks went to “move on.” After thirty minutes of walking, Mac could no longer say which direction it might be.

Stranger still, not a single one of the shuffling dead that moved past him in the street made any indication of noticing his existence. When he purposefully stopped in the path of one, a stooped, elderly woman who didn’t lift her head far enough to see beyond her toes, Mac watched her shift her gaze just enough to see his toes, and then turn to move around. They were all lost in their own little worlds, purposeless and aimless.

Barstow’s yammering about the Irelings began to make more sense to him now. What kind of death was that, to be left waiting, with no sense of time, or any notion of when the end would happen? Maybe this Bare Dirty place really was Hell.

It didn’t take long for frustration and unease to set in. He wanted to find one of these “counselors” and get on with things, but just sitting around and waiting for one to find him was not how Mac worked. He needed some sense of direction, a plan of action, something to put his mind to. If these angels and demons came from the center, then that was where he needed to go, and the zombified pedestrians wanted nothing at all to do with him.

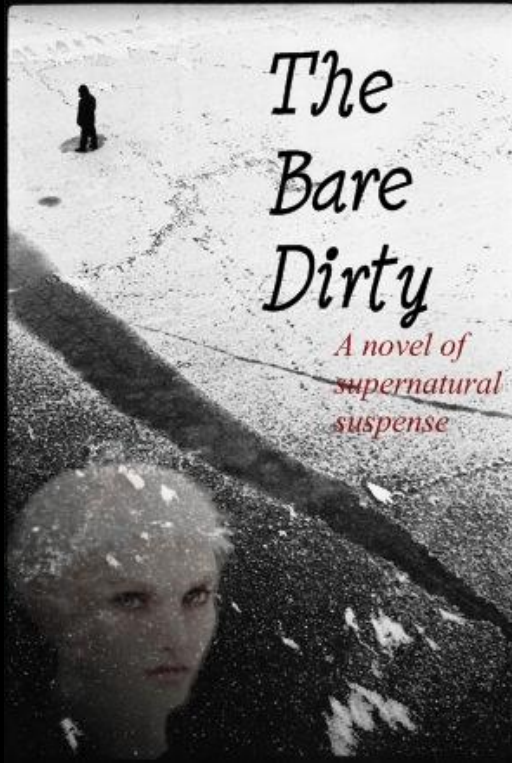
He needed some height, a place to look down on this endless city from. With a little luck, perhaps he would see where this “center” was. So, choosing the highest building he could see beneath the dust-raining cloud cover, Mac climbed up, taking stairs, and using railings to hoist himself up until he had reached the roof.

“Fuckin’-A,” he said, turning in a full circle. From his height, it seemed as though he could reach up and touch the wispy threads that dangled from the ashen blanket overhead. While it did afford him a more distant view, it was still an endless sea of stone, with no indication of which way might prove the right one.

Shaking his head in disgust, Mac jumped back down and walked on in a random direction to try again.

The Heart of Things:

At its heart, this is a story about redemption. All action, undead, and war aside, it is about what it means to be a good person, and what it takes, once fallen, to be viewed as such once again in the eyes of humanity (or those with the power destroy your soul if you fuck it up).



Six more attempts and Mac was no closer to having an answer. The dead were of little help. The blank stares and shrugs or worse, the knowing little smiles, only worked to hype Mac's frustration. He swore the next smile he got was going to get a mouthful of fist.

At the top of a sloping street, if a ten foot rise could be considered much of an elevation change, Mac figured it could be the highest point for miles around, and looked for the highest building to climb atop. When he approached the stacked slabs that passed for stairs, he found someone standing at the corner of the building, half hidden in the darkness between two of the buildings. Unlike everyone else, this guy eyed him with a careful, steady gaze.

"Won't see anything from up there, buddy," he said. A mop of black hair hung in a limp, greasy mass around his face. He looked young, and Mac pegged him straight off as any number of sleazy punks he had come across in his years of running through the worst parts of cities.

Mac checked to make sure the man was talking to him, thought about walking up to him, but then decided better of it. Punk or not, he had no idea what people were capable of around here. "I'm looking for the center of this fucking place. I'll be your buddy if you can point me in the right direction."

He gave Mac a slippery smile. "New here, aren't you?"

"That's no concern of yours," he said. "Either you know or you don't. Which is it?"

The smile receded. "You looking for a quick death?"

"Isn't that a little redundant?"

"Real death, buddy. You look for the center of things and all you'll find is the kiss of chaos."

"You trying to be cute or something?" Mac stepped toward the punk. "I'll worry about the demons. I just want to find me a counselor, that's all."

He snorted at Mac, but did not move. "You don't want to mess with that bullshit, trust me."

"I didn't trust your type when I was alive," Mac said, looking down on him now. He was a good five inches shorter. "Why would I trust your type now?"

"Listen, buddy," he said. "You got three kinds of dead here. You got the waiters, who sit around letting their brains turn to mush. You got the fools who think they know better. Then you got people like me, who know that this is all one big crock of shit, and are looking to make something out of what they've got."

Mac reached out and balled the punk's shirt into his fists, yanking him up close and personal. "Call me buddy one more time and I'll break your greasy ass into enough pieces it'll take you a fucking century to get across town."

He didn't look like he cared one way or the other about Mac's intentions. "Suit yourself, man. You'll never find the center from here. You want a chance to do something," he said, glancing down at the fists pulled up under his chin, "you'll come with me. I'll show you what the dead can do."

"Yeah? And where might that be?"

He smiled, a grin greased with the oil of a con artist. "We call it, The Ire."

Mac dropped him back to the ground, Barstow's words ringing in his ears. "Irelings."