

The sun rose above the College of Deaths. Golden light slipped between a maze of canyons and earthen mounds, forming a web of growing shadows over the massive labyrinth. Beneath the enormous, writhing mountain of West Tower, Francois Martin opened his eyes.

The nightmare was real.

He rolled onto his side, glancing through the window. Faces flashed through his mind, the ghosts of his other life. He turned his mind away from the images of *maman*, papa, and Luc. He'd never see them again.

"You up yet?" Ethan shouted through the door. "We don't want to be late for your first day."

"Yeah," muttered Francois, "I'm up."

He rose from bed and pulled on his robe. Walking to the window, he moved the curtain aside, and stared at the dead world. A canyon of red and beige stone ran towards the main campus. West Tower loomed in the distance, a gnarled mass of rock jutting towards the clouds like an enormous tomb.

Only last week, he'd helped papa in their lush green vineyard, before picnicking with *maman* and Luc on the banks of the Loire. He remembered their laughter at the tourists on their river barge, and the beautiful sunset behind the old chateau. He longed for home.

He turned to the mirror and ran a hand over his skin, noting the emerging stubble around his mouth.

The Death had stubble as well.

They'd been preparing for bed, when the knock came. An unshaven man in a robe pushed open the door; he carried a huge scythe. Without a word, the man walked in and grabbed Francois's wrist. The blade swung through the air. The world vanished into light. When he opened his eyes, the man said three words only: "You are a Death."

A Death.

A Grim Reaper.

"Come on Frenchie," said Ethan, poking his head in the room.

"I asked you not to call me that."

The older boy ignored him and started towards the front door. Francois grabbed

an apple from the counter, pocketed it for later, and followed. They joined a growing group of boys in robes, streaming through the canyons of the College towards Lower Hall. A crowd stood outside the Hall, listening to a purple-robed Death.

“Welcome, to our returning students, and to our new Deaths. My name is Sindril, and I am the head of the College.” Sindril extended his arms.

Francois glanced at the boys around him; not one smiled.

“I know you are nervous. This is a challenging career, and a difficult way of life. It will take time to acclimate, but soon you will see this as your home. I ask the older students to help welcome you. Without further words, let the new term begin.”

A smattering of half-hearted applause rippled through the crowd. Francois followed the others into the Hall for breakfast. The day dragged on with no enthusiasm for the fourteen-year-old. He shuffled through the corridors beneath a fog of disinterest.

“Hey,” he asked a boy next to him.

“What?”

“Are the girls in separate classes? I haven’t seen a girl all day.”

The boy laughed in his face. “Wow, you really are fresh meat aren’t you? There are no girls here. There’s no such thing as a female Death.”

“Oh right,” Francois replied, embarrassed. He knew so little about this world.

The boy laughed again, then extended his hand. “What’s your name, newbie?”

“Francois. Francois Marin.”

“You must be that French kid who moved in with Ethan.” He laughed again. “I’m Mark.”

“Quiet down in the back please,” said the teacher.

“Tell you what, Frenchie,” whispered Mark, “Ethan and a few of us are throwing a party for the new term. Why don’t you come?”

“I don’t know.”

“Meet us beneath West Tower at sunset. It’ll be fun.”

Francois didn’t reply. He opened his book, and gazed at their teacher with a dull stare. He’d only known Ethan for a couple of days, but disliked his roommate. Language didn’t seem to exist here the way it had in the Mortal World. He’d tried switching between French and English and no one noticed. Accents, however, remained with each

of the kidnapped boys. By his voice, he guessed Ethan had originally lived in America. Ethan called him Frenchie, an epithet he disliked, but it was better than others he was sure Ethan wanted to say.

Francois thought back to their introduction two days ago. He'd stood in the hallway listening through the door.

"No. I'm not rooming with a black kid."

"Watch yourself," said the silver-haired Death who'd taken Francois from his home. "Francois is a Death, just like all of us. You've been at the College a year Ethan, it's time to stop seeing the world in black and white. I don't care if you become friends, you're here to work."

The words still echoed now as he watched the teacher in front of the room.

"Work," said the teacher, "will not be easy. This is a mixed-year class. I expect the older students to work with the first years. Using a scythe takes time to perfect. The metal used severs souls from their bodies. Nothing is sharper or trickier. No one in this room, myself included, is a perfect Reaper. We each must grow and that requires practice. Your first test is in a month."

"Don't worry, Frenchie," whispered Mark, "I'll help you."

Francois imagined himself at Mark's party surrounded by other white boys. He pictured Ethan holding a scythe and cringed.

"I cringed too when I started," said Mark. "It's a lot of work. Scythes are tricky."
So are you.

* * *

Two days later, Francois stared at his breakfast. He sat in the corner of the Hall at a small table apart from most of the other boys. Two other first year students sat across from him, a sandy-haired boy he'd never seen until today, and a chubby kid who shared his history class.

A servant brought fresh pitchers of orange juice and water to their table. Smells of pancakes and fresh strawberries wafted through the warm air. Francois nodded to the servant. He gave a slight nod in acknowledgement, and hurried away. His hair was bright

pink, and his eyes yellow and slit like a lizard's.

"We're not supposed to acknowledge the 'Mentals,'" said the chubby boy.

"What?"

"The servants are called 'Mentals. My roommate told me we're not supposed to talk to them."

And my roommate can't be bothered to tell me anything at all. "Why not?"

The chubby boy shrugged.

Francois sighed and looked down at his plate again. This world was so strange. His hand fell to his lap, and his fingers searched for the scrap of paper in his pocket. He touched the edge of his most precious possession, the one reminder of the Mortal World he still owned. He couldn't show anyone. It'd be taken if discovered; Deaths were supposed to sever all ties with their former lives.

Still, he was grateful for the computer-printed photo his brother had given him. He'd opened it so often the ink was smearing, yet the image remained seared in his mind. A smile crept to his lips. Lise hadn't called it a date, but his arm was around her in the picture. Luc had snapped the shot with his cell phone just as Francois had stolen a kiss.

"You going to eat that?" asked the sandy-haired boy.

"Yeah," said Francois.

He picked up a fork and poked it into a heap of eggs. He twirled the food around his plate before taking a bite. Swallowing the too-salty eggs, his fingers clenched. What was Lise thinking now? Did she even miss him? What about his family? Were salty tears falling back home?

A shadow crossed his plate. Looking up, he saw Ethan, Mark, and two other boys grouped around him.

"How you been, Frenchie?" asked Mark.

"Fine." He turned back to the eggs.

"You don't talk much, do you?" At the edge of his sight, he saw the chubby boy rise and hurry away.

"No."

"I was disappointed you didn't come to our party the other day."

Francois didn't reply. He took another bite. Ethan sat down beside him.

“Look,” said Ethan. “I think we got off to a rough start. I know how difficult it was for me last year. I can only imagine how upset you feel. The boys and I are throwing another party on Friday. Why don’t you come?”

Francois turned and looked him in the eye. Ethan smiled.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” said Ethan, standing again. “We have to live together. We should try to get along, maybe even be friends.”

“I like you, Frenchie,” added Mark. “Muscular kid like you could help my boskery team someday.”

“Boskery?”

“It’s the sport Deaths play,” he replied. “It takes a lot of athletic skill, and you have to use boskery blades, which are like double-scythes. Everyone is expected to play starting their second year of school.”

“You mean we have to?”

“It’s one of the ways they measure your abilities. If you can handle a boskery blade well you’re going to get a good ranking, and chances are you’ll make a masterful Reaper. This is Ethan’s first year playing boskery, but the rest of these guys are all on my team, the Dragon Seekers.”

Francois nodded. Why were they telling him this? He wasn’t even eligible to play for another year.

“First years are still learning,” said Mark. “Plus, a few of you go back. With that in mind, only second years and up are eligible. Still, I wouldn’t mind training some new muscle early.”

“Wait, what do you mean a few go *back*?”

“What Death brought you here? Didn’t they explain things? At the end of the school year, you’ll take a test. If you pass, you return to the Mortal World with your memory erased.” Mark laughed. “Don’t count on passing though. They bring in a hundred a year, and in my two years, I’ve seen three kids total pass that test.”

The entire Hall seemed brighter. He touched the crumpled edge of the photo in his pocket. *A way home*. The silver-haired Death hadn’t told him any of this. He could return if he passed a test. The odds might be low, but the possibility waved before him like a

candle flickering on the distant side of a dark tunnel.

“At any rate,” continued Mark, “don’t let Ethan scare you. We’re all mean, but we’re nice too. I’ll see you Friday, base of West Tower, just after sundown.”

If he trained in boskery now, he’d have an edge on everyone else when it came time to take his test. Whatever this sport was, if it measured a Death’s abilities, what better way to prepare? He didn’t know Mark or the others. He still didn’t trust Ethan, but his roommate clearly didn’t lead this group.

Maman, papa, Luc, Lise...the reasons to return stretched endlessly in front of him. The glimmer of newborn hope flickered in his eyes.

“I’ll be there,” he said.

* * *

Francois sat against a mound of rock, staring at the cube. It rose from the center of a maze of canyons, mounds, and weathered stone. The black cube stood three stories tall, shorter than most of the mounds which made up the College. Far to his left and right two enormous columns of writhing rock reached beyond the clouds, stretching out of sight. East and West Towers soared over the College of Deaths, their gnarled stone surfaces mirroring the web of canyons below. The Examination Room in contrast had polished, smooth black walls.

“The Examination Room,” said Steven, the sandy-haired boy he’d eaten breakfast with that morning. “That’s where they give us our final test.”

“They didn’t even tell me,” said Francois. “He shoved a piece of paper in my hands and forced me to sign then brought me to the room with Ethan.”

“Maybe it’s better that way.” He picked up a pebble and flung it towards the black walls of the Examination Room. “The Death who kidnapped me wouldn’t stop talking. He kept apologizing and explaining things...told me his whole life story. I felt sorry for him. Besides, the result’s the same. We’re here for a year then we take the test. They say everyone fails. Nothing we can do about it.”

I can learn boskery. They don’t expect the first year students to try.

“It’s funny,” continued Steven, “how different the Examination Room looks. It

stands out, like someone just dropped that black thing in the middle of the school.”

“Yeah, funny.”

“Is your Applications teacher giving you a test next week too?”

“No, we have ‘til the end of the month.” He stretched his legs and yawned.

“Francois?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever think about the job?”

“What job?”

“I mean, do you ever think about what they’re asking us to do? What we *will* be doing for the rest of our lives?”

“You mean being Deaths?”

“We’re Reapers, Francois. Reaping *souls*. My teacher said this year alone, as first years, we’ll have to Reap two souls.”

“So?”

Steven turned to him, amazement written across his face. “Did you ever think any of that Grim Reaper crap was real? You know the guy who got your soul with his scythe?”

“Of course not. Yet, here we are. Am I supposed to walk around feeling sorry for myself? I’m pissed they brought me here, pissed they kidnapped me. I could care less what they expect us to do. Give me a scythe now, they’ll see just how willing I am to use it.”

“Don’t let them hear you talking like that. They have laws here. I know the Death who brought you didn’t explain stuff, but he must have told you what happens when a Death dies?”

Francois laughed. “Let me guess, a Reaper comes for that Reaper. Come on, it sounds like a bad joke.”

“No one comes, no. If you die in this world, you cease to exist. You don’t move on to whatever’s next, you don’t get buried, you’re *erased*. No one knows you ever existed.”

“Perfect, give me a scythe. Let’s erase a few Deaths, starting with the silver-haired creep who brought me here. No one will even know he existed. No one will notice

he's gone."

"You're not listening," snapped Steven. "The penalty for murder is death. The penalty for breaking the rules at all is death. You kill someone, or even attack someone, and they'll erase you. I won't remember you, your family back in France won't remember you, and no one will even realize you were ever born."

Francois paused. He hadn't really planned to attack anyone. Even if he killed the Death who'd kidnapped him, he had no way back to the Living World. If he tried and failed, they'd *erase* him. His parents wouldn't know he had ever existed.

No, it was a ridiculous idea. He looked towards West Tower.

Crazy was a way of life here.

There's still the final test; there's still a chance they'd let me go home on my own. I need to learn boskery. I need to pass that test.

"Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"Want to come to a party with me?"

* * *

A gust of cool wind blew dust through the canyons of the College. Shadows deepened as the sun ducked behind a cloud, reddening the dusking sky. The faint smell of strawberries lingered in the air. Across the enormous gnarled mass of West Tower, tiny lights began to flicker on.

"It's time," said Steven.

They walked across a granite courtyard and rounded a bend. Ethan, Mark, and two other boys leaned against the walls of the tower. Mark waved at them.

"Didn't think you would show," said Mark. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Steven," said Francois.

"We don't have room for two on the Dragon Slayers next year. Tell your boyfriend to go home." The other boys laughed.

"You said you were interested in me because I was athletic. Steven's in better shape than I am." He glanced at the group of white faces, doubting sports had anything to

do with his repeated invitation.

Mark paused. "Come on," he said. He led the group of boys away from the tower, through a series of canyons, and then to the edge of the College. At the end of the path arches of steel stretched for twenty feet into the sky. A pair of gigantic scythe blades formed each arch, and the arches circled the entire campus. The boys remained silent as they passed through the Ring of Scythes.

Steven shivered as they walked. Francois knew he didn't want to be here, but with Steven nearby the others wouldn't try anything stupid. Hopefully. Mark led them to the edge of the woods. Francois turned to West Tower behind them. A few faint stars had emerged on either side of it.

"Where are we going?" asked Francois.

"We're almost there."

He turned from the path and started into the forest. Mark and Ethan led, followed by Francois and Steven. The two other boys walked behind.

"This is a party? The middle of the woods at nightfall? I thought you guys were going to work on boskery skills."

"Think of this as a test," said Mark, "but the hard part is a solo deal. You pass this, and next year I'll let you on my team. I'll even give you scythe lessons this year."

Scythe lessons could be the difference between going home at the end of the year, and being stuck here forever. Whatever his game, it was worth the risk.

"What do I do?"

"I don't want to interrupt, but I think I'm going to head back," said Steven. "I just wanted to meet some new friends, but you've got a lot going on, and—"

"Joey, Max, take whiney-boy back to the College."

"We wanted to watch, Mark. Especially if this thing is as crazy as Ethan says."

"Take him. *Now*," insisted Mark.

"Go on," added Ethan.

The two boys took Steven by the hand and led him back. Francois watched him go.

"What do you say, Frenchie?" asked Mark. "Last chance to back out now."

He's just trying to intimidate me. If I pass his stupid test, he'll teach me to use a

scythe.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Good. See those trees over there?” He pointed to four shadowy trunks on the side of the path.

“Barely. It’s getting dark.”

“Then you’ll fit right in,” said Ethan.

“Shut up,” said Francois. “I see the trees.”

“Go to the other side of those trees. I left a boskery ball over there. Bring it to us, and you’ll be our friend.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Francois shrugged and walked to the trees. He stumbled on a root but caught himself before falling. Placing his hand on the trunk, he edged around the trees. Pine cones and dead leaves crunched beneath his feet. Finding a ball in the dark would be tough. He crouched down and started feeling his way with his hand.

“He won’t find it,” laughed Ethan.

He continued to fumble around the base of the tree. To his right, something moved in the forest.

“Hello?” he whispered.

He froze. Was there another part of the test? Maybe they’d gotten one of their friends to hide in the woods and surprise him.

“What’s wrong?” shouted Mark.

“Nothing, I’m still looking.”

He crawled forward but again heard a rustle. Two red eyes emerged from the woods.

“Who’s there?” he asked. “Is this part of—”

A man stepped closer, lifting the cover from a lantern. Francois blinked at a hooded figure with skin whiter than alabaster. The stranger’s red eyes bore into him like two daggers.

“Can I help you?” asked Francois.

The red-eyed albino stared at him. He dropped the lantern to the ground and

gestured towards Francois.

The world vanished.

Francois struggled to stand. He was kneeling in a cold white room. Light poured from every side. A crowd of albinos circled him, pointing. Their alabaster skin blended with the white light, but their red eyes pierced him from every direction.

“Why are you here?” said a throng of gravelly voices.

His head spun. The room whirled into a blur of white. Bolts of red glared at him in anger.

“Why are you here? Why are you here? Why are you here?”

Why?

Falling through a white void, Francois grasped at the air. His hand swept through leaves and clutched the base of a tree trunk. The room vanished and he sat in the forest.

The hooded albino hadn't moved. His hand was outstretched, pointing.

“What's going on?” Francois said.

The hooded man cocked his head to one side and vanished again. Francois blinked. The lantern was gone. Night crept in, swallowing the forest in a fresh blanket of darkness.

He shook his head and reached down, feeling for the ground.

Maybe that had been the test.

A white wolf leapt from the trees. Francois's heart thudded against his chest, and his neck tightened. The wolf stood in front of him with teeth bared, growling. Its eyes shone blood-red.

“Help me,” yelled Francois.

The wolf started forward. A second white wolf emerged from the woods behind it. It had the same blood-red eyes.

“Look at his face,” he heard Ethan say. “I told you it'd be worth it.”

The wolves stepped forward, and Francois grasped the tree behind him.

The wolves and men are all albinos, but why?

A third wolf leaped from the trees, identical to the first two.

He yelled and jumped to his feet. He backed against the tree, with sweat beading on his forehead. The bark scratched his hands as he forced himself away from the

growling wolves.

Circling the tree, he sprinted towards Mark and Ethan.

“What’s happening?” demanded Mark.

“Run,” he shouted. “Wolves.”

He ran past the boys, and started towards the College. The wolves growled behind him; a howl rang out through the night.

“I don’t see anything,” said Mark, jogging to catch up.

“No,” shouted Ethan. “I was just—”

Francois stopped and turned. Behind them, a robed figure ran a knife through someone. The blade came back soaked in blood. Francois’s gut clenched, as he fought the urge to vomit. The stench of blood and rust seeped into his nostrils. The man turned, with eyes glaring red, and lifted the lantern.

The world disappeared again.

Spinning in a room of white light, the crowd of men screamed.

“Leave me alone,” yelled a throng of albinos. “I killed one. I will kill you all for peace.”

Francois gasped for air. This couldn’t be real.

“I was just—”

“*Leave.*”

The light faded and Francois fell to the ground, landing on a pile of leaves. His face grazed a stone and he winced. He turned to see Mark kneeling beside him, trembling. Francois rolled to his knees.

The albino turned to the woods, pulling a cover over his lantern. The wolves and room receded into memory like a dream, though the smell of blood wouldn’t leave his nose. The albino disappeared into the darkness of the woods.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Mark.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I thought it would be funny to have you find a ball in the dark. Someone told me we should hide it here. Then I saw...” He broke off, clutching his sides.

“We came here with someone,” said Francois slowly.

“Steven, Joey, and Max,” said Mark. “They headed back. Did you...did you find

that ball?”

I found an albino wolf. I had a terrifying vision.

Francois looked down. In his hand was a beige ball, the size of a basketball. He didn't remember finding it.

“Let's go back,” said Mark. “I'm surprised you found that in the dark.” Mark's eyes glazed, as if haunted by a memory. “I'll um...I'll teach you some scythe skills.” His voice sounded flat, and as the two boys stood, Francois couldn't help feeling that they'd forgotten something.

“I thought I saw—”

“Let's not talk about it.”

They walked back to the College. Passing through the Ring of Scythes, Francois pictured the albino and the wolves. Had Mark seen them too? Was it some sort of hallucination? He shook his head. Someday, he'd return and see what really lived in the woods.

“I'm going to bed,” said Mark. “I'll take the ball back. Someday, you're going to make a great Dragon Seeker, Frenchie.”

“Thanks.”

Francois gave Mark the ball and walked through the dark canyons of the College. West Tower loomed in front of him again, covered in tiny lights that grasped towards the stars. He walked to his room.

It was nice to have some friends here. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the photograph.

Papa, maman, Luc, Lise. Someday he'd see them again. And now he'd made a friend. Still, it was nice to come to a room and be alone. Many of the other Deaths had roommates.

He was lucky to have been placed in a room by himself.

* * *

TWO YEARS LATER...

The College of Death will change forever when Suzie Sarnio arrives, the first female Death in a million years. Forced to enter the College of Deaths, she finds herself training to bring souls from the Living World to the Hereafter. The task is demanding enough, but as the only female in the all-male College, she quickly becomes a target. Attacked by both classmates and strangers, Suzie is alone in a world where even her teachers want her to fail.

SCHOOL OF DEATHS, an exciting YA Fantasy novel, will be released by Muse It Up Publishing. For details, extras, and more information about the College of Deaths, visit www.ChristopherMannino.com