

BELOVED SONS

BOOK FOUR OF THE EREBUS EQUILIBRIUM

NEIL CLADINGBOEL

Equilibrium Books™



Australia

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Beloved Sons by Neil Cladingboel.

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BELOVED SONS

*For Thea, always my guiding light,
even in the darkest of life's shadows...*

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NEIL CLADINGBOEL

PART 1: AWAKENINGS

PART 2: DARKNESS RISING

PART 3: ABANDONMENT

*“The many leaves of lightness and darkness
grow from the branches of a single tree.”*

NEIL CLADINGBOEL

Titles by Neil Cladingboel

The Erebus Equilibrium

*Reflections
The Anvil Amulet
Wraith Tide
Beloved Sons*

Bortag's Curse

Sandman (short story)

Short Fiction/Anthologies

Tale Spin

FlashSpec Volume One (ed.)

FlashSpec Volume Two (ed.)

*Weatherwood
Anomaly
Ghost of Elysium
Death Mask*

Poetry

Visions of Transition

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*“...This is my beloved Son,
in whom I am well pleased.”*

– Matthew 3:17 (KJV)

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Jonathan Edward Malone couldn't wait to greet the world. Born three months premature in the summer of 1965, his minuscule body had died only minutes after delivery. And yet, a miraculous heavenly intervention, the startling details of which he wasn't to uncover for another three decades, had ensured that his remarkable existence continued.

Slight in stature for many years as a result of his premature birth, Jonathan, like countless other children, had been taunted and bullied throughout most of his early childhood, particularly at the hands of Billy Robinson, his most hated childhood nemesis. Then, soon after Jonathan's tenth birthday, a tragic accident claimed the life of his younger sister, Sarah.

Some twenty years later, heavily sedated after suffering a succession of disturbing dreams, Jonathan stumbled upon a gateway to the beyond – a mysterious, parallel dimension that exists behind the seemingly innocent surfaces of all the world's mirrors. This discovery of Erebus, a place of judgement, located somewhere between Heaven and Hell, also introduced him to its remarkable inhabitants, the rorrim, and their peculiar leader, Kronac.¹

However, Jonathan quickly discovered that Kronac, the Keeper of Souls, was not some gruesome ghoul, but a much-needed ally who eventually convinced him of his

¹ *The Erebus Equilibrium*, Book 1: *Reflections* (Equilibrium Books, 2002).

destiny as one of the Chosen – a role that would see him become a pawn in an endless power struggle between the forces of good and evil.

With God on his side, Jonathan triumphed over Mandor the Watcher, the Keeper's adversary and evil usurper, who had recruited the equally evil bully, Billy Robinson to do his bidding, in a spectacular confrontation that resulted in the tragic death of Jonathan's father, and yet which also saw the resurrection of his long-dead sister.

With his father dead, Sarah returned, and Billy banished to the wastelands of Tartarus², Jonathan realised that triumph and tragedy would forever walk hand in hand throughout his life. In time, he would learn that this mirroring of momentous events was a necessary balance that ensured mankind's survival. In Erebus, they called it the Equilibrium; a careful harnessing of the tenuous threads between light and dark, good and evil, which he was to be called upon to protect and maintain on two further occasions in his reluctant role as one of the Chosen.

* * *

Granted a seemingly eternal, parallel existence in Erebus, Jonathan discovered that he could no longer return home³ to his beloved wife and family, and was

² *The Erebus Equilibrium*, Book 2: *The Anvil Amulet* (Equilibrium Books, 2002).

³ Unable to leave Erebus permanently, Jonathan discovered that he could visit episodes of his reflected life using the mirror portals, spending considerable time with his six-year-old self. Whilst the Elders frowned upon such excursions, especially where contact was made, lest the timeline be influenced in any way, they reluctantly allowed the visits, ensuring that the younger Jonathan remembered little of the stranger he had nicknamed Sandman, because of the tell-tale piles of sand he used to leave behind. See the short story *Sandman*, originally published in the *Tale Spin* collection (Equilibrium Books, 2003), and also included in *Bortag's Curse* (Equilibrium Books, 2005).

instead being groomed to eventually replace Kronac as the Keeper of Souls, which would require a thorough understanding of the history and purpose of Erebus and its inhabitants, the apparently immortal rorrim.

The remarkable rorrim of Erebus had survived inside its underground labyrinths for eons. Plumpish and gnome-like in appearance, they were the lifeblood of this mysterious underworld, working as clerks, guards, government officials, and at times, angels as well. Jonathan knew only a fragment of their history, but he was determined to learn more as his research of the ancient texts continued. Kronac had previously explained to him the origins of Erebus, though of course the often-impatient Jonathan had paid little attention then.

As if countless hours of scouring the ancient archives were not enough, Jonathan had also been asked to investigate one of the rorrim, known to him only as Okram of Bortag. Okram, the bastard son of Mandor's sister, had initially betrayed Erebus, colluding with his evil uncle in a near cataclysmic event. Upon witnessing firsthand the devastating results of his betrayal, Okram tried to redeem his actions by double-crossing his uncle; a desperate gesture, which aided Jonathan's triumph over the dark gods, but one which could not excuse Okram's earlier treason.⁴ Consequently, Okram was arrested and incarcerated, stripped of his position as Keeper's assistant, and tried before the Council of Elders, with Jonathan, a successful attorney on Earth, appointed to represent him as speaker for the accused.⁵

Explaining how Bortag was destroyed, a consequence often referred to as *Bortag's Curse*, Okram revealed a secret that had been closely guarded for thousands of years, the details of which resulted in the charges

⁴ *The Erebus Equilibrium*, Book 3: *Wraith Tide* (Equilibrium Books, 2002)

⁵ *Bortag's Curse* (Equilibrium Books, 2005)

against him being dropped, thanks to Jonathan's experience and ingenuity in the courtroom. They both had hoped then that the reward for such an outcome would mean freedom from their exile in Erebus. However, when Kronac explained to them that such an outcome was no longer possible, especially given Jonathan's unique affiliation with Erebus and the magical Anvil Amulet⁶ which had replaced his heart, Okram devised an audacious plan that would hopefully allow both he and Jonathan to flee Erebus for good, whilst never fully revealing to him the details of how such a thing would be possible.

Jonathan knew only that the secret dated back to the very origins of mankind, when the Earth had been seeded by the Helices Collective, for whom Okram, known then as Kryl, had been an operative in a long ago previous life, and that in order for both he and Okram to be reborn on Earth, two unborn fetuses would be required, and this was the terrible decision that Jonathan had to make.

He understood that his sister Sarah was the logical choice. Married to Justin Fougere now, and pregnant with twins, her unborn infants would be the perfect vessels for their escape. When Jonathan last left Earth, Sarah was into her third trimester, so they needed to return to those final moments just before her water broke in order for the process to work.

In the end it had all happened faster than his mind could comprehend. Jonathan felt himself dissolving into a halo of coloured light as Okram/Kryl extracted his life force, pulling them both through the liquid surface of the portal's glass. A few hours later, their now infant eyes stared up at the ceiling of a Chicago hospital,

⁶ The ancient Astronomers' Guild referred to meteors, meteorites and comets etc. as Anvils of the Gods. Amulets made from these Anvils became talismans of extremely powerful magic.

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laying side by side in their humidicribs, as Sarah and Justin's beloved sons.

PROLOGUE

Darkness descended from its inescapable, vacuous void, its frenetic tendrils swallowing the fiery Tartarus clouds like spilt ink on tissue paper. *Darkness*. It was a name that said so much and yet meant so little to him now. Darkness-in-exile was how he thought of himself. So many eons had passed he no longer remembered his birth name, but when so many followers worshipped him, what difference did a name make? Like modern-day Frankensteins, some had even built him a toy, the fools. But he had no need of wraiths; he was Darkness, the very personification of the word, and an ever-present threat, if not always visible. Summoning him by any method was ignorant and entirely redundant.

So it was only boredom and curiosity that had brought him to the Plains of Tartarus this day, as his immeasurable presence darkened the burning skies. They were like ants below him, pounding their chests at each other as each side claimed to be the strongest. The *Chosen One's* halo of energy against his followers' *Hellwraith*. It wasn't so much a fight as it was an embarrassment – for all concerned. But exile meant acquiescence, and so Darkness had let them think he'd been defeated when their little puppet fell to pieces on the shimmering desert sand.

He was what he was, with no desire to be anything other than what his followers believed him to be.

Nevertheless, what he saw this day ignited a spark of an idea inside his devious consciousness.

After watching the blue sphere disappear over the horizon, he looked down on the limping, hapless soul who'd been left behind after the battle, struggling to stay ahead of the deadly rain of fiery anvils. Darkness directed another flaming rock towards him, landing a few metres ahead of the solitary figure.

Nearing the base of the Cliffs of Doom, Billy Robinson froze in his tracks and looked up at the changing sky as the shadow of Darkness swept over him.

* * *

Alison stood sobbing at the window of the neonatal ward, reliving the roller coaster ride of events she had experienced these last few days. Justin had made it home in time to find Sarah, her water broken, and already going into labour. Their twin boys had been born a short time later, eight weeks early but both apparently healthy and strong.

She watched them stirring in their humidicribs, and then smiled as she read the names at the end of their cribs.

* * *

Jonathan felt himself dissolving into a halo of coloured light as Kryl extracted his life force, pulling him through the liquid surface of the portal's glass. Now, as his infant eyes stared up at the ceiling of a Chicago hospital, he realised Kryl's audacious plan had actually succeeded.

Kryl lay beside him in a humidicrib, only inches from his own.

Are you all right, Jonathan? he asked. Kryl had assured him that they would always be able to

communicate telepathically, even with their life forces hosted by infants so young.

Wow, what a rush! Jonathan finally replied. I can't believe what just happened, but yes, I'm okay... I think.

Good. The first assimilation is always the worst, Kryl told him.

I can tell you now, Kryl; this will be my first... and last! So, what do we do now?

We wait, Jonathan, and enjoy the ride... only...

What is it, Kryl? What haven't you told me?

It's nothing like that... but something doesn't feel right.

What do you mean?

I don't know; it's as if something is trying to push me out.

Push you out of what?

This body...

Kryl suddenly fell silent. Agonising moments passed as Jonathan watched the shadowy figures of nurses rushing to Kryl's crib as monitor alarms sounded and lights flashed. He kept calling to him but there was no reply.

Kryl, stay with me buddy. Just relax; I'm sure everything will be fine. Listen to me, telling the master what to do.

Jonathan... Kryl finally answered.

I'm still here. What's going on?

There's someone else already in here!

Someone else in where? What are you saying, Kryl?

There is another's presence inside this child... and it's trying to get me out!

Kryl fell silent again and his humidicrib was hurriedly wheeled away, leaving Jonathan frightened and alone as he tried desperately to focus on the many shapes and shadows that now filled the room around him.

* * *

Alison was alarmed to see the sudden flurry of urgent activity in the neonatal ward, and then, fearing the worst, her stomach dropped as Daniel's humidicrib was hurriedly taken from the room.

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PART ONE:

AWAKENINGS

1. BETRAYAL

Erebus

Kronac turned around and was surprised to see a hooded figure standing behind him at the Genesis Glass. His daily visits to the Glass usually went uninterrupted; a time when he could enjoy the serenity he felt when standing before its overwhelming presence. More than three stories high, the universe's oldest looking-glass towered over the Keeper, its brilliant-white light reaching every corner of the massive, rock-walled chamber that housed it. Pulsating with a kaleidoscope of dazzling starbursts, its viscous, liquid surface was constantly changing as it monitored its ever-expanding network of mirror portals.

“Oh, I see you’ve opted for a change of attire – one a little more befitting your role here,” Kronac said. “I didn’t recognise you at first.”

The hooded eyes blinked rapidly against the glare of the mirror’s shimmering light.

Kronac was starting to feel a little awkward. “Is there something you need?” he asked, almost fearing the response he might receive. Relationships in Erebus had been strained since the revelations of Okram’s remarkable lineage had been disclosed to the Council of Elders during his trial.

The figure remained silent but shuffled closer, being careful not to stray too close to the open mouth of the

chamber's other feature, a dark and seemingly bottomless abyss that extended all the way to Tartarus. The unsettling darkness of the massive pit was in stark contrast to the overwhelming brilliance of the Genesis Glass.

"Look, if you're here to plead your case again, you know there's nothing more I can do for either you or Okram – sorry, *Kryl*, as he prefers to be called now. And look at you in those clothes. A stranger here would never pick that you weren't one of the rorrim."

The figure's hands fidgeted uneasily beneath its flowing robe.

Unfazed by the lack of a response, the Keeper continued. "Is that one of Mandor's old cloaks? I remember they used to be like a second skin to him, so much so that you would rarely see him in anything else. Such long ago memories now. Much has happened since."

The figure took another step forward, its hands still hidden.

"You seem a little uncomfortable; is something wrong?" Kronac pressed.

"No... quite the contrary actually." A reply at last. "This actually feels better than I'd hoped."

The cryptic response almost startled the Keeper, given the earlier, prolonged moments of silence. "Indeed, and it... well, it suits you I think." He appeared to be struggling to find the right words. "Although perhaps it's a little bulky for you. I am sure we could –"

"I am not talking about the robe, you fool!"

Kronac was taken aback, and more than a little hurt.

"I see; then perhaps you should tell me what you want? It's obvious my attempts at camaraderie are wasted."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Kronac; it belittles you."

The Keeper sighed. "Tell me what you want, or leave me to do my work."

"What I want, Kronac... is to destroy you."

"Destroy me?"

"Well I can't kill you as such – you're already dead! We all are, aren't we?"

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Kronac asked, his concern deepening.

"Not at all; this is merely a part of a much larger plan. A stepping stone, if you like."

"So this is how you intend to escape? You think you can overpower me and use the Genesis Glass to flee Erebus? I know you've been angry about your circumstances, but this behaviour is unnecessary and completely unwarranted, even for one as impatient as you!"

The figure pulled its hands out from under its robe and held up a glass sphere.

"I *intend* to use this actually, but I have no interest in fleeing. Not yet."

Kronac was horrified when he saw a Time Sphere in the hooded figure's hands, and quickly turned around to count those spinning silently at the base of the Genesis Glass. However, all thirteen spheres were in place.

"Fire and damnation! Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Where indeed." The figure removed his hood and smiled at Kronac. "You weren't expecting this, were you?"

"I don't understand *this* at all, Jonathan."

"And I believe you; just as there's so much *I* have never been able to understand. But what good did that ever do me?"

"And you plan to use that against me?" Kronac asked, pointing at the sphere.

He nodded.

“Here, at the Genesis Glass? Where I have no less than thirteen spheres to use against you? One against so many, not to mention the power of the Glass.”

“Then you should have nothing to fear. But look again; this is no ordinary sphere, Kronac.” He lifted it higher so that Kronac could see the vortex of darkness it contained.

The Keeper of Souls stared at the orb and the many tendrils of dark smoke writhing inside it. “But that’s not possible,” he said, his plump, gnomish face suddenly a picture of concern and fear. “A Dark Sphere, here in Erebus? Where did you get this? You must know how powerful such a device can be in the wrong hands?”

“Even in the right hands, Kronac.”

“Then why would you do this, Jonathan? I thought we were becoming friends; that you had accepted your fate and destiny.”

“Fate and destiny? You embarrass yourself when you say things like that, Kronac.”

“Whatever you are planning, Jonathan, it won’t work. You can deny your destiny as much as you like, but you’ll never get away with this. I can promise you that.”

“Oh, but I already have...”

The powerful sphere suddenly shot across the chamber, hitting Kronac in the chest and knocking him backwards towards the massive, shimmering wall of liquid glass. Fragments of reflected light illuminated the darkened chamber as the sphere exploded, releasing the mysterious dark cloud, its eager tendrils quickly coiling around Kronac’s body as he tumbled helplessly into the Glass.

Sensing a presence of evil, the Genesis Glass instantly vaporised the escaping darkness, taking Kronac with it. Within seconds, the viscous surface of the towering mirror returned to normal, and Kronac, Lord of Erebus and Keeper of Souls, was gone.

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* * *

Hidden in the shadows, a horrified Solandra had witnessed Kronac's demise, her mind awash with feelings of grief, betrayal, shock and fear. When she was certain the assailant had left the chamber, she hurried to inform the Council of Elders and raise the alarm.

Behind her, the brilliance of the Genesis Glass momentarily faded as a dark shadow slowly snaked across its lucent surface, and then disappeared.

2. COMA

Malone Residence, 1997

“How much longer do you think Jonathan will sleep for?” Alison Malone asked her father-in-law, concerned for her husband’s welfare.

“Hard to say really, although he should be out for a few more hours yet,” Dr Malone replied.

“I’m so worried about him, Dad. Is he losing his mind or something?”

“No, Alison; I don’t think so. He just needs a good rest, from what you’ve told me. That’s why I gave him the sedative. He’ll be as right as rain in a few days; you’ll see. As soon as he’s ready to talk he can fill me in on the nightmares. Sometimes, it makes a world of difference to get things off your chest with a third party. Perhaps Jonathan’s a little embarrassed to discuss things with you?”

“No, Dad, that’s not it at all,” she replied, somewhat indignantly. “Jonathan can always talk to me; he knows that.”

“Are you two having any problems? I don’t mean to pry, but perhaps – ”

“No! Certainly not! It’s just this damn business with the mirror and the message, and then the dreams. We were really looking forward to this vacation – Jonathan especially, with the workload he’s had of late – and now

look what's happened. I just need to know that my husband's okay..."

* * *

Jonathan Malone couldn't understand why his father hadn't listened to him. Worse than that, Alison had called him without his knowledge, ignored his pleas and then allowed him to be sedated! She should have told him she had called his father. They both should have let him explain.

He could feel the tranquilliser racing through his body as unseen hands slowly dragged him back to unconsciousness. *I'm not making this up!* he shouted silently. *Alison? Dad? Please... you've got to believe me!* But he was already asleep, and his helpless cries were nothing more than lonely echoes inside his troubled mind.

* * *

Dr Malone had been studying the mysterious mirror writing for some time. "And you say Jonathan found no other clues when he dismantled the wardrobe?" he asked.

Alison looked up from the newspaper she was reading. "No Dad, he didn't. And it's rather a sore point. I made him put it back together. It nearly broke my heart to see him so disappointed. I hope he can come to terms with it all soon. I'm not sure I can take much more, or we'll both be in the Nut House!" She managed to laugh at this, and Malone joined her before walking back to the kitchen for yet another look at the strange fragmented writing his son had discovered on the back of the ancient looking-glass.

"It's a pity Parkinson isn't here," he said. "I'm sure he would have loved to have got his teeth sunk into this."

“Hey, Dad?” Alison was staring at something in the paper. “Didn’t John know a William Robinson when he was at school?”

“*Billy* Robinson, you mean?”

“Yes. I remember John telling me about some of the tricks he used to pull and what a bully he was.”

“That sounds like Billy. What about him?”

“Well, that weird cult’s accountant who was killed the other day – just before they discovered all that money missing – it says here it was a William (*Billy*) Robinson, aged thirty-three years, and it mentions John’s old school. Do you suppose it’s *him*?”

* * *

Jonathan could sense himself waking from his dreams of Erebus. He could hear the distant murmurs of his father and Alison talking together in the kitchen. Yet this time he didn’t want to wake. Not now at least. He resisted the urge to open his eyes and willed himself back to sleep – an easy task, given the amount of sedative his father has administered. A sudden wave of pain exploded behind his eyes as he sank deeper and deeper into the eerie darkness of unfettered sleep.

* * *

Dr Malone and Alison laughed and joked about Billy Robinson’s gruesome demise, each of them offering up crazy scenarios of what might have happened. They were so preoccupied that neither of them had noticed that a feverish Jonathan, who had been mumbling deliriously in his sleep and convulsing violently on the sweat-soaked settee, had suddenly fallen silent as his body stilled.

* * *

Jonathan slowly opened his eyes and then stared up at the ceiling. His head ached terribly and his eyeballs felt dry and sore. It took him a few moments to realise that he was out of the humidicrib, and appeared to be lying on a hospital bed instead.

Panicking a little, he looked for Kryl, expecting him to be close by. His vision was still blurry, but his bed appeared to be the only one in the room, which he noticed was filled with an assortment of machines and medical equipment. He had a vague memory of Kryl telling him that something wasn't right, and Jonathan was suddenly fearful that his friend might have died. And that would mean that one of Sarah's twins had died also. The thought was too grim to bear, so he quickly dismissed it. There had to be another reason for Kryl's absence.

A door opened and a nurse entered his room. Looking down at the bed, she suddenly froze.

"My God! You're awake!" she said excitedly, quickly racing to Jonathan's side to check his vital signs. "Welcome back, Mr Malone. Don't try to sit up yet; you're probably too weak. Just sit tight and I'll get the doctors."

Jonathan watched the nurse leave, wondering why she had called him Mr Malone. His eyes a little clearer now, he lifted a hand to his face to rub them. His heart froze. Expecting to see a newborn's fingers, the sight of an adult hand made him jump. He screamed, just as a group of medical staff burst into the room.

"Please relax, Mr Malone," one of them said, rushing to the bed. "Your father will be here momentarily, and your wife too I suspect."

"What?" Jonathan managed to croak.

"You're awake, Jonathan," the doctor said, "but please don't try to talk yet."

Confused, Jonathan tried to push himself up.

“And don’t try to move either,” the doctor added. “You’ve been physically inactive for quite some time so your muscles will be weak of course.”

“I don’t understand,” Jonathan whispered.

“That’s perfectly normal for coma patients,” the nurse said.

“*Coma?*” Jonathan asked.

The doctor glared at the nurse. “It’s better that we ease into any information we provide the patient,” he reminded her.

Dr Malone raced into the room and stood at the end of the bed.

“My God, Jonathan, it’s true; you’re really awake!”

“Everyone keeps telling me that, but if *you’re* here, then I seriously doubt it.”

“No Jonathan, it’s true enough,” his father replied excitedly. “You’re definitely awake! For the first time in two years in fact!”