

GUARDIANS OF THE RIFT  
A LIMITS @ INFINITY NOVELLA

BY  
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THE LIMITS

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Note to reader, this is the sixth work in my series, "The Limits" . Feel free to read the intro without fear of spoilers. But if you are interested in what you read, it would be helpful to start with my full-length novel, "Infinite Limits" .

Either way, thanks for checking this out and giving it your consideration.

J.C. Bell

## Intro

*–The Age of Death,  
The Seventh World  
First War of Lock Core, Post Exodus 565–*

*What are you thinking, Dertois?* Nicola wondered, watching as the Keeper stared down at the Rift.

If only she could penetrate his mind. There was so much she wished to know – so much she feared to know as well.

She sensed his thoughts, but as ever, they were deeply buried under layers upon layers of powerful shields. As long as she had known him he had always kept his thoughts well hidden, but they were even more so now – and for good reason. After all, the fate of their world was in his hands.

Dertois stood alone on the balcony, his hands clenched as they gripped the iron railing. Mage-fire and lightning flared in the distance, while the driving rain hammered against his shield of blue flames. The screams of the dead and the dying became one with the wind as it howled through the chamber. With every powerful gust, the room was flooded with the putrid stench of death.

The scent followed them everywhere. It clung to them -- and not solely in their blood-soaked clothing. Death seemed inescapable now; the scent, the sight and the sad acceptance that it was coming to claim them, one and all. After three days, Nicola still fought the fear and the hopelessness of it all -- as she still fought the urge to gag on her every breath.

Death was coming, and they were unable to stop it. Even now, death was spilling into the city; a throng of Plague infected monstrosities.

*Don't give up on us, Dertois . . .*

With every burst of lightning Nicola's blue eyes glowed. Her head of light brown locks writhed in the wind.

*Don't let this be the end.*

He meant so much to her . . . to the entire Seventh World. For the city, Dertois was the symbol of their courage and strength. To the Order of Magi, as their highest ranking member, he was the pinnacle of what one could achieve with the blood-born gift of the Singularity. For Nicola . . . he meant something else, something he would likely never know. Something she should have shared with him a long time ago.

If Dertois gave up, if his strength faltered and he fell sway to fear and hopelessness, all others would follow suit. The Order would dissolve, the Triad of Races would scatter, and Nicola would die alongside a broken man.

If he gave up, it would be the final sign, the final confirmation that all was lost.

Below them, the Great Red Wall shook. It was slowly, but surely, crumbling. The Dark Army was relentless, and seemingly endless. By the hundreds they poured from the Rift, more powerful and hideous creatures emerging by the minute. The defenders had fought well, killing legions of the dead, but despite their best efforts the wall was being overrun. Next to fall would be the city, and then shortly thereafter, the entire Seventh World.

Fully aware of their impending doom, the surviving leaders of the Seventh World had gathered in the Northern Tower of Lock Core. They all knew the end was near, but they had to determine how near, and if possible, figure out a way to postpone it. They already sounded the

Death Bell for a full seven tolls, thus signifying to the entire city that Lock Core was lost. To stay was to die. Anyone who wished to survive the day was to immediately leave the city. The rest were knowingly giving their lives to buy the rest of the world time to flee. They hoped that by combining their knowledge and skills, they could establish a new perimeter before the Dark Army tore through the entire city of Lock Core.

It all came down to Dertois' final command . . . They knew the man had no grand scheme to drive the Dark Army into the Rift. The best they could achieve was to see a glimmer of hope in the face of their Keeper.

So far they had seen none.

As they waited, water trickled through the ceiling of rotten wood, the droplets occasionally falling on the gathering of defenders.

Including Dertois, there were seven of them -- every one of which had more than proven themselves in the last three days. Their deeds had been beyond heroic, more akin to miracles. They were all powerful in their own right, but when those powers combined, they had made certain the Dark Army suffered dearly to take their wall.

The largest member of the group was the mighty Boulder Dwarf, Drau'd, eldest son of Brodin. Brown tufts of hair covered his legs, arms and chest; as thick as that found on a human head. With every breath, his gaping nostrils seemed to drain the chamber of air. Drau'd was twice Nicola's height, and as wide as she was tall. To reach the sentry chamber, he virtually crammed himself up the rusty iron stairway. During his climb, Nicola was certain the ancient structure would collapse. Thankfully, the stairway flexed and bent, but it held -- she just hoped the structure had enough integrity to safely deliver him back down. Nicola would be certain to keep her mage-fire ready during his descent, just in case the Boulder Dwarf started crashing down the seven flights of iron stairs. Considering what Drau'd had been through in the last three days, it would be a travesty for him to suddenly die a senseless death -- not to mention a significant loss to the overall strength of their army. Drau'd was an extremely valuable warrior, and an essential element in the defense of the Red Wall. In fact, every Boulder Dwarf was a priceless soldier in the Triad's army. The powerful giants left countless Plague infected beings to rot along the wall. Just earlier that day, with only a small force of two hundred, they had fought through miles of infested rampart in order to reinforce the Northern Garrison before it was overrun. In their charge, they lost a dozen of their kind, yet obliterated thousands of the undead.

Their bravery bought the city time, but they couldn't take all the credit for that small victory. The garrison had many staunch defenders who managed to stave off their defeat with one brilliant maneuver after another. One man in particular, a rich merchant-trader of some renown, was mainly responsible for rallying the garrison. Because of him, the wall was held far longer than should have been possible, allowing the thunderous charge of the Boulder Dwarves to reach them.

And, of course, the garrison had Solo Ki and his army of elves. The immortals. Each a legendary warrior even long before the coming of the Plague. The quick, highly-skilled elves proved an equal match to the greatest horrors spawned by the Rift. They were faster and far more experienced than the common soldier, but their greatest strength was their immunity. Whereas other fallen soldiers arose to fight alongside the Dark Army, the elves could not be enslaved by the Plague.

But they could be killed.

Sadly, even many of these great immortal warriors fell to the forces of the Plague.

Nicola stood next to their leader, Solo Ki, perhaps the most ancient elf of all. He loomed over her, a thin, skeletal figure with a dirty cape draped over his shoulders. His hood was up. Beneath it she saw a face of sunken shadows, and a pair of bright, glowing eyes of grey and white.

Nicola knew little of him, other than the many legends that surrounded the man. But they were only legends, myths to be more accurate. In actuality, the truth of his past was somewhat of a mystery. With his head of grey hair, and pale, worn features, he was certainly a relic of an age long past – possibly a time prior to even the great Exodus. But strangely, his name was absent from the historical records of that time. The first mention of ‘Solo Ki’ appeared at the beginning of the second era, coinciding with the end of the Gatekeepers, and the death of the High Mage Andrillin.

No matter his true origins, Nicola was certain of one thing, there was pain in his cold, dead eyes. Far more pain than even this world could possibly offer.

Solo Ki was a mystery, and a living legend. Having witnessed his abilities first-hand, there was no doubt in Nicola’s mind that he fully lived up to his reputation. In the thick of battle Nicola had seen his power and his prowess. She watched as his twisted staff of black wood sucked the very life from his enemies. The Graelic, the legendary staff of Adros. The one weapon the Plague feared. When wielded in the hands of Solo Ki, the wisest members of the Plague fled . . . the rest met their permanent end.

But even so, as powerful as Drau’d and Solo Ki were, there was another among them who had proven himself to be far more powerful than Nicola had ever thought possible.

*LeCynic.*

His name alone filled her with venom.

And the things she had seen him do with the Oneness . . . simply shouldn’t be possible.

LeCynic was advisor to the Keeper. But he was more than that – much more. Nicola was fairly certain LeCynic was a god.

If he wasn’t such an arrogant bastard, she would have given him a shred of respect. But he showed respect to no others, not even his Keeper.

Even now, on the verge of defeat, LeCynic calmly leaned against the chamber wall; his arms crossed, a smirk on his face. Remarkably, his robe was still sparkling white, while the clothing of all the others was filthy and worn. His tan features glowed and his dark brown hair danced in the wind. All in all, the young man appeared to have come straight from a refreshing trip to the bathing chambers and not a bloody and hopeless battle.

A stark contrast to LeCynic, and by far the bloodiest and most battered among them was Ebboron, Lord of the Rock Dwarves; his beard yet dripping with the blood of his enemies. Ebboron wore a breastplate of the precious dwarven ore known as ‘blue-steel’. But now the typical bluish tinge to the metal was hidden under a crust of dried up black blood. Even the mountain insignia and runes blazoned on his chest were indistinguishable, marred by deep gashes and heavily dented. What the Rock Dwarves lacked in size, they made up for in ferocity. They showed no fear in the face of the Dark Army, but charged headlong into the fray, their hammers and axes inflicting a deadly toll.

The last member of their council was also the newest; Hitt’rille, the recently elevated Lady Protector and commander of Lock Core’s northern garrison. Being the lone survivor of her squadron, she justly earned her title. Perhaps not as skilled a fighter as the elven warriors, she was a clever young woman who was also blessed by the gods with a great deal of luck. Just a week ago, Hitt’rille had been utterly untried in war – hadn’t they all? But she had proven herself

to be a quick-thinking commander after the passing of her superior, the venerable (and extremely vulgar) Bortimere.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there was the leader of their world, Dertois.

Of those she considered companions, his name was not only at the top of the list; it stood alone on a blank sheet of parchment. In this world, Dertois was her one true friend . . . and yet, Nicola had always longed for more – more than she could ever dare to ask of him. Many times she was on the verge of revealing her true feelings, yet faltered, for Nicola knew Dertois well. She knew where his heart of hearts truly lay.

Traditionally, the role of Keeper was reserved for the one most blessed of the Oneness. Dertois, however, was raised to Keeper because of his wisdom. His greatest strength – and the trait she most admired – was his ability to keep his emotions in check, and base his decisions on his intellect. Some found him to be cold and calculating man, but Nicola knew the truth of him; Dertois was a just ruler, one who set aside his own desires and held the needs of his followers to be greater than his own.

He loved every last citizen of Lock Core equally – Nicola included. Because of this, Nicola knew she would never hold a special place in his heart – just a place among all the others.

Over the years, she cherished that small piece of him that was her own, all the while suffering when that piece failed to grow.

But none of that mattered any more. Very soon, Dertois would sacrifice every last bit of himself in defense of his world.

This would be their end. The end of them all.

Slowly, Dertois turned, his brown hair draped just past his ears and was plastered to his face. Much like her own, his white robe was stained in the blood of both the living and the undead.

He stepped into the chamber, water pooling around his feet on the floor of red stones.

Dertois let his gaze wash over those gathered in the chamber.

"Amass our forces along the northern wall," he said, his face filled with determination. "Reinforce it with our forces from the east and western fronts, leaving only a contingent army upon those walls. Should the undead attempt to overrun our flanks, have our southern forces ready to rush to their aid."

Nodding at his words, the Lady Protector Hitt'rille spun to relay the orders to her officers waiting in the room below. Draped over her shoulders was an olive green mantle which signified her rank. Having recently pulled it from the corpse of Bortimere, the garment appeared scarlet being saturated with the man's blood. Hitt'rille quickly descended the ladder and could be heard by the rest of the Council barking orders to those below.

Dertois' body faintly glowed while slivers of light began crawling from his flesh, like worms creeping from moistened earth.

He turned to Nicola, his voice harsh and unforgiving, "Gather all the mages, it is time we rejoin the battlefield."

She found herself unable to return his gaze. Nicola lowered her sparkling blue eyes to the floor and she softly replied, "Aye, my lord."

"Aaarr . . ." Drau'd wobbled forward, his voice shaking the room. "So that all may live!"

Her heart sank to see the battle lust filling the eyes of the normally gentle giant.

"Aye, so that all may live . . ." Dertois replied, his fists transformed into balls of fire hanging at his sides. ". . . we shall fight, from this world to the next."

Outside, the rain and the undead army continued to pound the wall of Lock Core.

Solo Ki approached Dertois and whispered into his ear.

Nicola drew closer to the pair, knowing they had a rich past together and eager to hear the exchange. But she failed to catch the elf's words. As for Dertois' reply . . . she would never know, for Dertois opened his mouth to respond, but his words were lost. The darkness came, and the sound of the earth screaming tore his voice away . . .

. . . It began on the Northern Wall; a rapidly expanding globe of pure black. At first, the soldiers on the wall watched it arise in awe and confusion. Then it overcame them . . . it consumed them. They saw the bodies of their companions scatter in a blast of ash and then they tried to run. They failed. The globe expanded too quickly, catching many before they could even take a step. Others collapsed into the blackness along with the mighty Red Wall, which crumpled like a sandcastle caught in the waves of a high tide. Unable to escape as the wall disintegrated below their feet, the soldiers tried to scream . . . they failed in that as well -- dying without a sound as they were swallowed by the darkness.

It also took the forces of the Plague; equally confused, and equally unable to avoid their destruction.

Their 'immortality' meant nothing to the dark power as they too were swept away in a tidal wave of black ash. Realizing their millennium of life was at stake, the throng of undead reversed direction and surged back to the pulsating Rift, trampling their own forces in their frenzy to escape. Meanwhile, unaware of the calamity, whatever godless leader dwelt on the other side of the Rift continued to order his forces into the Seventh World. The newcomers arrived into the Seventh World to find their allies stampeding in their direction, spurred on by the giant ball of death rising up behind them. The new arrivals collided with those seeking refuge in the Black Door. At the base of the Rift, the army of the Plague became a frantic mound of rotting flesh as they clawed and crawled over one another in their attempt to reach the Rift. They too failed . . . the darkness came and claimed them all.

Throughout the Northern Wall, nothing was spared. All that the darkness touched, it destroyed. But the surge of annihilation wasn't done yet. The globe continued to expand, and was soon to devour the Northern Tower.

"It's magnificent."

Nicola was so fascinated and horrified by sight she didn't realize LeCynic had joined them – and he was smiling! The army of the Triad was being destroyed and he was smiling.

"Get back!" Dertois commanded. His body tensed, his shield flared then swelled to encompass the entire gathering.

Nicola obeyed, and sent her power out as well, her own blue flames merging with Dertois' and strengthening his shield. LeCynic however, continued out onto the balcony, not a lick of energy anywhere near his body.

*'Get back, you fool.'*

She tried to call out to him telepathically, knowing her words would be lost in the chaos, but like the arrogant fool he was, he ignored her. The darkness washed over them and LeCynic vanished from her sight.

It slammed against their shields, driving Nicola to her knees. Her shield compressed, barely large enough to keep the darkness from touching her flesh. She felt the Singularity drain from her body as if siphoned by the dark power. In front of her eyes, her barrier of flames flickered and wavered. In the initial contact alone, her shield thinned to a hair's breadth. And still the darkness came, a tempest of death broiling around them. At her side, Dertois fared little



better. He was on his feet, but gritting his teeth as he struggled to maintain his own thin barrier. Wisps of darkness leeches through, singeing his face.

Solo Ki stood beside them, raising his staff against the onslaught. For a brief time, the power of the Graelic held, absorbing the oncoming darkness. But as it did so, the blood red tip ignited in flames of black. Solo Ki's skeletal hands blackened as well, burning as he struggled to maintain his grip. He fought to remain standing, but was unable to bear the pain. He too dropped to his knees, his legendary staff, the Graelic slipped from his charred hands, fully engulfed in black flames. Whatever aid the staff was providing was no more, and Nicola felt the loss keenly.

So too did Dertois. Whatever power he had, he devoted to strengthening the shield at his back. To save his companions he let the darkness in . . . he let it take him. His shield evaporated. His flesh blistered and peeled.

*'I won't let you die!'*

His eyes melted from his head.

Somehow, Nicola found the strength to stand, and placed herself between Dertois and the darkness. Achieving heights of power she never dreamt of before, she raised a hand covered in blue flames and thrust it out against the oncoming wave of destruction.

For a brief second her power held, her love was safe . . . she felt pure annihilation at the tips of her fingers and she actually held it back. But the moment was brief, and the darkness was never-ending. The flames on her hand sputtered and then vanished. Her hand vanished as well; scattering into countless particles of dust. There was no pain, only shock as the rest of her arm vanish before her eyes.

As the darkness crept onward, melting her face like wax, she turned to Dertois. Through her one remaining eye she saw him collapse. Screaming, she fell to him, draping her body over his as the dark power swept over them. Nicola continued to scream, and she burned . . .

She was certain it was the end . . . after what seemed like an eternity of suffering she begged for it to come; an end to all her earthly pain . . . to die alongside the man she loved.

The end came. But the pain remained, unlike the thousands swept away in the darkness, Nicola was denied peace. She lived. So burnt and disfigured she appeared unhuman, she yet lived.

An eerie silence covered the land -- a shield of crackling azure flames cover her and Dertois.

Her vision was filled with tears, her body filled with pain. Every breath was like inhaling fire as she struggled to suck in air through the drooping flap of skin that was her face.

The darkness was nowhere to be found, only its aftermath remained -- a gaping black pit where a great red wall once stood.

The roof of the Northern Tower was gone, fully exposing the survivors to the down-pouring rain. Every drop that fell upon her was like a knife piercing her flesh. She screamed anew, louder than ever before.

The clouds parted. The rain became a drizzle. A dome of twinkling stars filled the heavens.

A giant, calloused hand wrapped around Dertois' body, lifting him up and away from Nicola. Feebly, she sought to cling to him with her remaining hand. But she was no match for the power of the giant, and Dertois easily slipped from her grip.

"My Lady, please. It's over now," a gruff voice called out to her, then a similar hand took her body with more care and tenderness than she would have ever thought possible.

. . . *It's over.*

Then she saw *Him*, hovering in a shell of blue flames where the balcony used to be. His sparkling white robe was singed, his flesh was blistered -- though healing by the moment. Otherwise he was unharmed . . . and the bastard was smiling. LeCynic was looking at the epicenter of the blast and he was smiling.

As weak and battered as she was, she would have arose and blasted him from the sky -- but then she realized . . . LeCynic saved her life. He just saved them all . . .

She had gone beyond the limits of her power and failed. Meanwhile, LeCynic stood against the darkness and he survived.

One final thought filled her mind as the pain washed her consciousness away; to survive such utter destruction, LeCynic must truly be a god . . .

. . . or the devil himself.

## The Destroyer and the Dead God

–*The Age of Death,*  
*Ki'minsyllessil, Post Exodus 586*–

Journey's end . . .

After a rampage of destruction that took him through some of the darkest realms of the universe, he had finally arrived – Ki'minsyllessil, the darkest world yet.

This was it . . . the source. He sensed it, hidden somewhere deep within the colossal trunk of the tower-like tree – the Graelic. The tree once worshipped by the elves as a god of purity and life, had been poisoned by an undead heart that was corrupt and evil beyond imagining.

The moment his bare foot touched the world's soil the source sensed him as well. The roots that covered the land were suddenly ripping free from the ground, uncoiling in his direction. A swarm of vines fell from the sky, darting towards him.

But it didn't matter . . . it was time to do what he was born to do. It was time to destroy the source, to tear out the hellish heart and send it back to the Void where it belonged.

“You're telling me Anon's somewhere up there?” Alec asked, as if oblivious to the ten foot thick black root rising up above his head, or the many barbed vines slithering from the sky.

If Anon was truly up there, then why couldn't he sense him? In the tree . . . in the world, he felt only madness and death. He craned his neck upwards, but saw only an endless black trunk and a sky full of skeletal branches.

“Unfortunately, yes,” his companion and guide, the Dead God Imorbis whispered in reply.

Anon . . . if Imorbis was to be believed (even after tearing through his mind, Alec wasn't sure he was) Anon could very well be a *true* god, or at the least a direct conduit to the power of this so-called Maker. And the tree had taken him! If so, how in the dead was he supposed to prevail when even the Maker had not? Considering the ominous sight of the towering tree in front of him and the depths of evil within, he began to wonder how far he could trust Imorbis – or his own power for that matter, so closely tied were the two. Could he face such an evil? Did he actually have a choice? The only certainty was that this was his destiny, he *had* to face this evil – and if his life was to have any meaning . . . he had to win.

“Well then, if Anon's up there, you may want to leave now, Imorbis,” Alec said, sparing the former Dead God a backward glance. “I'm not sure what's gonna happen when I try to save him . . . but I can guarantee you it won't be good.”

As ever, Imorbis wore a skin of dark energy that turned him into a living shadow. But somehow, in this place, he appeared more solid and real and could have almost passed for a living being. Alec didn't have to read his mind to tell that the Dead God was eager to see his plan fulfilled and had no intention of leaving. He had planned for ages for this moment, and Alec knew nothing would keep him from missing it – this was Imorbis' destiny as well. Alec had seen the Dead God's mind, and the countless evils he had unleashed upon the universe. He could even make a strong case that the spread of the Plague was his doing – without-a-doubt it was his creation. Still though, Alec saw something else in the being when he tore through his mind. Hidden deep within the pile of shadows and fleshless bones there existed the remnants of

a gifted and highly intelligent young man who was once capable of love, and cared deeply for those he called friends. The infection erased such thoughts – to be replaced by the Hunger, but now, nearly devoid of the dark power, bits and pieces of that young man began to return. Despite all the evil that Imorbis had done, he was trying to set things right – a feeling Alec knew well. Because of that, Alec couldn't help but feel a shred of sympathy for him, and felt it necessary to at least offer up a warning before he unleashed the full might of his power and gave the Dead God his final death.

Imorbis didn't respond, nor did he have to. He looked on at the towering tree, lost in memories of the past. The layer of dark energy that held his body together vibrated as if in anticipation.

Alec turned away from him – Imorbis didn't need a warning, he knew damn well this was where his life would finally end.

He gave his full attention to the deadly onslaught of roots and vines, which continued to tear free of the earth, rising up hundreds of feet into the air. For a moment they hovered over their heads, slowly swaying back and forth . . . then they smashed downward . . . A million vines with needle sharp tips joined them, falling like rain from the sky to dive straight towards the pair . . .

Alec's bare flesh became black flames. His aura swelled, becoming a pulsating wave of dark energy. As if effortlessly, Alec disintegrated everything the Dead Tree sent. The roots fell upon the pair in a shower of dust. The vines withered and retracted to the dark recesses of the night. More came . . . more took their place . . .

Alec grinned as they came on, then he destroyed them all . . . for as far as he could see. The sight of the tree evaporating made it hard to keep his grin in check before it became a smile. But he knew he must be cautiously optimistic. It was a small victory, and granted it was a small display of his power, but the roots were an inconsequential obstacle . . . the true evil had yet to be faced. His power may seem limitless, but so too did the evil in this world. The last thing he wanted was to realize his new-found power did have a limit, and to find it before he was able to defeat the *source*. Apparently, the *source* held similar thoughts, for it was holding back as well, and now the distant mountains of roots remained deceptively still.

"Looks like your old pal isn't too happy to see you, Imorbis," Alec said, the black flames retracting into his body.

"Humph . . . yes, he's unhappy to say the least. But most likely, I am too insignificant to occupy his thoughts. You however, seem to have drawn his full attention."

"No doubt, exactly as you anticipated . . ."

Imorbis fought well to keep the smile from creeping into his shadowy features.

"Well then, you may as well see to it that I'm properly introduced . . . shall we?" Alec asked, waving his hand towards the Graelic.

"After you," Imorbis replied, no longer able to keep the smile from arcing on his face.

Alec headed out, not entirely comfortable having the Dead God at his back, but far more afraid of what dwelt ahead of him.

Together the Dead God and the Destroyer strolled out to the trunk. Had it not been for the giant monstrosity looming over the landscape, and the stench of death permanently embedded in the air, the journey would have almost been peaceful. Looking upward at the Dead Tree, Alec could almost imagine the bountiful garden of life it must have once been . . . almost. The planet had come a long way from the world of Solo Ki's birth. Instead of lush green branches dancing in the breeze, the black limbs swayed menacingly though the air was still and

dead calm. Instead of leaves, and ripened fruit, bodies dangled from the branches; the immortal kin of Solo Ki, damned to suffer for eternity lest Alec can set them free.

And somewhere among them was the man he sought, Anon.

The closer he came, the more Alec was in awe of the tree. He had seen many worlds, many wonders (unfortunately, all of which were long since sent to ruin), and Alec could think of only one other structure in the universe that could compare with the Graelic – it was the black obelisk, Imorbis' 'Alpha'. The similarities between the two entities could not be coincidental. Both rose to the heavens, both were alive with a mysterious and unfathomable power that could only come from a true god. Both were simultaneously full of the essence of life and death, and were capable of spreading either force throughout the entire universe. Somehow, they were tied to one another; a secret only they shared. A secret he soon hoped to share as well – he would find it in the massive black trunk. First he would find the *source* . . . then Anon. Between the two of them he *will* have all the answers.

With Imorbis little more than a shadow cowering at his side, Alec at last stood at the base of the Graelic. In front of him, the roots rose like pillars and twisted together to create a maze of tunnels leading into the tree. The vast collection of warped arches kept the tree upright, displacing its weight to the anchoring system of roots that burrowed to the heart of the world and covered the planet's surface as well.

For a second Alec paused, wondering what would happen if he simply disintegrated them all, used his power like a lumberjack's axe and let the whole damn tree fall. What a sight it would be to watch the evil tree topple to the earth. Likely, the force of such an impact would throw the entire planet out of alignment, disrupt its orbit and send it hurtling into the cold depths of space for all time. But would that be enough? Could victory be so simple? There was that – a strong sense of doubt that his enemy would die so easily, but also Alec couldn't help but feel that the complete destruction of the tree seemed sacrilegious. It was infected. It was evil. But it was still very much godly. The true victory would be had, not by its death, but by tearing the infection out.

*Besides, he thought. If I destroy the thing, I'll never have my answers. I need answers . . .*

With that thought in mind, he sent his power out, a thousand threads of black smoke probed the surface of the tree then delved its interior as well. To sense the tree (even with his power) was to flirt with madness. But he needed answers . . .

To command his power – the power of the Void – he had accepted a truth. Reality did not exist; he saw it for the illusion it was and could unravel it and return it to its true state with a thought. He knew well the power of the Void, and that the universe was a cold and uncaring bitch of a mother that didn't give a damn about him or those he loved.

Even so, as heartless and false as reality proved itself to be, there was one thing he had yet to accept -- the belief that life – HER LIFE – held no meaning.

*Nathalia . . .*

What was the damn point? Life – even though it was some sort of grand illusion, it was yet a miracle, the greatest ever. Why then had it been reduced to madness and meaningless death? Such a miracle – such a gift – it should be a blessing. Why must they live if only to suffer and die? Could there be a better way? Could there be peace? And if so . . .

*How do we find it? – perhaps the toughest question of all. I have to find it . . .*

With all the power he now commanded, if he still couldn't find it, then there truly was no hope.

Hope . . . it drove him onward (that and revenge). Was there a point to it all? Or was the universe merely random madness, and the nothingness of the Void the only constant in what is otherwise pure chaos?

These questions filled his mind as he probed deeper into the tree. The chaos was calling to him, taunting him with an answer to all his desires at the end of what was an infinite pit. A part of him dreaded to find the answer -- the rotten and corrupted wood echoed his every fear, and the realization that he already knew what the answer would be.

He continued on, fully aware of the dangers. The drain on his ability was great, but Alec knew there was no other way; to find the *source* he had to risk himself, and to hope his power was the stronger force. He flooded the tree with his power, entering every last infected cell in his search.

He was falling now, falling into the tree's dark heart. He became one with the Dead Tree. There was a moment when he realized his power was dwindling and that eventually he would need it to escape, to free himself from the tree and reenter his own flesh. But he left the point of no return and his flesh behind . . . to find the *source*, Alec delved deeper.

He was the Dead Tree.

He felt what it felt; not simply a desire to kill, but to desecrate all that existed. For the tree, reality was the true desecration – an abomination to the purity of oblivion and the Void.

He had hoped to find Anon, and with him a reason to believe in something more. That life was real, and that it had meaning.

He didn't find Anon. Nor the smallest glimmer of hope. What he found was the *source*. Alec found nothingness . . . with his power tied to the tree he felt it spreading throughout creation. It permeated the air around him; continually splitting and dividing as it branched out through space. It burrowed below Alec's feet. The very earth was infected as it leeches into the soil. Throughout the universe, it was returning creation to its original state – nothingness.

And the source of it all . . . finally he had found it, but when he did, he realized his error . . . There was no source, only madness and a meaningless gift – life. He saw himself through the eyes of the Dead Tree and saw his deepest fears staring back at him amplified a million fold. He saw a shell . . . an empty vessel . . . a collection of matter that tricked itself into thinking it was alive, and then again fooled itself into believing that life had meaning. He was dust, cast off from one star after another to drift through space, time and time again reshaped and remade in an utterly random manner. All that he was, and all he could ever be would inevitably be washed away by the winds of time – to become dust once more. It didn't matter what he did. Even his power meant nothing to this force, this emptiness – this Void.

In the mind of the evil being, there could never be peace for there was only chaos -- it was the foundation of it all. Deep down Alec knew this as well. He had been born with the knowledge. Like the rest of the living, it had been forgotten. As a child, his mind struggled to make sense of its surroundings, crafting the illusion of order where there was none. Once more, his mind fell into the madness of this truth -- he was born again. To see through the eyes of the *source* was to look with newborn eyes; to see a reality that held no meaning. Like a babe pulled from the womb Alec looked at the world around him and, in fear and confusion, he screamed.

Meanwhile, too engrossed in discovering what dwelt inside the tree, he never saw the vines unfurling above his head and slowly drift his way.

He never saw the black vines as they entered his flesh, pumping him full of a thick, black liquid. His eyes glazed over in a sheen of oil. High up the trunk, a dripping slit opened to the

tree's interior. The vines hoisted him up to the crevice. Alec was still screaming as his body was sucked inside.

Once there, he didn't find Anon, but he found an answer . . .

Reality no longer made sense to him – if ever it had. He may have had his answer, but he no longer comprehended his own questions.

Nor did it matter . . . the Destroyer was now one with the Servant of Death.

There was only chaos . . . forever and always there had only been chaos.

Alec had his answer.



Pain . . . suffering . . . madness . . .

They were all so *familiar* to him they had become redundant. Imorbis had lived with them for a millennium, even Sevron had nothing new to show him – but oh how Sevron tried . . .

*“You were a fool to return . . .”*

Even Sevron's voice was pain . . . a thunderous noise that rattled his soul.

*“Even more foolish to think I could be defeated by your creation . . . His power is mine now. Soon all will be mine . . . I alone will remain, my existence a testament to the truth. The Age of Lies is at an end. The illusion of life will be no more, no more pretending. The dream you savored, and fought so hard to extend is over now. It's time you see the truth, old friend, as I once did.”*

Sevron showed him . . . a new horror and a new pain beyond even Imorbis' imagination, and at long last Imorbis found his penance – the suffering he so justly deserved. Even as Sevron sent him to hell, Imorbis couldn't help but laugh. He knew he would never find the Maker, but instead suffer eternal in the mind of Sevron. Still though, Imorbis knew something that Sevron did not; the Maker *was* real. And though this age was at an end, a new beginning was to come. And it would not be by Sevron's design, but would once more follow the Maker's path. Before he was utterly sundered body and soul, Imorbis' shadowed lips split into a wide grin. He found it ironic, that of all the places he had been, he would at last find peace in Sevron's hell, for he went there knowing that he had corrected the error he began so long ago . . .

Imorbis' died . . . but his plan survived, and it was fully in motion.

## LeCynic and Coba

*–The Age of Death,*

*The Seventh World*

*Second War of Lock Core, Post Exodus 586–*

Life . . . Death . . . it all tasted so sweet. And oh the power it bestowed . . .

Through the cold, dark night he hunted; the barren wasteland created by the Destroyer a virtual buffet of beings both living and undead.

Everything was prey now. Reality itself was his to feast upon. He moved through the land a blur, a ripple of black in the otherwise eerily still night. Those he hunted never saw him coming. By the time his eyes of glowing blue flames lit up the night they were well on their way to death; their bodies shrunken and withered, their veins empty and dry. The last thing left to them was their souls; but he fed on those as well. When LeCynic was done with them, they fell to the earth – a pile of dust, and before their dust settled, the scent of life (or death) filled him and the hunt began once more.

How he loved the hunt . . . he lived for it. For as long as he could remember it had been so. He had always been a hunter; preying off of those who were weaker, growing stronger as he tore them apart, physically and mentally.

In his human life, he quickly rose to Alpha male by dominating those among his pack – the Order of the Magi. He ascended their ranks because none came close to challenging his power – none would dare! With little effort he had the Magi pups bowing before him and whimpering as he walked among them. Even the former Keeper, Dertois, reeked of fear when he drew near. Both men knew it was only a matter of time before Dertois relinquished his role as pack leader for the younger and more powerful LeCynic.

Back then he felt as though nothing could stop him, and oh how he longed to prove the truth of it to the entire Seventh World. So, like a fool, he did the unthinkable . . . he entered the Rift.

No matter his current strength, or the heights of power he was soon to achieve, nothing will ever erase the sting of that failure. How easily he was defeated . . . how humiliating his defeat. The Tree took him and his loyal army with the utmost of ease. He had been so consumed by his own arrogance and power, he dismissed his opponent and failed to understand its true nature; that the Tree was death incarnate, and would never be defeated by a mortal.

Despite his unheard of skill with the Singularity, death claimed him and made him one of its own.

He had hoped to find glory in the Black Door, but instead he found catastrophic failure. He was beaten, humiliated . . . infected, and suddenly more powerful than ever before.

LeCynic survived and returned to the Seventh World, bringing with him the Hunger . . . and something else . . .

LeCynic was no longer alone. Another entity dwelt within him. Hidden in his Plague infected blood, it grew inside him. It sensed his world and the life within and it followed him back to the Seventh World.

No sooner had the Plague finished filling his veins, then the entire Dark Army began filling his world.

He remembered collapsing at the base of the Rift, his body consumed with pain, and power. He cried out; a scream part agony, part ecstasy. Meanwhile the dead flooded the valley,



limping, snarling, and clawing their way to the great Red Wall. They paused only to catch LeCynic's scent, then they passed him by.

They shouldn't have done that. They should have finished him when they had the chance.

LeCynic arose.

He watched as the undead filled the Seventh World – his world! The Hunger grew within him as the infection continued to spread, urging him to join them; to annihilate his people and desecrate his world until it no longer existed.

They sought to take everything from him; his world, his flesh, and his mind.

LeCynic vowed to give them nothing.

He would never become like them – a mindless slave to the Hunger. Nor would he sit back and watch them turn the world he had so rightfully earned into a dead planet.

He summoned his power . . . his *powers*. The Singularity alone wasn't enough to fight the will of the Tree, but he had *their* power now. No longer was LeCynic a mere mortal. No longer did he fear death – he was death!

He turned the field of battle into a bonfire. The flames of the burning corpses could be seen from the entire city, the smoke from as far as the Outlands.

It became a beacon. It roused the defenders to line the wall and defend their world.

But it was just the beginning . . .

For three long days LeCynic continue to burn his enemies to ash. During that time many unimaginable horrors came from the Rift to test his might . . . he killed them all. Even so, it wasn't enough. Even with all of his powers it wasn't enough. On the third day for the battle of Lock Core, even LeCynic surely would have met his end.

Had it not been for the Destroyer . . .

Some say it was a victory, some a defeat. To LeCynic it was both. The enemy lingered on, inside him, and his battle continued. Afterwards, it took every bit of his power to keep from losing himself; to be erased by the evil spirit of the undead tree. Desperate, he grasped at any possibility of defeating it. The blood of the Destroyer seemed the likeliest of solutions, so he drank it in gallons. The Hunger was appeased, but it only grew stronger. The infection accelerated, as did the decomposition of his body. To hide his rotting flesh, he was forced to veil his symptoms with the Oneness.

He continued to keep the Destroyer as his prisoner, but instead of drinking the man's blood, he drained it, then used his power to study it. He learned a great deal from the man, but sadly, before he could unlock his secrets, he was taken from him. Fortunately, some of his blood remained, and with it he began his own experiments. He took his own infected blood, mixed it with the Destroyer's and then altered it with the Singularity. He continued to toy with the recipe, all the while testing it on various captives of the Triad of Races. Most were utter failures, ending in foul deaths, or becoming monstrosities too horrid for even LeCynic to endure. Children, however, seemed to produce the most interesting results – those with Mage-blood, far more interesting than all the rest. So he began to collect them, these young Magi who were blessed with the *blood* nearly as pure as his own. Regrettably, all of them died during the course of his experiments. But from their deaths came the seeds of LeCynic's new army -- the beginning of his new pack; one more loyal and subservient than ever before.

They were his children – his wraiths . . .

He unleashed them on the Outlands and his new pack quickly grew to a legion of undead followers; all of which were bound to him by the power of his own infected blood. And for a time he ruled them all; the Triad of Races and the forces of the Plague.

Once more he thought himself unstoppable . . . once more he was proven wrong.

During the battle for Shattered Rock, he came face to face with the Destroyer, and suffered the full brunt of his ability. The Destroyer proved LeCynic's Plague-born immortality to be false and the gift of the Singularity an illusion.

The power of the Destroyer was the purest thing of all -- pure annihilation.

Through his eyes of Mage-fire he watched as it dissembled reality. The army of undead at his back became dust, and then the dust fractured into particles so small even LeCynic's eyes of mage-fire could no longer detect them. Their division continued without end until eventually they became one with the wave of death and moved on, dissembling the rest of reality in its path.

To survive it, LeCynic gave all his power to his shield. For a moment it held, glowing brightly against the onslaught of darkness. But the rage of the Destroyer had no match. LeCynic's shield evaporated – and his body soon after. There was pain beyond belief, and through the pain LeCynic fought on. Even as his flesh was no more, his bones crumbling, he fought on; refusing to accept that this was his end. That, for all his greatness, his life ended by another; a drunkard and a fool, and that in the end he would die a failure.

He survived . . .

He faced the very wrath of the Void and he survived. It wasn't because of his vast reserves of the Oneness, or his enhanced biological strength from the Plague. The reason he survived was simple, LeCynic refused to fail.

Yes, in all honesty he died . . . and he met his end. But what he encountered in the oblivion of death was a new power. One he never dreamed of possessing. He found the Void.

The Destroyer possessed it, and now so too did LeCynic.

The undead tree that infected him, that sought to claim his soul, it should have left him alone. It never should have fu\*\*\*d with LeCynic. Now he was free of it, and growing more powerful by the minute. LeCynic was coming for it, this “Evil Tree”. Let it send its armies against him. He will feed from them all, the entire Dark Army will become his feast. The legendary ‘infinite’ army of the Plague will provide an equally limitless source of power. He will drain anything that stands in his path, and then he will turn that power against the tree.

LeCynic will return to the Rift, and this time he *will* burn the Dead Tree to the ground.

Then, after that . . . nothing in the universe will be able to stop him . . .

Including the Destroyer.



LeCynic was truly a god now . . .

Coba had always thought as much, but now there could be no doubt. The powerful being he once was had been unmade by the Destroyer, and then born again through the blood of the living and the dead. By will alone he had survived the power of the Destroyer. It was that primal instinct, the will to survive that kept him here. And now those base instincts he unleashed upon the world; the need to feed, to hunt. Whether they were the living or the undead, it mattered not. He fed from them all . . . and with each feeding his power grew.

Yet fearful of his new master and god, Coba took a back seat as the hunt commenced. One victim after another, he watched as the Singularity spewed from LeCynic's eyes in blue flames to burn away his victim's flesh, while the dark gifts of the Plague transformed his body to black threads to tear them apart. LeCynic was in command of both powers now, and masterfully, he wove them together as one to create an unstoppable killing combination. At times he was a man; handsome and young. A head of dark brown locks, and strong chiseled features. His eyebrows were full and dark, casting a shadow over his ever burning eyes of blue-fire. A robe of energy covered his body, blacker than even the moonless night. But when he killed he became something else; a dark inferno. His robe vanished, melding with his flesh which became living flames of black. Wisps of blue fire danced along his body, while his eyes continued to burn azure blue. To behold him was to drown within him – to lose one's soul in the blackened pit of fire that was LeCynic, the Keeper of the Wall, the leader of the Plague, and to Coba, a god.

They picked clean the desolate wasteland that was Shattered Rock, and then together they hunted the outskirts of the city; feeding off the survivors of the Destroyer's cataclysmic blast. Scattered groups fled the city, wandering the scorched land in hopes of finding a glimmer of life – a sign that the entire world hadn't burned beneath the Destroyer's wave of death. What they found was LeCynic . . . or more aptly, he found them. One by one, one group after another he fed – and oh how his power grew. Other hunters lurked in the night, but they found them as well. They were the undead, remnants of LeCynic's former army. No matter how rotten and foul their flesh, he consumed them too. They even fell upon a pack of his personal guards. Still garbed in their fanged wolf-helms, the guards thought to contest LeCynic for dominion of the area. As though to demonstrate his control of the land, he took them with particular savagery. Crushing their wolf helms like tin cans and spewing their innards out of their suits of armor in a geyser of black goo. When at last they laid as crumpled bits of armor and mush at his feet he then summoned the fires of the Oneness, and burnt them to dust.

For his obedience, his god, LeCynic, left plenty of scraps – though Coba could only feast of the living. Mostly they were morsels of little nourishment; soldiers near death, or crippled and elderly humans too weak to move. His god tracked a steady stream of the latter, a trail of them leading to the city of Lock Core. When LeCynic passed over the old souls, Coba liked to believe he was leaving them purely for Coba's benefit, but then he sensed what his god likely had a long time ago – there was a larger group ahead of them, a group not of half-dead humans, but one filled with great power, and an unbelievable feast of life. In his excitement, he nearly asked his god what could create such a power, but he caught himself, realizing that he dared not show his ignorance in LeCynic's presence. He was all too aware of the fact he too could become a snack for his god should he prove an inadequate devotee. He had to put faith in his god, and that he would deliver him unto a bountiful feast.

They continued heading to Lock Core, sparing but one refugee in their path; an elf, his body and soul already sustenance for another dark power – a power remarkably similar to LeCynic's own. They kept their distance as they passed him by, his gaunt body obviously claimed by another demon.

All the rest they encountered they consumed . . .

Empowered by their undead gifts, they tore through the scorched land, quickly gaining on the distant party. Eventually, the landscape changed. The ash-covered earth was replaced with fields of wheat and lush swaths of grass. Before them, a forest loomed, and beyond that, the great Gorian chain rose to the sky. It was a mountain city, a wall. The great red wall of Lock

Core. They continued on, leaving the fields of wheat festering with disease, the blades of grass and the leaves dropping from the forest trees; withered and brown.

As they closed in on their prey, the sensation of life grew. In the presence of the power, the corruption he had become was felt more profoundly than ever before. So much so, Cobra's twisted soul screamed for release, the true death. Had it not been for the presence of his god, Cobra would have turned and fled. It was visible now as well, a beacon in the night, as if the being's power spilled from the very heavens.

. . . *Another god?* Cobra wondered, staring at the beacon in awe . . . and fear. Could even his god take such a being?

He realized his mistake the instant LeCynic stopped – being a god, LeCynic most likely was party to Cobra's every thought, his every doubt.

Though he didn't require air to live, Cobra realized he was holding his breath for what seemed like an eternity. He satisfied the instinctual urge and exhaled, believing his god would have killed him by now had he so desired. Something other than his moment of doubt caused his god to pause. Having no desire to risk any further lapses, he waited patiently beside LeCynic until the reason presented itself.

Suddenly, he wasn't alone with his god. As powerful as Cobra was, he never saw the other being approach – nor did he sense him. The child parted the dark night as if it was a curtain and was standing before them. He wore a pair of shattered spectacles that hung awkwardly on his face. His flesh was white as bone. He gazed blankly at them, his eyes empty and black.

By all appearances he was lifeless, infected. But Cobra saw through the façade; beneath the rotting flesh he sensed a beating heart that was very much alive.

And he was very powerful. Close, perhaps, in strength to his god, but certainly not LeCynic's equal.

Cobra expected his god to engulf him, take the child's power as his own. Instead, his evil, undead god smiled . . .

"What a pleasant surprise," LeCynic said to the child. "I thought this 'Destroyer' had surely taken you from me. But I see you too have survived . . . and changed."

The child was motionless, expressionless, as LeCynic's voice thundered down upon him.

"And you hunt them as well."

Cobra jolted back in fear as his god's laughter rent the air.

"Surely, there is enough power to be shared. Join us, Whimly. Together we shall feast on their souls."

"No."

Cobra's god was no longer amused.

He changed from a man into a blackened pit, threads of pure blue energy crackling outward, stopping just short of engulfing the child.

"You would deny me, child. Perhaps I take their power for my own . . . and yours as well."

The child continued his dead stare, even as LeCynic's black tendrils tickled his flesh.

"You do not fear me . . . I sense your power, but rest assured, even you cannot stop me, nothing can stop me now."

"You're wrong," the child flatly replied. "She will stop you. If you attack them she will kill you . . . if *they* don't kill you first."

The black threads took hold of the child, flames of mage-fire crackled from LeCynic's body.

"She travels with the One Elf . . ." the boy continued.

The blue flames faded, the tendrils of black withdrew.

Finally, the child showed emotion, a mix of sadness and hate.

"And there's a boy," the child said. "One as gifted with the Oneness as yourself."

"Our master has no equal," Coba blurted, charging the child. "He will take them all, including the One Elf."

LeCynic was a man once more. Before Coba knew what had happened, the hand of his god was wrapped around his neck. Coba offered no resistance as his god flung him back. Even if he had resisted, he doubted LeCynic would have noticed the difference. Coba fell to the ground, the touch of his god a smoldering hand-print on his neck.

"The One Elf," LeCynic said, his hand flexing as if eager to crush something in his grasp. Coba scuttled backward as silently as possible.

"An encounter with the One Elf may not be worth the price. Even for her . . ." LeCynic continued.

LeCynic seemed to gaze remorsefully at the beacon of light.

"I only sought to protect the Master, and see his desires fulfilled," Whimly said, bowing his head.

Coba saw the lie, clear as day. Surely his god did as well. Why then, did LeCynic not strike the child down?

"I suppose, there will be plenty to feed from in the city . . . not to mention a limitless amount inside the Rift," LeCynic said. "Besides, it's past time I return to Lock Core. I have much to attend to before I can see my vengeance fulfilled."

His burning blue eyes focused solely on the boy.

"Join me, Whimly. I know you desire her, though for another purpose. I know too, that you crave vengeance. Prove your loyalty, and I promise that one day you will have them both . . ."

He didn't wait for a response, instead LeCynic became a black inferno and became one with the night. Coba picked himself off the ground, taking a moment to glare at the child before following his god. Whimly continued to stare into the darkness, as if the encounter with LeCynic had never occurred. After a time, he roused, and turned to the beacon of fire that was Emily. Her blue fire glimmered within his black orbs. Then, as suddenly as he appeared, Whimly vanished.

## The Girl and the Ghost

She told the others (the ragged few who remained) to keep moving, to never stop, not until they reached Lock Core. She told them not to worry, that she would find them in the city, and when they met again they would at last be safe.

Emily was beginning to worry she was a liar, and that not only would she never see them again, they wouldn't be safe . . . none of them would, not ever.

They had made camp in an abandoned farming village on the border of Lock Core. North of them, the mountains rose to the sky, splitting the clouds as they drifted through their snowy white peaks.

Likely, all the city's inhabitants had fled to the Red Wall; no doubt spurred on by rumors of the battle of Shattered Rock, or the prior devastation of the Outland cities.

When first they arrived, Emily felt comforted upon seeing the quaint, thatched cottages and timber-framed barns. Sitting on a large knoll at the edge of town, a dozen brick and mortar windmills stood sentry against the Red Wall; their canvas covered blades a flurry as the mountain winds plunged through the vale. Even the rows of slate roofed granaries – though empty – were a welcome sight. The town was much larger than her own, yet the sights and smells were so similar to the village of Havenwood in which she was born, she almost felt at home.

Originally, the plan was to stay there for the night, to take advantage of the many empty lodgings that would more than accommodate the remaining refugees of Shattered Rock. They could have pushed on, but everyone was in desperate need of rest, and though they were less than a day from the city, they would need their energy and their wits about them when they arrived. Unfortunately, in the middle of the night, Emily realized there was a reason why the village was abandoned – it wasn't safe. A ten foot wall of stone with large wooden towers guarded the road to Lock Core, while a picket fence, no taller than Emily's waist, was the only barrier between the town and the infested Outlands.

*'What is it, Nathalia?'* she questioned her companion, her words delivered in a well-guarded telepathic bond. She pulled her cloak tight to her breast, the autumn wind sending a chill through her heart. *'What do you see out there?'*

Next to her, the body of the golden-haired elf shimmered– or perhaps shivered, Emily thought. A pair of orchid blades flickered in and out of existence in her otherwise empty hands.

*"I see death,"* she softly whispered, her voice falling on Emily's ears alone. *"Death like me . . . but different, and far stronger. It almost reminds me of . . . Alec, but evil. And unlike him, this being won't hesitate to kill us or anything else it may encounter, nor will it hesitate to embrace the name 'Destroyer'."*

*Like Alec,* Emily pondered, more afraid than ever to face what dwelt in the darkness.

She had grown powerful since the battle of Shattered Rock, but she would still be no match against the power of the Destroyer.

The man leveled an entire city! They had only just recently escaped his swath of destruction, a blast radius that charred the land for miles.

*'Can we defeat him, Nathalia?'*

*"Perhaps . . ."* she said. Her blades vanished as she smiled down at Emily. *"If we face him together, all four . . ."*

Her smile broadened.

*"All five of us."*

Emily dared to take her eyes from the night to catch a glimpse of her other companions. The three of them stood guard at the dilapidated gate of cedar that was supposed to seal off the city's gravel roadway. But the gate was bent so badly at the hinges, it couldn't possibly latch shut. They hadn't even bothered dragging it across the roadway to try, knowing full well it wouldn't slow down whatever hunted them.

With every breath of wind, the gate shook. The hinges screeched, echoing out into the fields like a dying animal pleading for mercy.

*Together . . .* she thought, wondering if such a thing was even possible. At the moment, other than the ghostly presence of Nathalia, she never felt more alone. *They detest me, why would they ever fight for me?*

She glanced at Solo Ki. His thin fingers coiled around the blackened Graelic; the dark staff reflecting the smallest light as if it were made of steel. His cape was even more worn and soiled since they left Shattered Rock, it whipped about his lanky frame -- which was as motionless as a slab of stone. Hate radiated from his grey and white eyes as he gazed into the night.

*Sure, he will fight,* Emily thought. *But only for himself; to satisfy his need for vengeance, and to quiet the never-ending sorrow of his soul, if for only a moment.*

His intense scrutiny of the darkness was the first signs of life the One Elf had shown since their journey from Shattered Rock began. Their unknown, powerful enemy had managed to rouse him from what Emily had begun to fear was an eternal slumber. To her surprise, as despondent as he may have seemed, his senses proved to be permanently tuned to danger, for Solo Ki was the first to detect the evil presence, and the first to realize they were being hunted. Initially, Emily failed to realize it. When he began dropping back from the rest of the party, she simply assumed he had finally given up on the Seventh World. She continued onward in dread, fearing that at any moment she would feel an emptiness at her back, and turn to find the One Elf gone. If so, she would have no choice but to turn back to Lock Core and move on without him -- as she did with so many others too physically or mentally weak to continue.

Dertois' words, and her subsequent decisions, continued to haunt her: "No matter what you do, you cannot save them all. But perhaps with your power you can save their world."

Along with the mighty warrior, Gunt, she had charged Dertois to guide the survivors to the safety of Lock Core. If they found trouble along the way, the pair would be the only ones able to face it. But, as for the demon hunting them in the dark; neither the giant's mighty war-pick, nor the blind, old mage's wisdom would make a bit of a difference. She prayed to the gods, both false and true, that the two of them were at least strong enough to deliver the others to safety.

"To the dead with you. What are you waiting for?" Tetloan cursed, appearing ready to bolt into the darkness at any moment. His remaining hand clenched and unclenched on the cherry wood handle of one of Nathalia's blades. Licks of blue flame poured from the stump of his missing arm, caressing Nathalia's other blade.

During their journey to Lock Core, she often noticed Tetloan and the One Elf would wander off from the rest of the group, but she couldn't figure out why. She would even see massive bursts of mage-flare erupting from their location. Out of curiosity, and concern, she even tried to snoop in on their private meetings, but was stopped short of her goal by a hissing and foul-tongued Galimoto. Because they were so frequently stepping away from the others, she

wasn't originally worried when she realized Tetloan had joined Solo Ki at the village gate, but then she felt *it*, and ignoring Galimoto's dirty looks, she joined them. When she found them gripping their weapons, and glaring at the darkness, she instantly knew that – whatever secret meetings they were having before – this was something different.

And the evil she sensed . . . it filled the very darkness, as if the shadows moved by its will.

When first she sensed it, she had to catch herself before instinctually filling her veins with the Oneness. She thought to question the pair, but realized by their intense glares, she would most likely be ignored. Even Galimoto ignored her, and refrained from insulting her in his musical voice.

Whatever hatred Tetloan held for her, Galimoto shared it as well. The two of them shared everything now. They were bound by the Singularity, perhaps deeper than either of them even realized. Beyond Tetloan's mind, Galimoto didn't actually exist. But through the Oneness and Tetloan's will, the creature was given the illusion of life. And because Tetloan was far more powerful than Brice, so too was Galimoto's presence in reality (unfortunately so).

There was a time she would have counted on Galimoto, despite his wicked temperament. But now the creature was more fiend than friend. Even Emily was no longer spared his cruel words or evil glares.

If it came down to a fight, it was doubtful Galimoto would be of much help, for at the moment, the little red being looked more frightened than angry. His tail wound around Tetloan's body, his claws digging into the boy's shoulders. Only occasionally did he poke his beady yellow eyes out from behind the boy's fiery red head.

And as for Tetloan . . . Even the hate-filled eyes of Solo Ki couldn't match his glare. He would fight. Of that Emily was certain. He would fight anyone or anything. And he would do it alone. Emily was surprised he hadn't burst into flames already, to fly off, storming into the darkness.

No. She wasn't worried about him engaging the enemy, so much as she was worried about keeping him from it.

Emily knew there was only one thing that would bind them together . . . one woman.

*'They'll fight for you, only you. Appear to them, and they will fight as one.'*

The elven ghost turned her eyes to Tetloan, and the pair of thin, orchid blades sheathed at his hips. Her own illusionary weapons ceased to appear.

*"If I must . . ."*

Her body solidified, and for a moment she stood as she once was – beautiful, golden, glowing and bold. Then she faded to a silhouette, her milky flesh became the dark night.

*"Only if I must . . ."*

*Why won't you speak to them?* Emily wondered, and not for the first time. *What was she waiting for?*

She wouldn't ask, not now. Not when such sadness filled those ghostly eyes of grey and white.

They all prepared for the worst as the evil presence neared. None of them spoke. Even the constant ranting of the imp had been replaced by his chattering fangs.

Then . . . as mysteriously as it began . . .

"It's gone," Solo Ki murmured, his keen senses once more the first to grasp the situation.

His words broke the silence, and Emily's fear. She blushed, embarrassed to discover she had unwittingly been holding vast amounts of the Oneness.



She let her fear, and flames, go.

She realized she wasn't the only one, Tetloan was covered in flames too. However, he wasn't letting go so easily

At the words of Solo Ki, Tetloan twisted his face into a snarl. His flames rose higher. He leapt forward as if to pursue . . .

The Graelic swept down at his feet, tripping him before he made a single step. He tumbled to the gravel road, his power gone.

Tetloan whipped his head around, directing an even more vicious snarl toward Solo Ki. One look at the disapproval in Solo Ki's white eyes and the snarl vanished. Emily was certain the two of them were about to turn their hate against each other, then surprisingly, Tetloan turned away in shame.

"Whatever it was, it's now gone," Emily said, attempting to take charge of the situation and her hate-filled companions. "I for one don't wish to wait for its return. If we leave now, by sunset tomorrow we can be at Lock Core. I think it's more important we tend to the others than risk our lives hunting this thing in the dark."

"Agreed."

The brief concession from Solo Ki actually managed to startle her. Before she even had a chance to respond, Solo Ki was already in motion. His long elven legs striding straight to the great Gorian mountain chain.

Tetloan was slow to rise, and paused only briefly to cast a final glare into the night, but then he was right on the One Elf's heels – Galimoto in tow, of course, making sure he sent Emily a dirty look as he passed her by.

"Thank the gods we didn't have to face him," Emily whispered, her words leaving her plump lips in a puff of mist. The others moved on, unconcerned with Emily and whether or not she chose to follow. "There is so much hate in them all, I doubt they would have fought as one. Even for you."

Her head hanging low, Emily turned back to the village, back to Lock Core, and followed after them.



*I pray you're wrong, child,* Nathalia thought, watching as Emily trailed after the others, her shoulders sinking in exhaustion and defeat. *If you cannot fight as one, in Lock Core you will all surely die alone.*

Next to Nathalia a child appeared, a cherubic, bald-headed elfling.

"*The demon lives . . .*" the child pondered. "*That was not foreseen . . .*"

Worry filled the child's wide white eyes.

"*What does it mean?*" Nathalia asked.

"*It would seem, sister, that nothing is certain . . . neither our fate . . . nor the justice of the Maker.*"

Nathalia studied her friends as they traveled into the night. Her eyes looked beyond the village to the city of Lock Core. She looked beyond the darkness, beyond her friends' earthly path. She saw their timelines as a jumble of possibilities – few of which were good. She longed

to show them the true path, but she was only allowed to guide them so far. In the end, their fate would be their own to make.

For the first time since her return, she spoke out loud to the fleeting figures, "*Father . . . you have to have faith. Goodness remains, so long as you believe.*"

Her elven-ponytail flowed along her back as she shook her head.

*Tetloan, find love before all that is left to you is hate. Emily . . .*"

Imagined tears spilled from her eyes.

*"Don't give up on them. Heal their hearts, and they will fight for you . . ."*

And for the last of her companions, she grinned.

*"Galimoto . . . for dead's sake, be good."*

The four heroes passed through the stone gate, continuing on the road to Lock Core. The pair of ghostly elves watched them leave the city, then they vanished.

The gate to the Outlands continued to shake; its bent hinges, crying out in the night.

For a time, the town was utterly vacant once again . . .

Then another being passed through the Outland gate. His body gaunt. His once elegant stride a slouching limp. His immortal face, sunken and withered as if worn by a million years of suffering. Tucked tightly to his chest, hidden beneath the folds of his cape, a black globe slowly expanded; growing ever closer to breaching the barrier of blue flames that kept it contained.

The elf's eyes were nearly pure white, and saw little as he passed through the town. Lurching onward, he felt the gravel below his feet and made his way to the capitol city of Lock Core.

## XM591 and X'ander

*–The Age of Death,  
The Seventh World, Post Exodus 565–*

A pair of thin, translucent panels hovered in front of the diminutive, humanoid figure. The panels glowed with an array of flashing lights (mostly red), illuminating the being's face, which was covered in grease, sweat and a bitter scowl. The being's fingers were equally filthy, leaving dark smudges as they danced upon the screens. With one desperate combination of inputs after another, he tried to eliminate the red sensors. But despite his best attempts, his frustration only amplified, for no matter how many he extinguished, more were ignited; the red lights spreading across the pair of screens like a raging inferno.

"Damn you, Argos!" came a gruff curse from the small being. "You've taken me through half the God-forsaken universe, now all I'm asking is that you get me down to that damned planet," he demanded, knowing full well Argos was unable to answer – in his haste to divert power to the gravity-thrust generators he had inadvertently fried the system's communication circuitry. Given enough time, he could reroute Argos' com panel and patch into a replacement monitor, but at the moment, all of his time was devoted to battling the many system failures that continued to flare up.

He may have possessed the title of "Captain in Transit", but he knew damn well the ship was commanded by another being – the sentient computer known as Argos. And for reasons unknown to him, that being refused to drop out of the orbit of what was obviously a lush and living world.

With a violent slap, he swiped away the warning sensors from his monitors, summoning instead, seven rows of alien glyphs and symbols -- the core programming language of Argos. The only way to truly control of the ship would be to overwrite Argos. An act which bordered on murder, depending on one's understanding of artificial intelligence.

But it had to be done. He was too close to fail. Nor could he bare to spend another day in the confines of the ship – especially when freedom was close enough to see.

Through the view-portal, his gem-like eyes took in the world below; the sparkling blue waters and drifting effervescent clouds of white. A vast, red-tinged mountain chain crossed the land like a fresh wound. The planet shone in the otherwise empty surroundings of space, making it almost hard to believe it wasn't merely a ghostly mirage.

The entire journey to the living world had gone much the same -- Argos fighting him the entire way. He wasn't sure if the ancient computer brain had finally malfunctioned and gone insane, or – quite possibly – Argos was trying to keep him from the planet. But why? For all he knew this was the last living planet in the known universe. To land there was the culmination of their entire mission. And the data had never been clearer: "Makiian Virus – 0%."

Then what in the dead hell was Argos' problem?

Luckily, up until this point, he had been able to maintain course trajectory and speed.

To actually find a star 97,000 light years away was a near mathematical impossibility. Yes, he could see its light (clear as day), but the light he saw was that of a star now 97,000 years older. What he saw was an ancient light, not an actual star. To find the star's current location meant calculating the gravitational current of the star and a million neighboring celestial bodies. For the past 97,000 years the star has been dancing through the universe, moving at speeds near a

billion kilometers/standard day. Determining its current and actual location basically amounted to complex mathematical guesswork. Though Rafe was considered intelligent, even among the Delphinians, such equations were far beyond even him. Few humanoid races had ever mastered such mathematics. The rest used machines.

That's where Argos came in. The computer mind could pin-point stars with an accuracy that bordered on prescience.

As for the problem of maintaining speed; considering all gravitationally tethered matter (otherwise known as the universe) had a radius of around 30 billion light years, his journey of 97,000 light years was minor in comparison. But without a functioning gravitational drive, a distance of 97,000 light years would take, at best . . . 97,000 standard years. Even with every last captain fulfilling their position, it would be tens of thousands of years before Argos reached the planet, if ever it did.

Millennium upon millennium of technological advancements had been made to space travel and still, no one had ever overcome the light barrier. Many, however, did find ways to cheat it. The Rift was one such instance, and was also, by far, the simplest and most expedient method of interstellar travel ever. The more archaic forerunner to the Rift, the grav drive, was another example, and arguably the most popular and efficient form of travel for its time.

Argos possessed such a drive. And in order to cover such vast distances faster than should be logically possible, the grav drive surrounded the vessel in a powerful antigravitational field -- essentially turning the ship into a mini, inverted black hole. Space-time was warped for the passenger. And time, being relative, thus flowed differently within the field. For Rafe, the passenger, the universe outside his view portal was frozen, the people statues. And for those beyond his vessel, he was invisible, moving well beyond the speed of their perceptible light.

The only down side, other than that it wasn't instantaneous, was that this method of travel complicated the traveler's relationship to standard time. For Rafe, he had been moving so fast, and for so long, he had lived near two decades of life; meanwhile, the universe beyond Argos had aged at a snail's pace. Usually, hiber-sleep compensated for the difference by putting the traveler in a death-like state that halted the effects of aging until the destination was reached. But Rafe didn't have that luxury. Part of his duty as acting Captain was to maintain the hiber-sleep of his shipmates, to suffer the passage of time so that the others could remain asleep and unchanged. That was the agreement he had made with his people, their 'pact'. Each of their lives would pass in order for those who remain to travel further and deeper into the universe. And hopefully, before all their lives had passed, at least one of them would stumble upon a living world.

After the passing of seventy-five of his predecessors, Rafe had finally done it. He had found a living world.

Now, if only he could convince the ship to land there.

It wasn't until he entered the star-system and began preparing for his descent that his major problems began and Argos locked him out of all of the ship's functions. No matter how hard he prodded, the stubborn computer refused to budge. After a great deal of digital trickery, he managed to hack into navigation and engineering. But the moment he did so, Argos stalled him with a flurry of mechanical failures, overwhelming his monitors and making it impossible to accomplish the simplest task.

He felt it was his duty as Captain in Transit to reach the planet. Unfortunately, there was only one way to make that happen. He would essentially have to 'kill' the one being that had been his companion over the last twenty years. Not only that, he risked the lives of all of those

on board the ship – the lives of those he had sworn to protect. Many times he asked himself, what would be the greater risk? To turn back to deep space, where they would all likely die before sensing another planet even remotely alive? Or disable Argos, drop the ship into the planet’s atmosphere and attempt a manual landing?

Neither choice was a good one. The decision would have been a lot tougher for Rafe, had the planet’s beauty not been so beckoning, or Argos’ silver walls not so confining. For him there was really only one choice, and it was worth the risk, and the loss of Argos’ life (if it could even be considered as such). He further justified his actions by reminding himself that Argos was only a machine; a collection of parts and pieces that merely imitated a living being. He was fairly certain that, no matter how sophisticated the mechanisms, a soul wasn’t listed among them.

“I’m sorry, Argos,” he said, his voice filled with real sympathy. As much as Argos confounded and frustrated him all these years, their exchanges had actually been a lifesaver. Without Argos taking the brunt of his rage and frustration, the man would have gone mad a long time ago. And all the while, Argos took his abuse stoically, never once taking offense, or replying in kind.

*Because he’s a machine, you damn fool. Beyond the parameters of his programming, he doesn’t give a damn about you or anything else.*

“But I’m going down there. With or without your help.”

*. . . a damn machine.*

He had planned for this before -- during one of his many days of bored solitude. Having virtually fixed the ship from bow to stern, it occurred to him that eventually the mind of Argos would enter the same state of dilapidation as the rest of the vessel. Should the mind of Argos fail, in order to save the mission he would have to bypass him – manually pilot the ship. He even went so far as to develop a program, one that would sever Argos’ mind from his body. It was a complex sequence of symbols. To enter them into the very matrix of Argos would require absolute precision and speed. Once Argos knew what he was up to . . .

. . . he would finally find out what happens when the ancient computer is pissed off.

But his hands were quick and agile. He knew he could enter them fast enough, and if he did, Argos would never see it coming.

He fed it into the system . . .

He was quick and precise, yet he still only made it halfway through.

The ship dropped out of orbit. The screens went black. There was an ear-splitting scream as the engine fell out of rhythm, grinding against the containment field as it tipped from its magnetic axis. The next thing Rafeal knew, he was on the ship’s ceiling, his body crushing under the pressure. Even the emergency lights failed to respond. The only light came from the view-portal, which was now filled with white, fluffy clouds.

“What have I done?” he managed to voice as his chest began caving in.

*Argos . . .*

He thought he knew everything about the ship; every nook and cranny was more recognizable than the features of his own face, the inner workings of its systems more familiar than those of his own flesh and blood. As consciousness slipped from his grasp, he realized that after all his years aboard the ship he knew nothing of Argos.

There would be no manual landing – not after what he had done. He would make it to the planet, but only as a fiery ball of plummeting metal. He understood his mistake . . . the ship’s reaction could mean only one thing -- Argos was truly alive.

And he had just cut off his head . . .



X'ander basked in the solitude. He needed the quiet to think, to remember – and there was so much to remember. Unfortunately, most of his memories were bad ones. But even so, X'ander was never one to shy away from sadness or horror. No, he had been numbed to such things a long, long time ago.

His days in the vast desert wasteland beyond the Outlands were spent much the same; in the daytime it was peaceful reflection, in the night – quiet brooding. While not lost in memories of the past he liked to watch the wind alter the desert dunes. Every so often, to clear his head, he enjoyed a sunset stroll through the sands – there was just something about the burning red horizon that stirred his soul. Perhaps it was the coming of the night that truly excited him, and the promise of death that came with the ensuing bitter cold. Even when the sun faded to black, he would wander on, lost in the wasteland, hoping to fall victim to the night with the dying sun his last vision of light.

But dawn always came before death, and X'ander would make his way back, back to his 'home'; a cave barely tall enough to stand in, nestled in a lone outcropping of rock.

This was all he needed from life. In the desert he was left alone. In the desert there was peace. There was no need to ask for more.

Ages ago, he had given up on the Seventh World and its so-called 'defenders'; the pathetic army of the Triad of Races. He knew the Plague would eventually find this world and when it did, the defenders would be slaughtered. X'ander wouldn't be among them. When he died, he wanted to be alone, in his home, with a mind full of memories.

Only rarely were the memories not enough. Only rarely did he find the need to clear his head, to watch as the sand and the sky became one in a glowing red haze.

This was one such night.

On this night, X'ander felt uneasy . . . restless. Something was amiss in the world, something profound and terrible enough to disrupt his peace even here, beyond the Gorian Chain. Once more he was taken by the urge to walk the desert night. But this time it wasn't to clear his head of memories, but from the impending sense of doom.

Normally he travelled west – straight towards the setting sun. But on this night he left his home with no thought of direction, destination, or even returning. On this night, X'ander traveled deeper into the wastelands than ever before. When the sun finally left, the darkness became absolute. Even with his keen elven sight, he stumbled about, as clumsy as a stub-legged rock dwarf. The Brother Moons arose, and his footing became clear, but still his movements were awkward, his usual grace absent. The cold had left his flesh dead to the touch, his arms and legs leaden and stiff.

High above the Brother Moons shone brightly. Harbos, the greater of the two neared its zenith, filling the heavens with its aura of white. He paused for a moment, his breath filling the air with a frosty mist. He pulled the woolen cowl up from his neck, draping it over his head, which was bare to the elements being utterly devoid of hair. His eyes of grey and white peeked out from the cowl, searching the vastness of space for the memory of another life, another home. A memory so ancient he could barely recall it – the creatures, the colors, the Graelic. In his mind they were all dead, all shades of black.

He couldn't help but note that the stars never seemed so sparkle so bright amidst the bleak emptiness of space. Or maybe, he just forgot what they looked like, being unable to recall the last time he bothered to look up. Even the constellations were all foreign to him; a disarray of pin-point lights. Their patterns so meaningless to an immortal; so rarely did X'ander look upon them, that when he did, he saw an entirely different sky.

His last memory of them was when he first arrived on this 'Seventh World'. He remembered leaving the Rift, and the hellish Sanctuary behind. Not only did he find it strange to call this new world home, but the mere fact that he was still alive was outright laughable. While his fellow survivors stumbled around like mindless 'dead brains', X'ander looked up to the heavens – the endless, lifeless heavens -- and roared with laughter.

Surely, it was all a joke . . .

He remembered wondering why none of the others saw the humor in it.

*And they thought I was the emotionless one*, he pondered.

As he gazed at the multitude of stars, he struggled to make sense of them. Some people connected them like a child's game; drawing lines from one to the next until the semblance of an image formed, transforming the celestial bodies into something familiar and simple. Something they could relate to in their mundane lives.

*I suppose those could form a dagger*, he thought, connecting the dots of a cluster of stars. *Perhaps those as well . . .*

Suddenly, the night sky was nothing but blades of various shapes and sizes. Now he remembered why he ignored the sky, he could go on forever making such arbitrary connections, but in the end, the patterns were utterly subjective and therefore meaningless.

If he so desired, he could undoubtedly find the twisted image of the Graelic hidden in the twinkling lights. But what would it matter? Having spent a great deal of time traveling space, he knew the stars held a deeper meaning.

And a deeper beauty.

*So brilliant . . .* he thought, wondering if this would be the last sky he would ever see – the sense of doom mounted in the east, in the heart of the Gorian.

Maybe he should have looked more often. All his years on this world he had spent looking back, never once did he think to look up, to see the past so clearly written in the ancient light of all those stars. Maybe he avoided the sight of them because he couldn't bear to see it, his home-world. He reveled in the memories of it. But knowing that somewhere among the countless drifting stars Ki'minsyllessil remained, and that it was now just a dead and lifeless planet was enough to drive him mad. That the beautiful world in which he was born was now just a rock, a pebble, a grain of sand in the wasteland that was the universe.

Only a miracle would bring it back . . . restore it to the bastion of life it once was.

But X'ander no longer believed in miracles. He had witnessed too much disappointment to maintain hope . . .

*Father . . .* (the cruelest joke of all).

The stars were so bright.

And from a distance . . .

*So beautiful . . .*

They almost seemed alive. He would have sworn he saw them move – one of them, anyways.

His mind was failing him. With the dull wits remaining to him, he realized he had been in the elements too long. The cold was taking its toll. Numbly, X'ander accepted that this time he wouldn't make it back to his home. No. He would never see his home again.

"Ki'minsyllessil," he mumbled, reaching out to the moving star, the brightest one in all of the heavens.

Whether some illusion of his mind or blessing of the Maker, it came to him, growing brighter, more beautiful than he could have thought possible. It was as if he pulled it from the heavens with his out flung arms.

In its wake, a fiery tail etched into the night.

It came closer, basking X'ander in a warm light. Night became day . . . and he no longer felt cold.

Ki'minsyllessil had come to him.

It was a miracle.



*–The Age of Death,  
The Seventh World  
Second War of Lock Core, Post Exodus 586–*

It had been so long since he'd last seen Argos, he'd almost forgotten the way. From the Archenon it was three day hike back to his ship -- three days if he traveled with little rest, stopping only briefly to ease his cramped muscles and fill his empty stomach. He managed the first day with relative ease, crossing the Widow River through the Frons. The twin towns were abandoned on either side of the river. As to be expected, few bodies remained to tell the tale of the battle. When the living died, they eventually stood up and walked away. When the dead met their end, it was usually in a pile of ash and silver fire.

He left the Frons and their falling wooden towers behind -- the last remnants of the civilized world. It was into the wilderness that he went and then beyond -- the Dead Sands. A blistering sun by day, and frozen tundra by night with virtually no shelter to speak of. A place where no one would dare to dwell -- no one sane that is. But X'ander was unlike any other. How he survived out there, all alone and for so long seemed impossible. It made Rafe's own period of solitude aboard Argos seem like a brief vacation.

After leaving the Frons, it was an arduous journey. To reach the desert he had to pass the southern crags of the Gorian; a jagged barrier of sharp, limestone pinnacles that formed the tail of the great mountain chain. Even with his incredible dexterity and physical fitness, the crags got the best of him, leaving him bloodied and battered by the time he completed his descent. Perhaps if he took his time, or traveled further south to find a safer pass, his hands wouldn't have been covered in fresh cuts, nor would he have suffered the deep gash to the left half of his face; a wound that would most likely become a scar.

But Rafe had a feeling there was little time left in this world. He knew the fall of Shattered Rock was just the beginning. Though the Destroyer had saved the Seventh World for a second time, by all accounts, the man was no longer of this world. Whether he was dead, hiding, or in a drunken stupor somewhere among the stars, it really didn't matter. Rafe had to find another way to save this world. He was done relying on the Destroyer, the man was far too unpredictable (in both his power, and his personality). Nor was he willing to risk everything on



the man a second time – having barely survived the first time. Besides, when it came down to it, Rafe was beginning to wonder if the man’s ‘help’ was actually far more dangerous than the Plague. Chances were, if Rafe saw the man again, instead of thanking him for saving them, he would be driving a dagger into his heart.

And he had just the weapon to do it too.

He wrapped his raw and bloodied palm around the bone handle. Hidden in the black-leather sheath on his left hip was a six inch blood-red blade, its edges sharp and strong enough to carve normal steel as if it were wood. The knife itself was near indestructible, supposedly forged in the fires of a star by some long forgotten race. The blade was given to him by a friend – his one and only friend.

It was X’ander’s prized possession. The elf had a love of daggers, and had gathered an impressive collection over his lengthy lifetime. But the *Blood-knife* had always been his favorite, and by far his most lethal. Not only could the knife pierce through armor as easily as paper, whatever alloy had been used in its forging was also extremely toxic to flesh – living and dead. A single scratch could cause a chain-reaction of accelerated decay, leaving the victim all but a skeleton in a matter of hours. Few would dare to wield such a weapon and risk such a fate. But X’ander was more than up for the task. Though not as adept with daggers as his friend, being a Delphiniian, Rafe was as agile as any elf – possibly, more so -- and therefore fairly confident he wouldn’t end up cutting himself with its ultra-sharp edge.

As much as he cherished his blades, X’ander had left them all in the ruins of the Archenon. The elf possessed another weapon now, one that made even the *blood-knife* all but useless . . . one that made even the Destroyer unnecessary. But his friend would pay dearly to wield it. In fact, if he did wield it, they all would pay the price.

*I wonder . . .* Rafe thought, sliding the *blood-knife* out just enough to marvel at the gleaming red steel. *Would this be enough to actually kill you, Destroyer?*

The man seemed to be death itself. Could he die? Was he their one true enemy? The one who would destroy them all?

If they met again, Rafe would try to stop him. First, he would start with the *blood-knife*. If that didn’t work, he had plenty of other weapons to try.

He patted the black metallic handle holstered on his right hip. It was *his* weapon of choice, commonly known as a *mana-ray*. Another relic of the Age of War, the *mana-ray* utilized the wielder’s life-force to discharge powerful blasts of energy. Created to harness one’s life-force and transform it into a weapon -- as did the Mage-lords, the *mana-ray* was but one way the races thought to use their technology to make themselves equal to their conquerors. Among the Delphiniians, and many other races, *mana* was thought to be the energy force that birthed the universe and guided its evolution. They believed that it existed in all things, and if harnessed, could be used to alter matter and the course of future events.

But other than their priests, few actually believed that *mana* was anything more than a myth. It wasn’t until the rise of the Mage-lords that they realized their mistake, and that it was indeed a very real, and powerful force. The Makii proved its existence, though they called it the Oneness, as did they prove its power, using it to rapidly conquer the universe. The *mana-ray* was one of many last ditch efforts to replicate that power. Many other bio-weapons were brought into existence near the end of the Age of War. But unfortunately, too few were created, and by the time they were, it was far too late.

Since his arrival in the Seventh World, he had many occasions to successfully test the weapon on various beings – even a few with Mage-blood. During his rise to power in Shattered

Rock, he left many charred bodies in his wake; humans, dwarves, and even elves were among them. During the battle for Shattered Rock, he turned countless undead into ash – even the soulless ‘Reapers’ succumbed to the true death after a blast from the *mana-ray*.

But, as one would expect, wielding such power came with a cost. The Delphiniian priests once lectured that there was a balance to the universe. It was *mana* that maintained that balance and prevented the universe from crumbling into ungoverned chaos. For every action that occurred in the universe, *mana* created an equal and opposite reaction. Their scientists realized the truth of it, for in order to transform one’s *mana* into a killing force, one had to pay with their own life. Rafe had killed many with the weapon, and doubtless, had aged greatly because of its use (the streaks of grey at his temples were but one indication). And though Delphiniians had an increased life-span, it was nothing in comparison to an elf. If he continued to use it, too much and too often, it would quickly age him well beyond his years, eventually killing him.

But what did it matter?

How much time did he have left anyway?

The end was near. Despite the Destroyer’s aid, the battle of Shattered Rock could not be considered a victory. Lock Core would be the final battle. After all, it was from there that the darkness began – the Black Door. Until they faced and defeated what dwelt within it, there would never be victory. All this time, he had been fleeing the Gate. He had traveled the universe for years – Argos, for an untold amount of time – and they had found nothing. There was only one path to take, and no matter how far they traveled, all paths led them back to that destination. The Gate. All this time they had been trying to hide from it, but to be free, to be safe, they had to face it.

As intelligent as his people were, only by eliminating all other options had the path become clear to them. Escape was impossible, for Argos was still a battered lump of useless metal. Nor was there anything to escape to. The best they could achieve was a progression of slow deaths as they scoured the heavens for the slightest glimmer of hope.

Rafe was done hiding, done with his search, done with the ‘pact’. The time had finally come. Time to admit his failure to his people, the subsequent line of ‘Captains in Transit’, and awaken them to the horrors of this world and this war. He would have to face them, tell them how he crashed them here on the Seventh World, and doomed them to die by the Plague. For so long he walked the Stasis Chamber, dreaming of meeting his fellow Delphiniians . . .

*Gemini . . .*

During the rare times when Argos wasn’t falling apart, Rafe would watch her sleep, “GEMINI XM574”. He would fantasize it was just the two of them in the ship, and subsequently fight the urge to awaken her and make it a reality. He knew the ‘pact’ forbid it. He knew it would risk the mission. He even had a hunch Argos would eliminate him the moment he did so – Rafe often wondered what became of his predecessor, and how strictly Argos adhered to the rule of one Captain in Transit at a time. But despite all that, the reason he left her alone was because she was so at peace. He had no right to take that away. To drag her into his prison, his hell that was Argos, in the hopes she would somehow be delighted by it. That she would fall into his arms in love, and together they would drift through the universe in happy bliss.

No. It was just a fantasy – something to keep him sane. He dared not play it out. She deserved better. He meant to give it to her, release her on a living world free of the Plague. Unfortunately, this was all that was left. There were no more living worlds; X’ander had taught him that. The Seventh World was all they had.

The peace of his sleeping people was over. It was his job now to convince them to join the Triad of Races, convince them to fight, and make their final stand here.

*I'm sorry, he thought. Sorry to awaken you to this horror.*

Not for the first time, he wondered if they were better off left to slumber. To die in their sleep, oblivious to the nightmare the universe had become.

*I'm sorry, but we need you.*

The Seventh World was his home now. The last home he would ever know, and he had to protect it. He needed his people. They were smart, resourceful and well versed in technology – something this world desperately lacked. Argos yet had a storeroom full of sophisticated weaponry. If they added that to the fight . . . it would at least guarantee it would be a good fight.

And X'ander . . .

If all else failed, he knew his elven friend would succeed. If there could be no victory, they would ensure the battle's outcome was a mutual defeat. One way or another, very soon it would all be over.

He was three days into the journey and walked now under the sun, through the blistering Dead Sands. Pulling his cloak tight over his face to protect his flesh from the sun's burning rays, he scanned the horizon; the sun-light sparkling in his emerald eyes. With sweat dripping down his body, he ran on to the rising sun. Though he had suffered much and rested only briefly during his trek, his short muscular legs moved as quickly as they did at the start of his journey. He slowed little as he scaled the flowing dunes, his body nimble and light enough that it left just the slightest impression in the sand, whereas a larger being would have sunk in, expending great amounts of energy with every step.

A sandstorm picked up in the west, driving the sand towards him in a horizontal gust. The wind swept over the dunes, altering the landscape before his eyes and erasing his path as quickly as it was made. As the storm engulfed him, he was forced to cover his eyes against the scouring wind. Blindly, he pushed on, familiar enough with his path to be confident he was at least heading in the right direction. Either way, if one knew what they were searching for, Argos was hard to miss.

He pushed on, fighting exhaustion and the deadly elements.

His body was used to such rigors – he had made it so. Since arriving on this planet, he had fervently trained his muscles and his mind. It was a carry-over of his physical training on the Argos.

In space, the exercise gave him focus and kept him sane. Here, it was a matter of survival; considering he was the size of a human child, in order to compete with the larger races, he needed to push his body to its physical peak. He many have appeared child-like, but for those who thought him weak, they mistakenly found that his strength was equal to most men.

There was a break in the wind. He used the respite to poke his gem-like eyes from beneath his hood and confirm his location. In the distance, he saw the cracked earth give way to a gaping canyon, several miles wide. The canyon was obviously unnatural, its walls made of melted silica glass. At the bottom rested Argos. From the distance, he could barely make it out; a half-buried hunk of blackened metal. But in his mind, the memory of the damaged hull was still all too fresh. Giant dents covered its scorched, black surface. Many areas were even breached – large, gaping holes imploded inward through the three-foot, ultra-dense metal. A deep set of scratches ran the length of the ship. Like the claw mark of some giant mythical beast, the trio of gouges sliced the ship from bow to stern.

Surprisingly, the majority of the damage was preexisting -- scars suffered from a millennium of space travel. Other than the burnt and blackened exterior, Argos suffered little from reentry. Despite disabling the computer mind, the ship had somehow managed to level-out prior to impact. Instead of leaving a gaping crater with a melted pile of metal at the center, Argos eventually came to a rest in the desert, carving a canyon through the sand,

The real damage to Argos was all internal. Though Rafe hadn't fully completed the sequence to deactivate him prior to the crash, afterwards, the computer mind was, nonetheless, unresponsive. Only emergency power and systems were active; such as the Hiber-chamber. He was unable to communicate with Argos on any level. Following the crash, he often returned in hopes of restoring the communications systems. Yet, even after a complete rebuild of the integration motherboard, there was only silence from Argos' end. Rafe feared the worst, and that he did indeed succeed in killing the machine; though he deeply hoped he only killed its voice.

He took a small comfort knowing the brain core continued to emit electromagnetic signals. Though the readings were odd, they were a clear indication of synthetic brain function.

Either way, the ship was in no condition to fly. Nor would Rafe return to space even if it could.

Whether good or bad . . .

*We're stuck here*, he thought, pausing as he reached to top of the canyon wall.

He hesitated, not because he feared the descent, but because he dreaded returning to Argos. He stared down at the half-exposed ship, wondering what would happen when he awoke his people. For so long he dreamt of this moment, to no longer be alone, to once more be among his own kind. Finally, the time had come. But what would they think of him and his decision to land them here? Could he convince them that it was for the best? That this was to be their new home, and that they would have to fight and give their lives for a world they didn't know?

Rafe could be persuasive, his rise to power in Shattered Rock was proof of it, but would they listen to him, follow him, the very man who stranded them here to die?

To find out, there was but one more obstacle to overcome. He had to scale the canyon wall. Though a difficult task, it was one he performed many times before. Only now, his hands were in such poor condition he had to be more cautious than ever. The melted walls were all but smooth to the touch, leaving virtually nothing to support him. In order to descend, he would have to turn the slightest bump into a handhold. Because his body was light-weight, his fingers small, he usually managed it fine. But still, Rafe knew damn well the smallest mistake could send him plunging to his death.

It would have simplified things if he had secured a rope at some point along the canyon wall. However, Rafe didn't want it to be simple. He didn't want just anyone to be able to reach Argos, only those he summoned here. As far as he knew, X'ander was the only other inhabitant of this world to have actually made the climb. And other than his elven kin, no other beings would have the skill. That was exactly how Rafe wanted it, he knew the other elves didn't care to venture into the dessert, and if the humans somehow made it this far, they would die in the descent.

Only the Magi posed a threat, but then again, rope or no rope, if the Magi sought to reach Argos they would simply fly down to the canyon's base.

Rafe wished he had that luxury. He had to admit, as much as he sought to train himself to physical perfection – he was tired. And he was worried. If he failed this final obstacle, not only would he never meet his people, they could be trapped, sleeping in their chambers till the

end of time. There was too much at stake, and for him to be at anything less than perfect condition could result in a costly mistake.

But he was running out of time . . .

He decided he had to take the risk. Cautiously, he began his descent; his tiny hands and feet brushing the glassy edge until they found any imperfection. He tucked his big toe into a divot, his left hand pinched a marble sized pebble. Slowly, he left the edge of the cliff behind.

It wasn't long before he began to reconsider his decision, and his need for haste, for normally he made the descent in the dark (finding his way by feel). But now, the sun was directly overhead, baking his body as it reflected against the glass wall. The heat forced him to speed up his descent; his fingertips burning the longer they lingered on a grip. Worse yet, his hands were now slick with sweat as well as blood, making it all but impossible to hang on. Yet somehow, he continued downward, half-slipping, half-gripping. He made it over a third of the way down before his feet lost their support. He hung for a moment, his wet hand clamping down on a pea-sized rock. Meanwhile, his feet flailed around, desperately searching the cliff's face for anything to regain his footing. But there was nothing to find. With his fingertips blistering from the heat, he was forced to release his grip.

He fell the last thirty feet down the near ninety degree slope. Putting his back to the wall, Rafe slid downward, using his entire body to create any friction possible in order to slow his fall. Nevertheless, he hit the ground hard and fast. He took the brunt of the energy and sent his body forward in a tumble. He rolled with the momentum, but even so, it was a violent roll, and though the ground was sand-covered, a layer of hardened silica was not far beneath. When the momentum was finally expended, he slowly rose to his feet, bruised and beaten. His back was raw from the friction of the slide. The recent cut on his face had reopened and was gushing with blood.

He took a moment to ensure he had his weapons (and that he hadn't accidentally cut himself with the *blood-knife*) then he wiped the sand and blood from his eyes.

He froze . . .

Something was amiss.

A crackle of energy sent him rolling once more. He barely dove out of the way before the arc of lightning blasted him off his feet. Another blast streaked over his head as he crouched in the sand. He had a weapon in both hands; the *blood-knife* glimmered in his left, while the needle of the *mana-ray* dug into the palm of his right hand, drawing his blood, and energy.

After his fall, he had been momentarily disoriented, and hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. But he could see his attackers now . . .

He holstered the *mana-ray*, and tucked the *blood-knife* back into its sheath. No matter what happened, he wouldn't be using them to fight his attackers – to fight his own people.

Three gem-eyed Delphiniians came at him, all very familiar faces, but one far more so. Two held their own sort of energy weapon in their hands; a rectangular black box with silver buttons on its surface. The other was unarmed, a female – a face he only dreamed he would see awake and with consciousness in those light-blue topaz eyes.

She came forward slowly, cautiously, a clear fighter's stance enacted with every step. Though her body was thinned from her long years of slumber, Rafe could tell there was a definite toughness to every bit of her scrawny muscles.

He also noted the flickering golden aura that covered her body. Rafe recognized the device that created it; a gold belt around her waist. A phase shield. He also knew its weakness, and the many ways to disable it – scattering a handful of sand at it would be the most convenient.

Though it could fully absorb a wide range of individual strikes, multiple attacks would weaken its ability, and drain its power core, which possessed a brief lifespan to begin with.

Typically, one donned a phase shield if they planned on engaging in a brief, but bloody battle. The wearer could forego defending themselves, and focus instead on eliminating their enemy as quickly as possible.

Rafe took her use of the shield as a bad sign, and deeply hoped she wasn't planning to kill him too quickly.

*I just need time to explain myself, then they will understand . . .*

The trio came closer, Gemini leading the way, a murderous look in her brilliant blue eyes.

Rafe stood up, dusting himself off, wondering what a ragged mess he must look to her. Their meeting was not how he imagined it to be, and he imagined it often and in many ways. In none of them did she hold such a loathsome scowl, nor did he think such a hateful look could ever come upon that lovely face.

Several feet in front of him, she stopped. Finally, he was face to face with Gemini.

“Gemin . . .”

Before he could finish his greeting, or offer an explanation, her fist landed squarely on his face.

The blow took him by surprise and was well-delivered, knocking Rafe on his ass.

Kneeling on the canyon floor, one hand stemmed the flow of blood from his nose, the other grabbed a handful of sand . . . all he wanted was a chance to explain . . .

“You FOOL!” she spat. “What have you done?”

He let the sand spill from his fingers, his bloodied lips opened to reply.

But before he could say another word, Gemini launched a swift and skillful kick towards his head . . . he clamped down on the sand.

Though expertly delivered, this time Rafe wasn't so easily surprised . . . he pitched his weight to the side, moving with the momentum of her blow. He tucked his right shoulder to the ground, while his left hand rose up, flinging a fistful of sand at Gemini. Her foot clipped his wrist, shattering it. But the sand scattered against her shield, causing it to flicker uncontrollably. Large gaps spread across its golden surface.

Rafe roared in pain . . .

Heaving up with his fist, he landed a vicious uppercut directly on her beautiful face. Luckily, the shield wasn't fully deactivated. It managed to absorb most of the blow, but still, Gemini flew back, crashing into her two companions. Rafe followed after her, kicking the blaster from the nearest of them, while the *mana-ray* was in his right hand and pressed against the other Delphiniian's head. Below him, Gemini scowled at him in disgust.

“I don't want to fight you,” Rafe growled, his eyes mainly focused on Gemini. “If you only let me explain . . .”

He was about to tell her everything . . . Tell her that this was it. That he was only doing what was best for them all. That he wanted to save her . . . that he wanted her, for so long he wanted her . . .

He never got the chance.

He never sensed the other being . . . it moved so silently, so swiftly . . . Before he even knew what was happening, a metallic fist caved in his rib-cage and sent him crashing into the glassy canyon wall.

Gasping for breath, Rafe struggled to his feet. Before he did so, he was lifted into the air by a glimmering metal hand. He looked down into a pair of burning red eyes and smooth, blank

metallic face. He struggled to unsheathe the *blood-knife* with his broken left hand, meanwhile, his robotic captor heaved him into the air, its body incredibly thin and near ten feet tall.

He managed to free his knife . . . was about to use it to sever the robot's arm . . .

"*You should not have brought me here, Caretaker Rapheal XM591,*" the faceless being said in a thunderous electronic voice.

"Argos?" Rafe managed to whisper, the *blood-knife* slipping from his crippled grip.

"*. . . Nor should you have attempted my destruction.*"

"*. . . I'm sorry, Argos,*" Rafe continued, struggling for breath. "I never meant to hurt you . . . to hurt any of you . . ."

Rafe desperately wanted to continue, but blood spurted from his lips instead of words. His vision filled with stars . . . the robotic voice of Argos became a muffled roar. The eyes of his love drew near, sparkling against the oncoming darkness. He longed to stay in their blue light, but the darkness claimed him and Rafe was left unconscious, and utterly speechless.



For as far as X'ander could see, the earth was dead, a blackened pit of ash. And beyond it, the autumn sun turned the horizon blood red. As he had been commanded; he stood atop the scorched tower of the Archenon, his keen eyes of white watching for the last of the refugees to vanish into the distant bloody aura.

He had to be sure he was alone. None knew what was to come – not even Rafe fully understood what it was capable of. Once, he foolishly asked his lord the obvious question, to which he received the simple, and more obvious answer; "It feeds. That is all. All that it nears it consumes. The more it consumes the more it becomes. Should it grow beyond our control, it will not stop feeding until the entire Seventh World is devoured. Next to the Plague, it is the universe's darkest creation. It is 'The Eater', a weapon created to end worlds. To end the worlds of the Makii."

Darkness fully descended upon the land as all the survivors traveled beyond his sight. Certain he was the last of them, X'ander left the balcony and entered the main tower of the Archenon. He descended the spiral stairway that hugged the Archenon's walls, then crossed an iron walkway leading into the Great Tree. His thin fingers reached out, brushing the tree's bark as he stepped through a gaping cleft in the trunk.

He felt its life-force, though dim, and was somewhat heartened knowing that the Great Tree was yet clinging to life. But then again, considering what it could have become, even though it still survived, it would never be anything more than a monstrosity; its hollow, rotting and near-lifeless trunk the ultimate metaphor for the remnants of the elven race.

The human king who built the Archenon tried to kill the Great Tree, to utilize its dense wood for the construction of his indestructible tower. The Great Tree was a gift to his grandfather from the elf prince Adros. But the grandson believed more in stone and steel than the magic of the elves. He also feared the legends of the Graelic, and the embodiment of evil it had become, so he stripped it of its branches, gutted its interior, and incorporated the remnants into his grand Archenon.

Little did he know the Great Tree yet lived, and that every moment of its life was spent in suffering. Only the elves could feel its pain. Only a few had the courage to actually do so . . .

X'ander let the Great Tree's pain wash over him, then he entered into the trunk's hollowed interior.

He followed the hand-carved stairway upwards, ending his journey at what was once a pair of heavy wooden doors. The elaborate dragon carved on the face was lost in a pile of splinters and cracked planks; the heavy iron lock was smashed to pieces. Halfway across the room, the interior bar latch rested -- a bent piece of hardened steel.

X'ander smirked at the sight. The force necessary to break the doors, and the magic barrier that supported them, was impressive indeed. But what impressed him even more, was that the young elf had not only managed to persuade Gunt to break them, but to also assist her in raiding his lord's beloved armory. If X'ander was capable of feeling sorrow, she was the one person lost in the battle for whom he would have shed a tear.

*So like your mother . . . and grandmother, X'ander thought, storing the memory of her alongside that of her maternal ancestors. So brave yet recklessly so. So confounding in the ways of your compassion.* Together the line of beautiful, strong elven woman would remain in his memories. So long as he lived they would be remembered, deep within the part of his mind that could almost be described as his 'happy place'.

It was a very, very miniscule part of his mind.

*Like them, you cared too much . . . and died because of it.*

He absorbed the memory of her death as well. A sacrifice that restored their father to life, and united the entire elven race. But in the end, her sacrifice amounted to nothing. The elves were near extinct now, and their father, the One Elf, was fully immersed in the Elven Death. X'ander felt nothing as he let the dark memory in, it was soon lost among the countless others that filled his mind.

He longed to lose himself within them, to drift from one horror to the next in the hopes that he felt something. But, as ever, he knew it would be a waste of time. There was nothing there, and that no matter how long he dwelt among them, he would only find indifference.

He tore himself from thoughts of the past, reminding himself he had a future now. His new lord, Rafe, had given him one, and now it was time to claim it.

He stepped over the broken door, entering the precious armory of his lord. Few of the collection remained. The hallway leading into Rafe's chamber was lined with empty shelves, and shattered display cases.

Blades and armor of rare and precious materials had been looted, as well as many 'less typical', though equally precious weapons. Only the oddities remained, those that least resembled an actual weapon. A bronze cube had been kicked into the corner, each face etched with a unique (and dangerously powerful) rune. Separated by less than an inch, a pair of steel tubes vibrated on the floor. Alone, they softly hummed, but when touched together they created a wave a sound so violent it could rupture an enemy's organs from over a hundred yards away, or crack stone within a hundred standard feet. Other equally strange, but only slightly less dangerous, items were carelessly strewn across the room. All of them were powerful, but one was far more powerful, and dangerous, than all of them combined.

There it sat, on a pedestal of white marble. Untouched by the thieves, and rightly so. The shield of energy held, though barely. The barrier of azure flames flickered and dimmed as the shiny black substance inside flexed and expanded, as if testing the limits of its prison.

*"A world ender . . ."* Rafe once said.

Only once had another dared to touch the weapon, let alone wield its power. X'ander had the misfortune to be present for the event; the White Mage held it for only a moment, stroking it



as if it was the wizard's pet, before his body caved in upon itself and the globe stretched and engulfed his remains. The man never even had a chance to scream. He was suddenly no more, and the blackness was a ball, larger than before, and floating in the air where, a heartbeat ago, the man once stood.

Now, X'ander would wield the weapon, knowing full well it would consume him. And knowing too, that it wouldn't stop there . . . Ki'minsyllessil could not be revived.

His thin elven fingers reached out, penetrating the shimmering blue shield.

X'ander would follow in the refugees' wake. If they failed to save Locke Core, he would return to his home-world . . . and he would take the Eater with him.

If Ki'minsyllessil could not be saved, it would have to be destroyed.

He took hold of his future . . .



Rafe awoke . . . he tried to sit up but a jolt of pain shot from his belly and he collapsed onto his back. He groaned as his head slammed against the unyielding metal floor.

*What happened?* he wondered, rubbing the back of his skull while his jadestone eyes took in his surroundings. *Where in the dead am I?*

Everywhere he looked he saw smooth, metallic walls.

“No . . .”

He instantly recognized the room – as he recognized every room within the Argos. In his many years aboard the ship he had thoroughly explored every room, every chamber. He knew every flaw, every nick and every scratch on every wall of this ship with far greater detail than even the advanced computer mind of Argos.

And it just so happened, Rafe knew this particular room better than most.

The chamber was five hundred paces long, and three hundred wide. The side walls were barely taller than a human, but the ceiling barreled upwards, forming an archway in the center tall enough for any elf to comfortably navigate. A clutter of boot prints covered the floor, outlined by a thin, sparkling layer of silver dust. Barely recognizable amidst the stampede of feet, a row of faint, circular imprints ran down the length of the chamber's center.

Yes. He remembered this chamber very well. After all, it wasn't all that long ago since he looted it. Ultra-fine particles of silver ore still lingered in the air, shimmering as they drifted past the line of glow-lights on either side of the chamber's barreled ceiling.

Rafe was deep within the ship's stern, securely imprisoned in what was once Argos' silver hold.

For the price of a single canister of silver (a fortune at the time), he enlisted a pack of Blue-mages to help him empty the chamber of its goods. Back then, he felt the people of the Seventh World needed it far more than did his slumbering brethren. So Rafe took the canisters from the hold, melted down the silver dust, and put it into circulation. By doing so, he flooded the silver market, making the ore affordable for all. It was because of him that even the poorest citizen of the Seventh World now had a silver blade in their hands – and more importantly, the ability to fight the Plague.

That wasn't to say Rafe had been acting purely out of kindness and the best interest of the Seventh World. It was no coincidence that he sold the cargo at a time when the Seventh World's

market was starved for silver. The dwarven mines had all but run dry. They were digging so deep and so distant, that the cost to transport their goods basically tripled its value; thus allowing Rafe to sell his silver at an obscene price.

And immediately after he did so, the price plummeted.

As a result of the sale, he possessed unlimited funds; without which, his rise to power in Shattered Rock would not have occurred quite so swiftly and peacefully.

But it was all gone now; his wealth, his power . . . and apparently his ship as well.

Once more, he was a prisoner to the Argos.

“Damn you, Noooo!”

He didn’t even bother to plan his escape, knowing full well the chamber was built like a safe. All of the walls were three-feet of solid hardened bi-metal. Even if he had his *mana-ray*, a full blast wouldn’t put a dent in them. The only way in or out was through a single access located at the far end of the tunnel-shaped room. It was invisible, marked only by the slightest crack in the smooth wall that was too thin to see, and could only be discerned by a familiar touch. The doorway could only be opened from the outside, and *only* by passing a bio-cerebral test that was tuned to the Captain in Transit – which, judging by his current predicament, Rafe very much doubted he would pass.

Without-a-doubt, he was thoroughly imprisoned. And there were few places Rafe dreaded more than being imprisoned on the Argos. The Rift was one . . .

The room suddenly shrank, the walls seemed to collapse in on him.

There was another place, one that he feared more than even the Rift. One that would amplify the horror of his imprisonment a thousand fold – space . . . endless, empty space.

His hand shoot out, running over the polished metal wall. Long ago he had learned to sense the slightest shift in the grav drive, and could practically determine its velocity by how much it vibrated the hull.

“Thank the gods,” he growled, comforted that the walls were utterly still to his touch. They were yet grounded on the Seventh – a death sentence to be sure, but at least here it wouldn’t be drawn out. At least here he would die quickly, fighting and not drifting through space.

Instinctively, he thought to call to Argos, to assess the ship’s current condition, but then he remembered something . . .

. . . a metallic fist pounding his flesh.

Argos was alive! And he was pissed off . . .

His tiny hands ran along his bandaged ribcage. Even a gentle touch left it tender. But even so, it was clearly on the mend. What should have been broken ribs was a bruised belly. Likewise, he felt his cheek – the deep cut suffered during his hasty climb through the pinnacles – and felt only smooth skin.

Ignoring the jolt of pain from his ribs, he stood up. His captors had to know what this world was, what it meant to not only their people, but to the very continuation of all life.

Though it pained him to do so, he screamed, “THERE’S NOTHING LEFT!”

He knew Argos had a sensor positioned in the far corner and he faced it with all his rage.

“THE UNIVERSE IS DEAD! AND WE ALONG WITH IT IF WE DO NOT FIGHT!”

That was it, all he wanted to say, his grand speech to compel his people amounted to basically four words; “The universe is dead”. Stop searching. There is nothing left out there to find.

He stepped back, then crumpled over, succumbing to the pain.

To himself, or to anyone else who was listening, Rafe groaned, “There’s nothing left out there, you fools. The Virus beat us to them. There’s only one world it hasn’t fully consumed . . .”

He glared at the recorder, and his mystery accusers on the other end.  
“ . . . and we’re on it.”



In one clear-screen was the past, the other – the present and the inevitable future . . .

She couldn’t take her sapphire-blue eyes off the past . . . the looks he gave her, the longing in his eyes. She watched one reel after another and saw the action repeated, time and time again. The villainous Rapheal made his rounds to assess the stasis chamber. He checked the life-readings as he walked; for the most part giving but a quick gaze to discover any abnormalities. Content that no one was dying, he always moved on from one pod to the next. It wasn’t until he reached the XM generation that he finally paused. And every time it was at the same pod. And every time he gave it that same look . . .

Gem watched the reels for hours, and it was always the same; never once did he make it through without pausing at her pod, to stare at her as she slept.

*Why me . . . ?* she wondered, fully aware there was over two hundred other female Delphiniians left in the chambers, yet he hardly spared any one of them a glance. *Who do you think I am?*

He didn’t know the first thing about her. He had no right to gaze at her so lovingly . . . If he knew what she really was, he would have buried that red knife deep into her heart.

Gem was a Cleanser.

She was only awoken at the end of their shifts; when their usefulness expired, or when they went mad. More often than not, she was roused for the latter; few Captains in Transit lasted more than a decade before they lost their minds and Argos determined them to be hazardous to the ship and the entire mission.

Such was Gem’s purpose aboard the Argos – to be an assassin. A killer of her own people. Argos summoned her to clear the way for the next Captain in Transit – to eliminate any trace of them or their final days of madness.

Another reel commenced. But this one was different . . .

Once more Rapheal entered the stasis chamber . . . but this time he was half stumbling, as if lost, a crazed look in his sparkling green eyes. He didn’t take a single reading, nor look at a single pod – except Gem’s. But he almost walked past even her.

The lighting must have struck her eyes at just the right moment, creating a blue twinkle within the glass tube. It was only a brief glimmer, but was enough to draw his attention . . . Rafe stopped stumbling forward. He paused at her pod . . .

He stared at her, transfixed; far longer than ever before. So long, Gem had to scan forward through the recording in order to see him move. When she finally slowed the playback to normal speed, she saw a different man. He had steadied himself, the crazed look had left his eyes. He stood over her, straight and tall (tall for a Delphiniian).

“You deserve better than this,” he whispered to her slumbering form.

*You’re wrong,* she thought.

“I promise you, I won’t stop until I find it . . .” he said, before leaving her and then continuing down the chamber; his emerald eyes now full of determination.

*There’s but one thing I deserve . . .*

He couldn’t be more wrong about her. And judging by the last reel, it was a miracle she hadn’t been roused to kill him. Argos must have seen something in the man that stayed her hand. Most likely, she could attribute his continued existence to his remarkable resourcefulness.

All of the Delphinians aboard the Argos had their role to play . . . for Rapheal, it was to repair the ship. He was an engineer, the most gifted one they had, and as he had proved, the only one capable of keeping Argos space-worthy. The truth of the matter was that Argos was falling to pieces. And somehow, despite their dwindling supplies and resources, Rapheal had been able to keep them moving through space. Undoubtedly, Argos was aware of this as well.

However, because Argos couldn’t afford to let him go, Rapheal had greatly overstayed his captainship. One such as him was meant to be awakened for a span of a few years at most - enough time to repair Argos then fall back asleep until he was needed once more. Far too much time had passed for anyone to weather such solitude and remain sane.

Surely Rapheal was mad? Why else had he landed them here?

And the things he had done since then . . .

Such as the orb . . . the most powerful weapon know to creation, and he dared to take it!

She should kill him for that alone . . . yet . . .

Gem continued to ponder the man, and the records continued to unfold. She grew so deep in thought that she barely realized there was a disturbing lull in the records -- a lengthy period whereby Rafe failed to make his rounds. In fact, she couldn’t find him anywhere in the ship, on any of its monitors.

And then . . .

Another recording started on the clear-screen . . . this time warning lights were on all the recordings of the past, flashing in the background while a siren blared.

Looking more haggard, gaunt and lost than ever, Rapheal appeared on the screen. He approached her tube and gently placed his hand upon her face. His fingers left a clear trail on the dust covered glass . . .

Meanwhile, in the other clear-screen – the one showing the present -- he howled – “THERE’S NOTHING LEFT!”

*Was he mad?* she wondered, focusing on the display of him in his present state.

Rapheal stared down the monitor as he roared, “THE UNIVERSE IS DEAD!”

After the fight, in order to heal his broken ribs, they had removed his shirt. Gem couldn’t help but marvel at his physique, and the many layers of corded muscles covering his body. She had to admit, together they would make a splendid mating pair. There was much to admire in the man – discounting his potential insanity. Foremost would be his intelligence. He was brilliant, perhaps dangerously so, but only to those he deemed an enemy. Otherwise, for the few he called friends, he proved himself to be a highly loyal and useful asset.

And Rapheal was determined. It was obvious in the way he fought, and the way he had trained his body to become a weapon. In his time upon this world, he had become as skilled a killer as herself – perhaps more so.

Gem brought her hand to her bandaged head, her own aching reminder of what comes from underestimating the man. She knew too, that the injury could have been worse. Rapheal could easily have struck a lethal blow to her unshielded vitals. Instead, he chose to disable her

with an attack to her shielded head. Likewise, he could have killed her companions, yet he spared them as well.

Was he mad at all, or merely determined? Determined to save them . . . to save her?

It was obvious what kept him going all those years. Just to see her was enough . . . enough to give him hope. To give him a reason to fight on. And oh how he fought . . . he landed them here, even after Argos determined it was infected and sought to alter their course.

But Argos also underestimated the man's determination and brilliance. Unbeknownst to the machine, Rafe had not only taught himself Argos' programming language – which was ancient and long since dead – but he also found a way to disable the computer with it. And none of them, not even Argos itself could find a way to repair the damage.

Being unable to reconnect Argos to the ship, the best they could do was upload Argos' mind to a battle-mech they had salvaged from the Age of War.

*What if he wasn't mad at all? What if he was right?*

How many times had she been awakened? How many of her kind had she been summoned to kill? How long had they actually been searching?

Considering the value of any one of their lives, the time-table was staggering.

*What if there was nothing left? What if this is the last world not fully consumed by the Virus?*

Even if he was mad, even if he purposely sabotaged the ship to land them on an infected planet, Gem couldn't deny that he was still damned clever . . . Clever enough it seemed, to not only live in an infected world, but to have thrived within it. Apparently, he had risen to some sort of lord in this land; one who commanded a substantial army. But more incredulous than that, he faced the Plague with his army . . . he faced the Plague, and he survived!

"What if he is right?" Gem whispered out loud. "What if it's time to stop running?"

*"And what if he is wrong?"* came the booming electronic reply at her back.

Instinctively, she ran her hand over her shield's trigger – not that it would have done a bit of good in a battle with Argos. The body he possessed was ancient and held unknown powers. Once, at the bloodiest height of the Age of War, armies of such beings flooded the universe; sent forth with a very specific set of programs – to wipe out the enemies of their creators. And for a time, they were incredibly successful.

But with the discovery of the Singularity, the machines became puppets to the Mage-lords -- who subsequently turned them against their creators.

Before now, the Delphiniians simply had no reason, or no way to test the mechanical body. Fearing any lingering programs, they didn't dare power the thing up without bestowing it with a fully sentient artificial mind – one they could trust – thereby knowing for certain it wouldn't turn against them and slaughter them all.

Like Gem, the automatons existed for one purpose – to kill. And she had a feeling they were far better at it than her.

For starters, she was a little more than unsettled at how silently he moved – normally, she was the stealthy one. Gem was accustomed to her diminutive size, actually found it had advantages when fighting larger opponents. But next to the slender metal giant, she never felt so small and insignificant. In her experience, most beings of substantial stature tended to move relatively slow. Argos suffered no such deficiency. She had seen him move – seen him fight in their encounter with Rapheal – and the body was nothing but fluid grace, mixed with incredible speed and power. Any attack she would dare to raise against Argos would be met with a decisive and deadly counter, which the computer mind would process at the speed of light.

Luckily, unlike Rapheal, she hadn't done anything to anger the being. Besides, if he wanted to kill her, he could have done it anytime during their journey by simply severing power to her life-pod. For those countless years she had trusted the computer with her life, she had no reason to stop now.

"How can we ever know if he is wrong?" she asked, turning to face the giant metal being, and looking him square in his fiery red eyes.

"*We cannot,*" came Argos' reply. "*By stranding us here, he has strategically ensured we must accept his truth.*"

His truth . . . "THE UNIVERSE IS DEAD! AND WE ALONG WITH IT IF WE DO NOT FIGHT!"

"But what do you think, Argos? You have known him these many years . . ."

She turned her gaze back to the past, to the recordings of the landing, and of Rapheal hacking into Argos' mind.

"*I'm sorry, Argos,*" he said.

Gem sensed only sympathy in his gruff voice – not madness.

"*But I'm going down there. With or without your help.*"

After seeing all the recordings, it finally made sense to her; he wasn't purely mad. Nor was he purely a villain. Argos may have stayed her hand in killing him because of his ability to maintain the ship, but there was another reason. One the computer may not readily admit, considering what Rapheal had done to it. But after such a lengthy time with but the two of them alone in space, Gem was beginning to realize the Delphiniian and Argos had become friends.

The further proof of it was the mere fact the man remained alive in the holding chamber – Argos could have easily taken his revenge and squeezed the life from him when he held him in his cold, metal hands.

"*He is resilient, and resourceful beyond measure,*" the robot replied.

Gem did her best to bury her smirk, finding the comment to be a polite acquiescence to the fact that Rapheal had bested him.

"*But he was wrong, the world was infected . . . we should not have landed here.*"

"But here we are. And considering he is the only one capable of fixing the ship, it appears we are at his mercy."

The recordings of the past ended as Rapheal severed Argos' link to the ship. The screen went black. Gem was left with the current image of Rapheal crumpled on the floor of the holding chamber.

"Whether or not the universe is dead doesn't really matter. Does it, Argos? I suppose in that sense his is correct. If it is even possible to fix the damage he has done, we cannot force him to do so. It would seem there is only one thing left for us to do, one world left in which to live."

A weight lifted from her shoulders as she uttered the words. For the first time since she set foot in this cursed ship she almost felt happy. No longer would her purpose be to kill her kin. Oh yes, she would still serve her purpose, better than ever. But this time it would be against her enemies. This time it would be against the Plague.

"*Yes . . .*" a chill seemed to fill the robot's emotionless, monotone voice. "*Rafe's actions may have proven false, but the data does not. We will not leave this world . . . there is but one chance for our continued survival.*"

Argos' red eyes burned like embers.

"*We must stay . . . and we must fight.*"

*A weapon to end worlds . . .*

He limped onward; his hands shriveled, his bald head covered in a spider web of blackened veins.

*How must I look now?* he wondered. One glance at his sunken, splotchy flesh, and X'ander knew the answer . . .

*Like you, Father. I must look like the One Elf himself.*

He had only recently left the charred lands of the Destroyer behind him, and already, he had aged a millennium.

*But unlike you, I will soon find death.*

Of all the elves, only one of them was *truly* immortal – Solo Ki. Once, ages ago, X'ander thought to test his invincibility for himself. On every level, his father not only passed, but far exceed X'ander's best efforts to end his life.

It wasn't to say that X'ander wasn't a skilled killer – far from it. His skill with knives was renowned and unrivaled, in this world, or any other world he ever set foot upon.

In his lengthy life, he met few who could stand against him – Nathalia may have been one. No doubt, some of the more powerful Dead Gods could be counted among his superiors.

But Solo Ki was on a whole other level, and blessed with an ability none in the universe could claim -- a fact X'ander learned the hard way.

He was blessed with prescience.

The One Elf was so in tuned with the slightest aspect of his surroundings -- particularly the minds of his kin -- that during their battle, he knew what X'ander was going to do before even X'ander did. By the time X'ander's blades came leaping from his fingertips, Adros was already in motion. He didn't even bother to use his staff. His dirty cape caught the majority of the blades, the rest flew harmlessly past him. When his boot came crashing against X'ander's skull, he hadn't even realized the One Elf was upon him.

He learned that day that he would never be the equal to Solo Ki, and that his father was beyond death, beyond any physical test. And oh how it angered him! An emotion so rarely felt, suddenly filled his very core. He was enraged. Not because he lost the contest, but because of how skilled and gifted Adros truly was.

He spat at the man while cursing him . . . cursing his very existence.

*"How can you be so powerful . . . and yet such a failure?"*

After that, X'ander made his way to the Dead Sands, where he expected to live the remainder of his days malcontent and dwelling on the crumbled dreams of his past.

Then, like a miracle, Rafe came; and with him came hope.

*I will do what you never could, Father . . . I will end the blight that infests our people.*

X'ander trudged onward toward Lock Core, in his wrinkled hands, the Eater continued to test the dim barrier of blue flames that encased it. The thinner the flames, the greater the drain on X'ander's soul – and at the moment, they held but a spark of life.

He met few as he travelled – as he had hoped. Most were the undead – which were spiritually drained the moment they mistook him for a snack. The rest were survivors of the war of Shattered Rock. Many were too weak to continue on, and had the misfortune to lie down in his path. He felt little sympathy for them as their life-force was consumed. He knew, their end

was coming sooner than later, regardless of the Eater. And with X'ander's passing, their deaths were at least quick.

Days passed, and he continued on; every step he took slower than the last until eventually, they were no longer steps. X'ander crawled the remaining distance to Lock Core; the Eater no longer held in his hands, nor in a barrier of flames. As he came upon the crumpled tower at the edge of the city, the Eater was within him, devouring him from the inside out. What was left of him – his paper-thin flesh, and fleeting soul – were the only things keeping it from feeding upon the entire Seventh World.

He clawed his way to the tower, only to collapse at its base – utterly spent; his skin fading to an oily black. As even his eyes of grey and white filled with the black liquid he took a final look at his destination, and failed goal.

High above the city, blue flames filled the night. While at the city's heart, where the Black Door throbbed, a familiar and powerful glow turned the city into shadows of grey and gold. Atop the remnants of the Northern Tower, a brilliant sphere of azure blue grew, stretching out to cover the entire city, spreading to the Outlands as well. All it touched filled with life; the grass stood straight and tall, growing around him. Leaves of green filled the trees, then they blossomed, fruit budding on their branches.

Before X'ander's flesh was no more he too fell beneath the healing glow . . .

Then, X'ander rose to his feet.

The battle continued rage on at the heart of the city . . .

With the Eater devouring his insides as quickly as they were healed, X'ander headed towards the Rift, and the final battle for the Seventh World.

. . . unbeknownst to him, golden shafts of hair began sprouting from his bald head.



## Prince Adros and the Lord of Argor

Out of nowhere the blackened staff appeared and smacked against his wrist -- the only wrist he had left. There was a loud ‘pop’ as all of the carpal bones in his wrist exploded on impact. Gritting his teeth, he swallowed his scream as a jolt pain ran the length of his arm. Desperately, he fought to maintain his grip on the orchid blade, but it slipped from his limp grip, falling with a clatter to the field of grey stones that was their chosen fighting grounds.

Then, as quickly as it came, the staff withdrew.

Sneering at the fallen blade, and his useless hand, his pain became anger.

Without hesitation, the young man summoned the full might of his power, covering himself from head to toe in azure flames. He raised his left arm – which was a stump, ending several inches below his elbow – and sent blue flames pouring from the end of the amputated limb. The flames twisted around the cherry-wood handle at his hip, slipping the blade from its leather scabbard. As the weapon slid free, the silver, leaf-shaped cross-guards and orchid inlay sparkled beneath the blue flames. His mage-fire encompassed the weapon, animating it, forcing it to circle clockwise in the air, its razor edge leading the way. Spinning like a windmill in a hurricane, he launched the blade at his opponent, who was stoically still, his hands coiled around his blackened staff as he awaited its arrival.

Spinning so fast it appeared a solid circle of silver and blue-fire, the weapon came at the gaunt, eight-foot tall being.

Meanwhile, blue flames raged through the boy’s body, fusing the broken bones in his right hand. The pain was gone, but the anger remained . . . and it was stronger than ever.

He clenched his hand into a fist.

Flames dripped from his fingers, etching a trail through the stone floor as they burned their way to his fallen orchid blade. Crackling with power, the flames curled around the weapon’s hilt, retracting it back into his waiting hand.

Just as his fingers wrapped around the handle, the spinning wheel of steel and flame came upon his opponent . . . only to be met with a similar spinning wheel; this one, a whirlwind of blackened wood.

As if the elf had ripped out a chunk of his soul, the young man felt his power drain as the two forces collided. Even so, the exchange only served to fuel his anger – and therefore his power. He channeled them both against his opponent.

*Impossible!* he fumed, as the staff of charred wood continued to hold his twirling weapon at bay.

Even after many such sessions, many such battles, he continued to be amazed and confounded by the elf’s abilities. Not only could he drain the vast amounts of mage-fire he sent against him – enough power to make the Destroyer envious – but it seemed physically impossible that any living being could move so fast, especially considering he was unaided by the Singularity.

*Let’s see what you’re truly capable of, One Elf,* the young man thought, his grip tightening on his other blade.

This time, he would force his opponent to be even faster . . .

This time, Tetloan was going to put the One Elf to the test . . .

The One Elf's staff began to take on a bluish hue as Tetloan leapt forward, his strength, speed and agility enhanced to their utmost by the Singularity.

Tetloan's form was still far from perfect, but like the One Elf taught him; what he lacked in perfection, he could compensate for with brute force and power. Since the beginning, the One Elf knew they had a limited time to train, and he would never make a sword-master out of him before they reached the city. And now they were nearing Lock Core, and thus nearing the end of their little training sessions. Indeed, as Tetloan attacked, his footing was all wrong, his poise sloppy, and his balance awkward. They may be close to Lock Core, but he was still a long way from becoming a sword-master.

But . . .

The One Elf taught him other things, a bag of tricks with which he could intertwine the Singularity and his limited sword-fighting skills. And thus, he could become something else . . . something far deadlier than a sword-master, or even a Magi. By combining Nathalia's razor sharp blades with his power, the One Elf had trained him to be a weapon more deadly than any sword-master ever dreamed.

The One Elf also taught him that the Magi of the old order shunned the use of any weapon, other than mage-fire, and that the Solo Ki had met only a few who had gone against that rule. But those that did successfully join the two disciplines became far more lethal fighters than virtually all of their peers.

A single step sent him flying through the air, faster than a lightning strike. The keen edge of the orchid blade came down in an arc . . . right where Solo Ki's head was . . . Or where it used to be. A strip of dirty fabric drifted through the air where the elf once stood. Undeterred, Tetloan continued swinging with the weapon in his right hand, while simultaneously pressing his attack with his other animated blade. Using the spinning weapon to keep the One Elf too busy to initiate his own offensive, Tetloan chased the One Elf down with his other blade, hacking and slashing wherever the lanky being appeared.

As if fighting a ghost, the One Elf vanished wherever his blade fell. The elf's cape suffered one serious blow after another, but the One Elf was always one step ahead of him. He couldn't fathom how he continued to miss him. His intended target was so large, yet moved with such fluid grace. And for a being that seemed so decrepit, worn and weary, he was incredibly agile and quick. Even so, it shouldn't have been possible for the elf to dodge him, not when he moved so fast. Not when his every pore was broiling with the mage-fire.

Tetloan was beginning to believe the One Elf was anticipating his thoughts, reacting before Tetloan had even thought to act. He somehow needed to surprise him, to find a way to attack him that even the ancient weapon master wouldn't expect.

And he would have to come up with something quick, for the longer the fight lasted, the greater the drain on his power. Little by little, it was slipping, consumed by the One Elf's twisted staff. Once Solo Ki managed to free himself from the spinning blade, the fight would be over. Tetloan would be powerless to stop the staff from penetrating his otherwise limited defenses.

Beyond the rudimentary sword skills, the One Elf taught him a thing or two with the Singularity. Normally, he wouldn't resort to such foul play, but the elf had said so himself; everything was fair game. If he had to cheat to win, then do so.

Sending his power directly against him was useless, he knew that from experience. But for a skilled mage, everything in the environment could be considered a potential weapon. Taking a quick look around, Tetloan saw a field of such weapons.

His energy went out in all directions. Dozens of giant stone slabs arose from the ground.

He sought to hurl them at the One Elf, or at the least hamper his movement, box him in so he couldn't escape his blade so easily. But yet again, the One Elf proved an elusive foe. As they flew at him, the crafty old elf used the stones against him, leaping from one to the next as if they were stepping stones. He also timed their movements to shield himself from Tetloan's spinning blade. Dancing his way through the slabs of grey stone, he even managed to slip between them and thrust his staff out at Tetloan.

The butt of the staff struck him squarely in the forehead. Tetloan fell to his knees, the stones all fell from the air, as did his spinning blade.

The pain disorientated him, and the staff drained his power.

"You promised me you would put them to use," the One Elf said, looming over him. "And that you would give me your all."

He felt his power rising . . . along with his anger . . .

"You said you would send the Dark Army to hell . . ."

"I will," Tetloan growled, his rage building as he stared at the fallen orchid blade. "I will kill them all!"

"Then do so," the One Elf said, stepping back, raising his staff into a defensive stance. "Starting with me."

Tetloan filled with power . . . more so than ever before. So much so that it didn't merely cover him, it consumed him. For the first time in his life, he didn't try to control it, he became one with it.

He stood up, his flesh was fire, a pyre of blue flames that burned to the heavens.

Tetloan sent his power out, all of it. Solo Ki was engulfed. Even his legendary Graelic had trouble absorbing the vast amount of raw power. He swung out with his sword as the inferno raged over the One Elf; the orchid blade coming faster and more powerful than ever before. As usual, there was the standard, disappointing "thunk" as the blade was intercepted by the staff. But surprisingly, the blade imbedded itself in the staff. The One Elf's eyes of grey and white widened as they regarded his damaged staff . . . they widened even further, when the other orchid blade came bursting out of his chest.

Tetloan grabbed hold of the elf as he collapsed. Cradling the giant elf with his power, his used his good hand to pull the sword from his back.

"I didn't mean to . . ." he said in disbelief, amazed that he had actually managed to overpower elf. All of his prior rage was replaced by sadness at the sight of the injured elf. During their journey to Lock Core he had developed tremendous respect for the ancient being and never actually intended to harm him – he didn't believe it was possible to even do so. After failing for so long to so much as scratch him, he never actually thought it was possible to hit him, let alone land a lethal blow. For Tetloan, the death of the One Elf would be a tragic loss for all of the Seventh World. And for it to occur by his hand, would be a travesty he could not bear.

"I'll take you to Emily, she can heal you . . ." Tetloan stammered, knowing his healing skills were more than a little bit lacking. "She can heal anything."

To his amazement, the One Elf laughed. With every dying chortle, bloody phlegm spewed from his mouth, but still he laughed.

Then, still clutched tightly in his skeletal hands, the bluish glow of his staff faded to black. Blood stopped pouring from his chest, and from his lips.

With the wound fusing shut, the One Elf said, "Well done, boy."

He stood up, Tetloan's eyes looking straight into the pink scar on his chest.

“But before we reach Lock Core, there is one more lesson you need to learn . . . the most important one if you wish to face the Plague.”

The elf stared down at him, his grey and white eyes lifeless and cold.

“The next time you kill something . . . make sure it is dead.”

## Eyes of Blue and Brown

“Bloody Gods,” the man grumbled at her back. “I knew I shouldn’t have let you talk me into leaving my weapons behind.” His face was hidden beneath a hood of black; his only visible feature – a pair of brown eyes. “. . . What I wouldn’t give to have something more than this damned sword,” he continued. “Not to mention my armor . . . it’s been saving the lives of my family since the Exodus – saved my own ass on more than one occasion -- and I’ll be dead if I don’t need it now more than ever. Besides, considering what it’s been through – the very Rift itself -- it just doesn’t seem fitting to have it end its days as a pile of rust in that hell-hole, Shattered Rock.”

She had listened to him gripe for days now, and for the most part, she suffered his words in silence. But there was a limit to what she would ignore, and her mentor had more than surpassed it.

“We lost much in Shattered Rock,” she replied, her voice laden with honey, even though her words bespoke her disapproval. “I would think your dented armor would be counted among the least of them.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t hear the standard “Humph”, curse, or equivalent unintelligible grunt.

Her reply managed to shut him up . . . momentarily anyways. They didn’t make it much further down the cobblestone road before the complaints renewed, much louder and more vulgar than before. She knew it was brought on by fear, and was therefore willing to disregard the majority of it -- the rest, she tried to ignore altogether. Truth was, she too was afraid. But even worse – and perhaps most frightening of all – her mentor was right.

Where they were going, they would need all the help they could get. . .

Ahead of them, the Gorian Mountain loomed, its snowy peaks hidden by a dense layer of smoke. The ash-filled clouds veiled the sun, covering the land in a dusk-like gloom even though it was not yet midday. Occasionally lightning flares erupted in the distant sky, followed immediately with an earth-shaking thunderclap. Constant flames rose from the heart of the city, from where the Black Door lay.

All of the sights had been visible from miles away. Only recently were they close enough to hear the screams; at least their dying echo as they reverberated through the canyon of red granite.

Though heart-wrenching and eerie, she took the continued screams as a good sign. If the people were in pain, it meant they still lived, and if so, then perhaps they weren’t entirely too late.

Since they left Shattered Rock, they had moved at a near sprint. Now, weary beyond measure, they somehow managed to pick up their pace; the images of the burning city, and the muffled echoes of pain, forcing them to dig deeper into their every last reserve. Huffing and puffing with every breath, the man also somehow managed to continue spouting expletives at her back. She was actually impressed by the man’s level of creativity and vulgarity in his use of the words. The thought of killing a ‘meat puppet’ with its own genitalia had never crossed her mind. But surprisingly, her mentor could think of several methods.

“. . . I’ll shove that shriveled . . . huff, huff . . . down your dead . . . puff, puff . . . and rip out every last piece until . . . huff, huff . . . before I kill you I’ll pull it from your . . . puff, puff.”

She had to turn and glare at him when the methods focused on the female ‘meat puppets’. Then, like a mantra, he once more turned his grumbling to his lost weapons, listing every last item he was forced to abandon at Shattered Rock.

“If only I had my axe . . . and my mace . . . can’t forget my daggers . . . and my armor, of course . . .”

For the most part, his words fell on deaf ears, but now, with the obvious battle raging before them, she couldn’t help but agree with him. Her fingers lingered uncomfortably on the hilt of her own standard-issue longsword. She felt the corded leather handle in regret, wishing she could wrap her hands around the smooth oak shaft of her spear instead.

In their need for haste, she had decided it would be best to leave their larger weapons behind. For her grumpy mentor, this amounted to a virtual armory which she personally had to rip from his hands – and he had been complaining about it ever since. Once more they wore the uniforms of the Death Guard. Partly, it was because she knew they could move quicker the less encumbered they were. If he had it his way, her mentor would have waddled his way to Lock Core in his antique suite of plate mail. Sure, the armor could have saved his life, but by the time he made it to Lock Core, he would also be the last one standing.

There was another reason she had convinced him to leave their items behind and don their Death Guard attire; it was because she desired as little trouble as possible along the way. The living tended to avoid any one who was ‘under the mask’, and for good reason. One could never be sure for whom they were summoned to cleanse of infection. And if they happened to come upon the undead, there was always the hope the smarter of their kind would realize their profession, and let them pass in anticipation of weaker prey.

The guise seemed to serve its purpose, for they met little resistance in the course of their journey. Only a few minor gatherings of ‘meat puppets’ barred their way, but they made short work of them and lost little time with the effort. In her estimation, they should be days ahead of the others – if the others yet lived. And she had the utmost faith they yet did, and that they too would make it to the city. Considering the company they kept, it would take an army of the undead to stop them. The Destroyer pretty much took care of the Outland infection, leaving the hell-spawn of the Rift as their only true threat.

If they could keep the Plague contained in the city until the One Elf and the others arrived, they could just stand a chance . . .

“Wait until the One Elf has a crack at this lot,” her mentor scoffed, similar thoughts apparently running through his mind. “By the time Solo Ki’s done with em, they’ll be sorry they ever set foot in this world.”

Once more, she found herself in agreement with her mentor. An odd coincidence, to be sure, so rarely did the man string his expletive laden sentences into a logical thought.

But like her mentor and herself, the others had no idea what they were walking into. This wasn’t what anyone expected to find after leaving the remains of Shattered Rock. They had hoped to find help in the red-walled city. Having only recently ‘defeated’ the Plague, the last thing she expected was to face it once more. And this time it was coming from the endless depths of the Rift . . .

And this time they didn’t have the Destroyer to stop it . . .

As much as the sight of the city gripped her with fear, she knew damn well there was nowhere left to go. The Outlands were dead. Only one city remained to the living, and they had no choice but to press on towards it . . . to the burning Red Wall.

The Red Wall . . . the city of Lock Core . . .

Originally, it was never intended to be a city, but a fortress. The many tiers of dwellings carved in the face of the cliff were built as barracks; to house a standing army of the Triad at all times. But after so many years of silence from the Rift, families began joining the soldiers in their dwellings, and with a growing domestic base, more workers moved in to fulfill their needs. The housing developments continued to spread over the mountain, drawing even more workers – more families. Before long, the Red Wall *was* a city, its structures and dwellings growing more elaborate, larger, and climbing farther and burrowing deeper into the massive Gorian Mountains. The cliffs became castles. The interior -- an ant-hill like maze of chambers and tunnels. And the mountain itself, a sprawling city surrounding the Great Red Wall.

As for the actual wall, one look at the marvel of fortification and it was no wonder why their predecessors thought it was insurmountable. At its shortest point, the wall was over ten stories high – nearly twice that if one included the four primary towers, positioned at the north, south, east and west ends of the wall. Between the primary towers, smaller towers of red stone divided up the length of the crenelated wall. Depending on their location, the towers were constructed in various ways; some were entirely tunneled into the mountain face, while others were mainly stacks of granite blocks. But no matter their shape, each tower was similarly outfitted with defenses. Row after row of archers' slits faced the Rift, and each tower had several cantilevered balconies large enough to hold a dozen soldiers or a war-machine; most commonly a catapult, scorpion, or giant, pourable bucket of molten lead.

From their distance, she could see little of the Wall's defenses other than the northern tower, which was still under construction even twenty years after the Destroyer toppled it with his power. The tower itself was surrounded by a scaffold exoskeleton, with rigging, ladders and several lift platforms providing transitions from one level to the next. All of which were aflame, turning the entire northern tower into one massive pyre.

As they drew closer, it was obvious the city had been hard at work bolstering its defenses in their absence. They hadn't been gone long, but since they left, a wall had been built to block access to the city from the Outlands – something unheard of in the history of the city. It was always assumed the enemy would come from within the Wall, from the Black Door. No one ever thought the Plague would fester and grow in the Outlands, consuming the cities and thus turning them into an army that could take the city from beyond.

Luckily, they were able to save the city from such a fate. She just hoped they could save it from its latest threat as well.

Upright logs bound together and sharpened to points barricaded the roadway in front of them. A ramshackle tower, roughly two-stories high, was behind the wall. The lower half, brick and mortar, the second-floor timber-framed with a knee-wall of notched logs. A large wooden gate blocked the road, suspended at the top by wheels that were attached to a large support beam spanning the width of the opening.

Written in blood red letters upon the gate was the warning; "NO OUTLAND ADMITTANCE."

The wall was far from insurmountable, any substantial army could easily force its way through, while a smaller party could climb it with only a minimal effort.

She was about to attempt the latter, believing the tower to be vacant, when she saw a pair of conical helms slowly poke up from the tower's knee-wall . . .

## The Outland Gate

“You hear something, Dobb?” the thin, scruffy-faced man asked his companion. His eyes were surrounded by large black circles. Since the fires began, he had slept little. When the screaming started, he slept not at all.

“Other than the battle?” Dobber replied, gnashing his teeth on an empty pipe, not even bothering to look the other man’s way. “Not really. You’re imagining things, Pete. Who in the dead hell would want to come here?”

Four weeks ago, the pair of men had been commanded to man the Outland Gate. Rumor had it that the Outlands were swarming with the dead, but during their watch, they hadn’t seen a single being – living or dead. Because of the silence, they assumed everyone beyond the city avoided Lock Core because it was under siege, or they were already dead and infected.

Whatever the reason, both men were far more worried about what was happening in the city. People may have considered Pete slow, but even he knew the fires and the screams of the dying could mean only one thing – the Rift was opened, the full might of the Plague had returned to claim their world.

They hadn’t expected to stay on their post as long as they had, especially with no further contact with the rest of the city.

Rations were running low, as were their moods. The first to go was their tobacco, the second their brandy. As soon as those were gone, Dobber became grumpier than ever.

Empty jars and metal canisters were scattered around the tower, many of which emitted foul odors -- begging to be emptied. A bushel of half-rotting apples, a basket of figs and a quarter-dozen eggs, were all that remained of their food.

Dobber continued to gnaw on his pipe, sitting with his back to the Outlands. He only had eyes for the city, and rarely took away his gaze. His eyes were red and glossy, as if mesmerized by the burning Northern Tower.

Not for the first time, Pete questioned the logic of continuing to man their post. He knew Dobber felt the same, though he was itching to join the fighting at the Wall. All Pete really wanted was to find somewhere to hide. Considering it was well-known the Outlands were infested, the guard tower had seemed as good a place as any. That was to say, until he heard the muffled curses from down below.

Before the Outland Gate had fallen under their charge, refugees were allowed to enter the city. Though back then, there was a squadron of Death Guards stationed in their place. But still, even under the close scrutiny of the Death Guards, mistakes were made – the Plague found its way into the city, scattered outbreaks flared up. Entire neighborhoods were consumed before it was contained.

After that, the Outland Gate was closed to all.

The Death Guard doubled their forces, and turned away all who approached.

Then, the uprising occurred. It was discovered that the Keeper’s guards were infected – likely had been for some time. The Death Guard were forced to abandon their posts, moving quickly to hunt down LeCynic’s unholy creations and eradicate every last one of them.

At last count, five remained at large.

The Keeper’s soldiers were said to be demons, and killed many Death Guards before they succumbed. After the uprising, not only were the Death Guard’s ranks weakened, but a new



threat was growing at the Rift, calling for every able-bodied soldier to be mobilized around the Black Door.

And now Pete knew why . . .

“There! I swear I heard something in the road,” Pete continued.

“Well, if you’re so sure, then take a look,” Dobber replied, disinterested with Pete’s fears and anything else that remotely related to his assignment. He took it as an insult to be sent to the edge of the city, when the war was being fought at its heart.

Pete, however, considered himself lucky. He was still unsure how he landed the position, nor did he wish to question such fortune. He did, however, have a strong suspicion as to how Dobber ended up there. Back at the barracks, he had heard rumors that Dobber got a little too close to the commander’s wife. For his own safety, Dobber was relocated as far as possible from the man, who was a hardened survivor of the first war of Lock Core.

“What if it’s the dead out there?” Pete asked.

“Then all the more reason to look. It’s our job, after all. But, if you ask me, all the dead are at the Black Door, where we should be.”

The curses from below became clearer, and fouler. Pete blushed beneath his scruffy beard, while Dobber’s sun-tanned complexion grew suddenly pale.

“Whoever it is, he doesn’t sound happy,” Pete said.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“You still think we should take a look?”

“May as well,” Dobber stated, with little conviction. “My ass *has* been getting tired from sitting here so long.”

Though not exactly the order he expected from his senior officer, Pete complied, and together they poked their heads up from the tower wall.

One look at the masked figures below, and both of them immediately ducked back down; Pete frantically trying to string an arrow to his bow.

“You there!” came a gruff call from the road.

“What do we do, Dobb?” Pete whispered, still wrestling with his bowstring. “Don’t we have to let them in?”

“I’ll handle it,” he replied, spitting out the tip of his pipe he had unwittingly bit off. He then shouted to the pair of Death Guards below. “Sorry, good sir. You’ll find no infected in this tower. I give you my word on that . . . as a gentleman.”

Pete did his best to mask his chagrin at the last part, but even so, he couldn’t keep his eyes from rolling back in his head.

“I don’t give a bloody damn about your honor, or if you’re infected or not,” the man below fumed. “If you don’t open that gate, I’ll split your skull either way.”

“Begging your pardon, but I don’t think I can do that . . . even for you. No one’s to enter the city, Keeper’s very own orders.”

“The Keeper!” the man below fumed. “Your Keeper’s a rotting son-of-a-bitch. Literally! He’s god-damn infected. To the dead with his orders.”

“I think he means LeCynic,” Pete whispered to Dobber.

“Right . . .” he replied. “They must not know”

“May LeCynic rot in hell,” Dobber cursed down to the pair. “And all his creations. We take our orders from the good lady Katerina now. In case you haven’t heard, there’s a war brewing in the city, and a plague as well. We have enough to deal with in the city without letting in the Outland infection.”

“Besides,” Pete chimed in, poking his head up for another look. “You’d be a fool to want in. Beyond this door, there’s nothing but death.”

“A fool?”

The man’s hand whitened as it constricted on the sword handle. His brown eyes filled with pulsating red veins.

Pete ducked back down, his arrow finally notched and ready.

“Let me in the gate, boy, and I’ll show you who’s a fool.”

A gentle whisper interrupted the tirade of cursing, then a sweet and soft voice spoke, “We just came from Shattered Rock, and have seen more death than you could possibly imagine. We faced the Keeper’s undead army and have survived. It’s true, we know nothing of the City’s plight, only what has befallen the Outlands. Please, let us inside. We need to tell our tale to our leader. And as members of the Death Guard, we *need* to join the fight for this city.”

“There *is* only the two of them . . . And after all, they are Death Guards.” Dobber pondered. The man always had a soft spot for women, and the sweet voice from below seemed to easily melt his reserve. “And really, what harm can they do? Other than to themselves?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Pete replied, not sure he was. The woman seemed to be a reasonable sort, but he was certain the man was going to cut him down at the first chance he could get.

“Keep your arrow on them,” Dobber said, sensing his fears. “Just in case.”

Fortunately, beyond the insults directed at their mothers, the pair of Death Guards left them alone – the female one even ignored Dobber’s best attempts at seduction. They didn’t even bother to check them for infection before dashing off into the city, where their black robes and masks soon vanished amidst the darkened streets.

Afterwards, it was relatively quiet in the tower. The fires died down in the distant sky, and the screams as well. Only the occasional moan reached their ears, but whether it was from the living or the dead, they couldn’t tell. From their position, there was little they could do either way.

Further orders never came . . . so in the meantime they continued to man their posts. The pile of apples dwindled, while the putrid smell emanating from the jars increased. Taking advantage of the respite, Pete was even able to catch up on some sleep.

Then, half sleeping during his watch, Pete once more heard something from the Outlands . . . a rhythmic pounding from the roadway below.

He nudged Dobber, motioning to the Outlands.

He took a moment to rub the sleep from his eyes, then, ever so slowly, they raised their heads over the wall . . .

. . . just as before, they immediately crouched back down.

“What do we do about them?” Pete nervously asked, not even bothering to notch an arrow this time.

“*No Outland admittance . . . what the dead! Open the damn gate or I’ll smash it open,*” came the thunderous voice from the road. “. . . then I’ll topple that pile of twigs and you along with it.”

“We let them in, of course,” Dobber replied. “Didn’t you see the size of him . . . and his weapon?”

Pete scampered down the tower to obey, operating the winch before the giant could make good on his threat. As soon as the door opened a crack, a meaty hand took hold of it, thrusting it open the rest of the way. Pete flew to the ground as the winch spun wildly out of control.

Laying on the ground, he felt the earth shake as the massive being lumbered in. It paused to scowl down at him, gripping its gigantic war-pick tightly. Scars covered his hairy face and arms, a leather vest covered his chest.

Pete was certain he was about to be squashed by the fearsome giant, when a hooded man stepped forward; his eyes empty pits on his head. Behind him, a throng of ragged children piled into the city.

“Who is the current Keeper? What has befallen the city?” the man with the dead eyes asked, somehow able to gaze directly at Pete’s location, though obviously blind.

He felt even more frightened under his eye-less gaze than he did under the giant’s, and felt compelled to reply.

Before they left for the city, Pete told the man what he knew – which was very little. The Boulder Dwarf looked angrier than ever at his words, while the blind, old man simply looked defeated. Taking the children with them, they followed the same path as the pair of Death Guards . . .

. . . Roughly a day later, they didn’t even bother to stop the other party that arrived at their gate. The one-armed boy seemed ready to kill them with his glare. The gaunt elf lord appeared to be death itself. And the girl with the pouty lips . . .

They were embarrassed to admit it afterwards, but she disarmed them with little more than a smile.



. . . Much later, another being approached the gate to Lock Core. But by the time he crawled his way to the wall of logs, the gate was already burning. And the tower was a pile of ash . . . a pair of skeletons mixed within.

The being lacked the strength to crawl over the debris, so it rested among the ashes instead. As the being was about to make peace with death, a miracle occurred . . . a globe of blue energy covered the entire city and beyond . . . it passed over him, caressing his emaciated body with gentle licks of flame.

The bald-headed elf rose to his feet, then entered the city through the Outland Gate.

## Boulder Brothers

*–The Age of Death,  
The Seventh World  
First War of Lock Core, Post Exodus 565–*

The rain continued to fall upon the Red Wall . . .  
. . . so too did his father's hammer, every blow landing on the stone like a violent crash of thunder.

The rain and oncoming night challenged Drau'd's limited cave-vision, obscuring his father's image. He could see clearly for ten steps in front of him, but beyond that, the Red Wall was a blur, and the land below a writhing black pit. Thankfully, by following the repetitive booms of his father's hammer, he was easy to find amidst the walkway full of prowling shadows.

Through sheets of driving rain he closed in on the sound, finding his father's massive form hammering away at a humanoid body at his feet. Deeply set within his crag-like eyebrows, his wide brown eyes were a mix of rage and intense focus as he sought to decimate the being. Tufts of curly grey hair sprouted from his head like a bush, so matted and snarled they defied the drenching rain

His legs trembling as the walkway vibrated below his feet, Drua'd steadied himself and lumbered towards him.

For as long as he could remember, a smile had blessed his father's face. The only thing more legendary than his strength was his kindness. But ever since the Rift awoke, a dark scowl had been spreading upon his visage. And now, three days into the war, Drau'd feared that scowl had become a permanent fixture.

Once more the elder giant raised the massive crystalline hammer to the sky . . . with a roar, he propelled it downward, backing the swing with the full might of his massive arms and shoulders.

Drau'd's legs nearly buckled beneath the blast. The granite below him fractured into hundreds of spider web cracks.

Before his father raised the hammer for another blow, Drau'd called to him.

"You've been summoned, Father," the young giant said, raising his voice to be heard above the rain.

His father turned to regard him, and for a moment, the familiar wide smile returned.

Standing just over five-stones (roughly ten human feet), his father wasn't the largest of the Boulder Dwarfs. But with his muscular arms and shoulders hardened from years of toil in the granite mines, he was possibly the strongest. Every passing day, Drau'd seemed to be gaining on him in height, yet was still a long way from filling out to match his girth.

That wasn't to say Drau'd was weak -- far from it. It simply meant that because he had only seen the passing of twenty-four sun stones, he lacked the rock-hard physique that could only be earned through a lifetime of rigorous work.

"Summoned?" his father replied, pausing to lift his hammer off the pile of mush that was once the being's head. "Summoned for what?"

Little flesh remained on the corpse's bones, and that which did, was yellow and continually bled, excreting a black pus-like substance. Many of its organs were exposed, though

none of them were recognizable. Judging on its location, Drau'd figured the pile of black slime spilling from its midsection to be its entrails.

The sight – and the smell – of the dead ones was still horrifying to him. As was the realization that some unholy miracle was even now keeping the creature alive.

For the most part, they had cleared the walkway of the abominations, but a few of them were proving more difficult to be rid of.

This one especially . . .

It was an *ancient one*, and though the body was no larger than a human's, it had been a most deadly opponent. After a millennium of infection, its cells and its soul were utterly consumed by the dark power, endowing it with strength equal to the greatest of the Boulder Lords. And it was faster . . . far faster than his kin -- faster than any living being should be. Sadly, three of their Lords fell before it was defeated. That they defeated it at all seemed a miracle, for whatever dark power gave it strength also made it nearly indestructible. Even weapons of silver proved ineffective against it.

Drau'd remembered his own failed attempt to end the abomination; for a split second, the creature was preoccupied, tearing handfuls of flesh from a defeated Brother, allowing Drau'd to land his mace of silver spikes on the top of its head. Like hitting a wall of pure granite, the blow reverberated through his weapon, jolting his entire massive body. The being didn't explode into silver-fire, nor did the spikes even penetrate its skull. With all of his weight and power behind the blow, Drau'd was barely able to drive it to its knees. He only managed to stun it, and only momentarily.

Nevertheless, the momentarily pause was enough time for his father, Brodin, to step in and pound it into the walkway with the legendary hammer, "Hell's Bane". Others joined in, including Drau'd, but only the blows of "Hell's Bane" had any lasting effect. Still, it took over five solid swings by his father, the mighty Brodin, before the being went down. And even now, with its mushy black brains splayed over the walkway it refused to die; its fleshless hands flailed about in an attempt to dig into his father's legs and spread its foul essence.

Brodin stilled the nearest hand, stomping on it with an enormous black boot.

"They're holding a Council . . ." Drau'd hesitantly continued, knowing full well how his father felt about such things. "For all we know, it could be the last one ever."

At the words, every hint of a smile faded. A fierce glint filled his father's eyes. Like a beast sizing up its prey, he looked at Drau'd; the wild grey locks covering his face and head standing up like a lion's mane.

"A Council eh?" Brodin replied, turning from his son to renew his efforts to kill the creature. As if he was working stone, he rhythmically slammed "Hell's Bane" against the creature's body. "Tell em I'm busy."

Drau'd thought he saw an inner glow from the hammer as his father collapsed the being's chest cavity. But the glow vanished, and he dismissed it as a trick of his mind; the hammer most likely catching the light of mage-fire or a distant lighting strike.

"Humph," Brodin scoffed, the being little more than a mess of black slime around his boots. "Let's see you get up from that."

As if in response, the more meaty areas of the slime twitched.

"Will someone get me a Mage to rid us of this thing!" he shouted to a pair of giants who were guiding a cart laden with large stones through the walkway. "Can't hardly burn it myself in this damn rain."

Seeing the ferocious look in their leader's eyes, they deposited their load then hurried to comply.

For the moment, the northern quarter was secure. Earlier that day, they had retaken a large portion of the Wall, joining forces with the garrison of humans, elves and their diminutive cousins the rock dwarves. The battle had been bloody, brutal, and highly costly to their kin. Many of his kin fell . . . but everyone they lost took a great toll on the army of the Plague.

When first the Rift awoke, it was a full day before they heard news of it – and another full day before they reached the Red Wall. Though late to the party, their arrival couldn't have come at a better time. Their deafening charge down the wall took the Plague by surprise. The undead had victory all but in their grasp when the two hundred Boulder Lords came storming down the wall, sweeping thousands of the fiends to their deaths.

However, even now the undead forces were amassing below, preparing for another assault; obviously intent on taking this section of the wall.

To slow their progression, the Magi were working in shifts; half of them were busy raining flames down upon the gathering forces, while the others took a moment to rest and regain their strength. The humans were either scrambling down the walkway, resupplying the defenders with silver-tipped arrows, or they were constantly unleashing those arrows into the horde below. The elves lined the knee-wall alongside the humans; each wielding a longbow of black elm equal to their height (which was well over seven-feet tall). Even in the driving rain and darkening sky, with their keen grey and white eyes they could pick off enemies from five hundred yards away; their arrows flying from their fingertips twice as fast as the human archers.

Drau'd's 'cousins' the Rock Dwarves, put their enhanced night-vision to use as they searched the walkway for fallen companions, or any remnants of the undead army, and put a permanent end to them with their silver hammers and axes.

As for the Boulder Lords, some, like his father, were helping the dwarves; insuring all those they 'killed' in the recent battle were actually dead. The rest of them were harvesting stones from any nearby non-defensive structures and stacking them along the knee wall. When the battle renewed, his kin would hurl the stones into the oncoming horde.

"Why in the Seventh would they call a Council now anyway?" Brodin pondered, mostly to himself, ignoring the twitching pile of slime at his boots.

"Perhaps they have a plan," Drau'd said, doing his best to sound optimistic.

His father's raucous laughter caused any nearby dwarves to pause their tasks.

"A way to drive them back into Hell's Door once and for all," Drau'd continued, trying to convince his father to take the Council seriously.

"A plan . . . ?" Brodin mocked, slapping his meaty palm upon Drau'd's shoulder. "You've seen what this enemy is capable of, my boy. Seems to me, there's only one plan left . . . we stand our ground, or the Seventh World dies. Our Keeper's a wise enough fellow, surely he can see what this is . . ."

Wrapping both hands around "Hell's Bane's" handle, he hoisted the shimmering brick of crystal to his shoulder and continued, "To be sure, our ancestors had a plan . . . a good one, a real chance to end this madness. But by dead if we didn't ignore it. Instead of strengthening the wall, we created a city . . . a city for the dead ones to feed upon."

Drau'd knew what *this* was. He had seen it in their fight for the walkway, as he saw it still, filling the vale below. He didn't have to be as wise as his father, or the Keeper, to know the truth of it.

They couldn't hope to defeat this foe. *This* was the end of the Seventh World, and perhaps the end of all life.

But knowing that . . . seeing the endless undead army pouring into his world . . . it didn't make him want to run and hide, prolonging the inevitable. Instead, the thought of it filled his veins with fire, a rage unlike anything he felt before. With the end so close, he only wanted to fight harder, survive longer, and never give up; not until his heart stopped beating and he was taken either in death, or the undeath.

He prayed to the gods, it wasn't the latter.

"Since the Exodus, the Triad has stood as one," Drau'd said, his intense brown eyes a mirror image of his father's. "If this is the end, it should still be so."

"Aye, it should . . ." resigned, Brodin agreed with him. Above all, his father was honorable. Even if he thought the Council was a waste of time, he would fulfill his duty and attend.

Drau'd saw the inner struggle within his eyes; as much as he was honor-bound to attend, Brodin also needed to be with his people, at the war-front where his strength and the power of "Hell's Bane" counted for more than debating the inevitable at the Council.

Drau'd knew where his father's heart lay. He had never been one for deliberating. Brodin had always let his hammer do the talking for him, whether it was in the mines of the Athmas or, more recently, the walkway of Lock Core.

"With your permission . . . I would attend in your stead," Drau'd said, not eager to leave his kin, but well aware that his father was far more valuable on the wall. "Besides, without the mighty Brodin to guard it, surely Lock Core will fall," Drau'd chided, though he believed the words to be true.

"Ha . . ."

A toothy grin covered his father's face.

"You've more than proven yourself worthy to do so, first as a warrior, now as a crafty politician," he continued, smiling at Drau'd with pride. "The Council would be lucky to have you, my son. And the Boulder Lords lucky to have you as our representative. I dare say, the only one to suffer will be the Red Wall, for the mighty Drau'd will be sorely missed upon its heights."

Drau'd reached out to clasp his father's hand, only to find himself pulled in by his iron grip. One arm still balanced "Hell's Bane" on his shoulder while the other wrapped Drau'd in a bone-crushing hug. A little surprised by the sentiment, Drau'd wondered if his father was merely proud of him, or if he thought it was the last time he would see his son.

"I'll return to fight at your side, father," Drau'd stated, doing his best to convince his father – and himself – that they would meet again.

Brodin nodded his head, though it was obvious from the look in his eyes that he knew better.

"Go then, my son. Stand for the Lords. You've earned a chance to lead our people, I'm sorry if this is the only one you'll get . . ."

Drau'd nodded back, then turned to leave, heading to the Northern Tower.

Behind him, his father set to work on another twitching corpse. Drau'd only made it a few feet before his father's gruff voice called out to him one last time, "If I've fallen when you return . . . take "Hell's Bane", and make certain my death is a permanent one."

"I won't disappoint you . . ."

“No, son. You never have . . .” Brodin whispered.

He couldn’t bear to watch him leave – not without becoming a whimpering babe in front of the rest of the defenders; the mere thought of never seeing his son again nearly drew him to tears. Doing his best to bury his sadness, he continued down the walkway, unleashing his emotions by laying waste to anything moving that wasn’t alive.

No matter what was to come, he knew his son would die well and with honor. He was not only blessed with a warrior’s heart, but a caring soul as well – a most rare, and special combination. Whatever the battle, Drau’d would always fight for the side of the righteous.

He tried to convince himself that it was a good thing he had left, and that Drau’d would be safer with the Council. After all, the World’s most powerful mages would be in attendance, and with any luck, so too would the One Elf.

*Yes, it is good he has left,* Brondin decided.

Drau’d stood a much better chance in the tower than he did on the walkway. The wall was a slaughterhouse. The living were the cattle. He knew what was to come, but he didn’t want to see it – to see the potential and goodness of his eldest boy desecrated, his body butchered. Brodin knew his own days were numbered, whether he died in this battle or home, upon his deathbed. But he had lived his life to the fullest; found the love of his life, and raised two strong sons.

Drau’d deserved as much. No . . . he deserved more. He was stronger, kinder and wiser than Brodin ever hoped to be. He would have led his people with honor.

Now he would never get that chance . . . the closest he would come was a meaningless Council.

His youngest boy, Gunt, would have to take on that duty. Though yet a child, Gunt would be the last of his line, and therefore heir to whatever remained of the kingdom of the Boulder Lords.

He grinned, thinking of his first trial in this war, having to tell his feisty little boy that he was too young to join them. Unlike his elder brother, Gunt had been fighting him since the day he was born; every bit as fierce as his mother, and as stubborn as his father. A child born for war, he would take on any enemy no matter the odds, and for no other reason than he loved a good fight.

Despite having lived to see only sixteen sun stones, he had no doubt Gunt would have honored their people in the field of battle. But his rage was unbridled, and he was far too rash. He wasn’t ready for war, not yet. Because he lacked maturity and discipline, he most likely would have fallen sooner than later. Brodin had no desire to lead him to his death, and certainly no desire to witness it.

If Gunt obeyed his father’s final command, and led his people deep into the mountains, then gods willing, in time, he shall grow to adulthood and be granted the opportunity to quench his blood-lust in battle against the undead horde.

He could no longer hold back his tears as he pictured his youngest son’s anger pitted against the Plague. Oh how he wished he could have seen it . . .



Wiping away the tears, sweat and rain from his eyes, Brodin continued to clear the walkway, the thought of his youngest son avenging the fallen Boulder Lords making his grisly task a bit more bearable.

After bludgeoning a few more undead skulls, he couldn't find anything else to eradicate. Most of the smaller Rock Dwarves were in a similar position, and had stowed their weapons so they could drag the lifeless corpses to the edge of the wall and hurl them into the throng below.

As he watched them labor, Brodin still found it strange that, among the rest of the Triad, his people had somehow gained the title 'dwarf'. It wasn't that he resented it, or found the contradictory title insulting. There was great kinship between the two races, and both groups were more than happy to be thought of as family.

Since the exodus, they had formed an immediate bond with the dwarven race. The two races were so often working together, and so physically similar (other than their size), that the rest of the Triad found it convenient to lump them together. In their mountain homes, they were relatively secluded from the rest of the races. Dwarven artisans and builders could often be found in Lock Core, but the majority of their people remained in the mountains; the Rock Dwarves dwelling deep within, burrowing caverns, halls and mining the rich supply of precious ore, while the Boulder Dwarves lived upon the cliffs, constantly sculpting the mountain face into elaborate caves.

To the Triad, his people were known as Dwarves, but among his own kind they were Lords – the Boulder Lords. If the Triad wished to group them with the dwarves, then so be it. The Lords considered it an honor to be included in such noble company.

He patted one of his smaller kin on the back, nearly toppling him over as he sought to pull his pickaxe from the skull of an undead corpse. Together, they shared a chuckle as the little dwarf's temporary loss of balance forced him to rip the head off the rotten corpse.

"You wouldn't have that problem if you used a hammer, Grandlefist," Brodin joked, pointing to the crystal brick that was "Hell's Bane".

"You know . . ." the dwarf said, studying the foul head stuck to his weapon. "I think I rather like it. Maybe I'll keep er there . . . let the rest of these bastards know what they're in for."

Brodin replied with a booming laugh, even though Grandlefist hadn't intended it as a joke. And indeed, the dwarf left the head as it was – a foot of silver coated spike sticking out from between its eyes. Just to even out the weapon's weight, he found another corpse, and buried the other end of his pickaxe into its head.

Still laughing, Brodin moved on, checking the progress of the rest of the defenders.

For the most part, they had cleared the walkway of corpses, and the rain was taking care of the remaining blood and gore. The Boulder Lords continued to gather nearby stones, and had created several towering stacks along the edge of the wall. Brodin inspected a stack of the large granite blocks, testing their heft to see how quickly he could start hurling them into the horde below. He held one aloft, just beyond the edge of the Red Wall. To check its effectiveness, he let it fall, counting the seconds before he heard a distant, satisfactory thunk, accompanied by a guttural scream from below. He pondered dumping them all, so irresistible was the urge, so satisfactory the 'thunk'. He stayed his hand however, knowing the time was soon to come when he would have more than his share of killing.

Night was creeping in, further darkening the dreary grey sky. Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the difference. The eyes of the Boulder Lords weren't as strong in the darkness as their smaller cousins nor anywhere near as keen as that of the elves. But with the help of the

constant barrage of mage-flare and occasional lightning strikes, even Brodin could see that the latest army was far more powerful than anything they faced before. Not only had they grown to cover the land below, but they continued to spill from the Black Door, piling over one another in their blood-thirsty rage to reach the wall. At the base of the wall, a sizeable pile had formed -- despite the arrows, flames, and giant stones that were being hurled at it.

He couldn't get a clear image of the enemy, but the one thing he could discern was that among this group he noticed many that were fleshless and skeletal; similar to the *ancient one* that had been nearly impossible to take down.

It was to be expected . . . so it went since the beginning. Every wave was a test, and one wave after another the forces of the Plague tested the wall. The arrival of the *ancient ones* in the last group was merely another test. Most likely, whoever commanded the Plague wanted to see how the defenders stacked up against them, or if they were even capable of killing them. To be sure, they could kill them -- "Hell's Bane" had seen an end to one of them. But that was only one of the *ancient ones*. Now, though the skeletal shapes were difficult to count in the pit of writhing bodies, there had to be thousands of such beings . . . and more poured from the Rift every minute.

He looked down upon the gathering army in sadness, knowing this would be the final wave. The enemy had learned all it needed to know. Now, it would hold nothing back . . .

And so it began . . . like a single entity, the mass of bodies began surging up the Red Wall.

"Brothers, to the wall!" He thundered.

He didn't bother to look to see if his command was obeyed, the pounding of nearly two hundred pairs of giant feet was enough confirmation.

Quicker than he expected, they scaled the wall; the fleshless ones . . . too many of the fleshless ones, their fingertips digging into pure granite as if soft earth. Immune to fatigue, strengthened by the Virus and ensuing bloodlust, the climb wasn't difficult for them . . . but it did slow them down.

It did give the Brothers enough time to reach the wall and drop their stones.

Setting "Hell's Bane" aside, Brodin lifted one of the large bricks over the knee wall (which was no higher than his ankles) and immediately let it fall. The first ancient one in its path his saw it coming; his glassy, black eyes were emotionless as the stone plummeted towards him. As if an afterthought, the creature tried to dodge it. Though it moved quickly, the stone managed to clip its arm, and in a burst of foul black blood, it tore the limb clean off. His expression as emotionless as ever, the ancient one went plummeting end over end after his fallen arm.

Those below it had no idea what was coming. Their fallen companion and the stone collided into them, creating a chain reaction of tumbling bodies. One by one the stone peeled them from the wall, clearing a straight path to the field below.

The path closed instantly.

But now Brodin had a stone on each shoulder and was dropping them in pairs, hurling them as fast as his massive arms could lift them.

Even so, in his periphery, he saw that the wall was being covered by the foul creatures. With every passing second, the swarm of bodies grew closer to the top of the Red Wall.

And meanwhile, the Brothers were running out of stones -- not that it really mattered, for it was becoming apparent that the dead would reach them before that happened. Brodin waited until he saw a skeletal hand clutching the knee wall, then he slammed his final stone down upon

the creature. Instead of grabbing another brick, he wrapped his callused palms around the steel column that was the handle of “Hell’s Bane”.

The undead were about to surmount the wall. He raised the hammer into the air, preparing to blow anything that made it over back into the Rift. But instead, Brodin was the one flying backwards. He landed on the walkway, his ass taking the worst of the damage as the face of the wall was doused in broiling flames.

“Damned Mages. Cutting er a bit close, ain’t they, Brodin?”

Picking “Hell’s Bane” off the walkway, he turned to find Grandlefist at his side. His face was blackened. Smoke rose from his singed red beard. One hand held a light-weight shield of their special ‘blue-steel’, the other tightly gripped a pickaxe with a pair of half-rotten skulls on either end.

Several of Brodin’s kin rushed to his aid, but he shrugged them off, getting to his feet by using “Hell’s Bane” as a prop.

A quick glance to his left and to his right revealed a line of dwarves, giants, humans and elves arrayed along the knee-wall for as far as he could see.

They all looked below, to the burning dead ones. Though they burned, few fell . . . and they continued to climb. Several of the defenders emptied their stomachs onto the horde as the stench of thousands of burning corpses wafted over the wall. Brodin’s gut was hard as rock, but as his gaping nostrils sucked in the foul air even he felt the bile rising at the back of his throat.

“Apparently, the Magi didn’t cut it close enough, Grandlefist.” Brodin replied, watching as the burning horde drew nearer. As if they weren’t horrid to begin with, now what little flesh they had was cooking and sloughing off of their bones.

Shouting at the top of his mighty lungs, he called out to anyone on the wall that could hear him, “Guardians of the Gate, gather yourselves. Our end is near . . . I will not promise you a victory. But if we stand strong . . . and stand together, I guarantee that when you fall . . . you will have died a good death. And with any luck, you’ll have sent some of these bastards back to hell where they belong.”

A battle cry resounded along the wall. Preparing to meet the final wave, the defenders raised their melee weapons to the air, crying out, “So that all may live!”

With his knuckles whitening on the steel handle -- skeletal hands topped the wall -- “Hell’s Bane” came slamming down.



The Red Wall had fallen. The throng of lifeless flooded the walkway, and spilled into the city, where they satiated their hunger within the very streets of Lock Core.

The line of defenders was reduced to a ring. They were constantly moving back . . . their numbers constantly shrinking. Humans were scarce among them – dwarves even scarcer. Elves formed the majority of the circle. Of the Boulder Lords, few of his kin remained. None would say they died easily, or from lack of fight. Indeed, the Boulder Lords sent many to hell before they went down. But unfortunately, their massive bodies proved too large a target, and the latest wave of enemies were much quicker than those that came before; many were, in fact, the *ancient ones*. And many were something else . . . something far worse. Though they all shared the same callous stare, the blood of some was like acid, and burnt flesh and even steel when spilt. The

handle of “Hell’s Bane” was well worn from facing such beings. Blessed be the Gods, the crystal brick at the end suffered no such damage.

The only positive note to the battle – if it could be considered as such – was that the defenders no longer had to worry about infection. Those who fell, didn’t rise up to fight alongside the dead. Instead, they were quickly pulled into the horde, where the dead tore them asunder with their bare hands. They cared nothing for the blood they spilt, making it clear they hadn’t come to this world to feed on its populace, but to exterminate them.

To the Guardians’ credit, they held the wall for some time. Though most of the fight was spent backpedaling against the sheer numbers, it was hours before they were completely overcome. If it wasn’t for the quick and skilled elves, they would have been annihilated a long time ago.

Many would say Brodin could also take credit for their survival – though he wanted none. At the moment, the only thing he sought was vengeance – to take as many of the undead fiends as possible with him to the afterlife.

Swinging “Hell’s Bane” like a pendulum, anything in front of him went launching into the air.

His chest heaved in and out. His arms burned from exhaustion. But he refused to stop swinging. He refused to let his hammer fall. The more undead ones that came at him, the harder he swung . . . and the brighter his hammer glowed.

Surely the gods were with him in this final battle, the others knew it as well. As they all fought beneath “Hell’s Bane’s” glow, they knew they weren’t abandoned. The gods fought with them, empowering his weapon, its light the only thing between them and dark oblivion that threatened to engulf them.

Then, as if another miracle, the dead suddenly froze in their tracks. For the first time since they faced them, their vacant expressions showed an emotion . . . confusion. The undead may have paused, but the Guardians did not. They took their confusion as another godsend, and pushed forward, hacking and slashing their way through the solid throng.

Their free-for-all didn’t last long. They too stopped, even with their enemy utterly defenseless before them. They too looked on in puzzlement as a black tide arose in the night, swallowing every last star in the sky.

All that it touched it was scattered through the winds in a blast of dust. Even the ancient ones evaporated. The Red Wall itself collapsed into a pile of sand.

It roared down the wall, consuming all.

And it showed no sign of slowing as it came for the defenders. Side by side, they bravely awaited its arrival; elves, dwarves, humans and giants standing as one. Knowing full well it meant their death, they welcomed its arrival. Since the battle began, they had accepted the fact that they would never leave the Red Wall, and that they would die defending it.

Yes, they would be destroyed . . . but so too would the army of the Plague. It was closer to victory than they ever hoped to achieve.

Truly, the gods were with them . . . if the destructive power wasn’t proof enough, Brodin actually saw one, hovering in the air at his side. She was much stranger than he would have imagined; a golden halo surrounded her body, which was that of a frail old woman, with fine, white hair covering her skin. Her eyes were yellow; her nose pointed and long.

As if recognizing her presence, “Hell’s Bane” glowed brighter.

With the darkness crashing down on him, she turned to Brodin and spoke, “Rest well with the Maker, Mithrlnite. And know that your hammer will pass unto your sons.”

Brodin was torn apart by the maelstrom . . . but instead of pain, he only felt peace, for he knew his sons would live on, and in their hands, the undead would continue to suffer “Hell’s Bane’s” wrath . . .

∞THE END∞

For my latest works, find me at <http://infiniteLimitsJCBell.wix.com/jcbell>. I would also love to hear any feedback – good or bad.

Thanks,  
J.C. Bell