

∞LIMITS@INFINITY∞

THE CHOSEN

By

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## ALANA

*'How do you know, Anon? To save them? What makes one . . . what makes us worthy?'*

*'Many are there who are Blood-Born. As much as we wish it were so, we cannot save them all. To do so would refute our purpose. Such power can be both wonderful and horrific. It all depends on who wields it. The Plague is nothing more than a product of the latter. Indeed, you are truly blessed, Alana. You are wonderful. Not only limitless in your ability with the Oneness, but with your capacity for love as well. Have no fear, when someone is worth saving, you will know.'*



-- *Age of Death,*  
*Edroth*

Fear.

The High Court of Edroth was ripe with it. No matter how hard they tried to hide it, Alana sensed it in all those who were present. The Blood-Guard, Edroth's elite soldiers, hid their fear behind glowing 'halo' shields, their shard-guns loaded with silver rounds. Her elder brother, the young Prince Gedron, covered his fear in the blue flames of Dreamfire, more than Alana had ever seen him hold before. So much of it that the very fabric of reality was beginning to tear around him; the stone splintering below his feet, the walls cracking when he drew near. Gedron and the Blood-Guard were the High-Court's last line of defense, and though they all faced the chamber door with determination in their eyes, Alana saw the fear in their hearts, and the knowledge in their minds of the impending doom that was sure to come.

In some, the fear was physically apparent - - her younger sister's thin fingers trembled in her hand, her mother's grip - almost painful, as she pulled Alana to her breast. For them, it was pointless to hide it. There was nothing left to them but love. Her mother was Bloodless - had never set eyes on the Dreamfire. Unfortunately, Alana's sister Ezule inherited their mother's deficiency, and no matter how hard Alana sought to draw the Dreamfire from her blood, it remained dormant. For them, the fight was all but over. Her mother knew the moment would soon come when, helpless, she would watch her children die. Ezule, too young to comprehend death, knew little more than tales of the Rift. Her young mind was coming to grips with the fact that her every fear was soon to be confirmed and confronted.

Alana felt it, the fear. Their deaths. She knew their end was at hand. Like most things associated with the Dreamfire she didn't need to understand it or have it confirmed, she knew it just was.

"Father will stop them. He had but a hundred men when he took the Gallow's Fort, only ten of which were Dreamers. With all of Edroth aligned at his side, even the Dark Horde with

fall,” Gedron declared with all the confidence of a king – which he was soon to be, no matter how short-lived his reign.

He truly seemed certain of his own declaration, which made Alana wonder. Could he not see? Was he so focused on holding every last drop of Dreamfire that his mind was closed to the truth? Or had Alana not seen the truth of him until now, that she had greater power though she was but half his age?

She continued to study those in the room, while in her mind the battle unfolded . . .

Only a quarter-day into the battle and the army was routed, her father, the King, lay dying. Mortally wounded, dead hands fell upon him, enslaving him to the Dark Cause. For the first time in her life, she couldn’t sense her father . . .

“Alana,” her mother cried. “Wake up. Please Gods, wake up, child.”

She found herself on the floor, blood pouring from her nose. Her mother’s silver hair tickled her face as she bent over her.

“I’m so sorry, Mother.”

“What is it, child? What happened?”

It was time.

“They’ve taken him . . . Father is gone. I’m sorry. I couldn’t save him, and I fear I can’t save you either, Mother. Or Ezule. Gedron . . . “

She wished death was his only fate.

Her mother’s wide Edrothian eyes were filled with tears and understanding. No matter her lineage, her mother was still a goddess in Alana’s mind -- Intelligent and wise beyond any Seer or Dreamer. Alana’s Father may have imparted her with the Dreamfire, but surely her mother had enhanced it. Her mother always had her own innate understanding of things, an almost prescience. With the Dreamfire alongside that gift, Alana truly could see the shape of things, as they were, as they are, and as they shall be. A Oneness. A singularity of things separate space and time.

She sat up, hugged her mother for what she knew would be the last time. And Ezule . . . She held her even tighter, so fragile and small. So real in her arms, yet moments away from so horrible a fate. She saw it as truth, as unquestionable as her own existence. Could she alter their future? Did she dare try?

Perhaps that’s what it would take? Her life for theirs. What if she didn’t survive this day? Could such a sacrifice make the difference, alter *her* dream?

The chamber door was blown asunder. Silver shards, and Dreamfire flew towards it. She covered herself in Dreamfire -- more than even her brother held – and turned to face the Dark Horde, not sure if she could change her fate, but determined to die trying.



The Blood Guard was left in bloody pieces. Gedron screamed in rage and pain as his veins blackened. Alana, her power spent, crawled to the crumpled forms of her mother and sister. Dark shadows reared up around her, cutting her off from her family. She knew not their words but sensed their emotions; fear, excitement, admiration. She had truly done her best to change the dream, but it came true all the same. She yet lived only to be converted, no matter how hard she fought and with such reckless abandon for her own life, they had let her live.

This was where her dream ended.

A hand, more shadow than flesh drew near her, pausing just inches from her opaque skin.  
*'Not her.'*

The room filled with light, pure and white.

The hand withdrew. The beings didn't leave, but formed a tight circle around her instead.  
*'She has been chosen.'*

Between her captors' legs she saw the speaker approach. A being of pure energy. Faceless, lacking any features to speak of. His body an average size humanoid shape, likewise unremarkable other than the white glow surrounding it.

More words came from her captors, guttural cries of rage. One dared to act upon his anger, and dove for the glowing being. Without any apparent effort, a hand of white energy found the attacker's neck. The creature's body began to crumble, its stony, alabaster flesh flaking into dust. It fell to the floor, headless. Seeing its demise, the other Dark Ones parted for the being, no longer regarding him with anger but with an understanding that bordered on reverence. They emanated awe. In their alien tongue one word was repeated among them – Anon.

Exhausted physically and mentally, Alana slumped to the floor, unable to comprehend her sudden rescue, and by so powerful of a being.

*"It's time to go, Alana."*

She looked up . . . found an altogether different being standing above her. He looked harmless, could not possibly be the god she just saw. Even with the Dreamfire filling her vision she could still not see past his illusion. He was short, and nearing his twilight years. The only hair that grew from his head sprouted from the sides, leaving the top of his head a sweat-slicked dome which reflected any light that fell upon it. The man seemed physically fit, yet a rotund potbelly protruded from his waist, clearly visible even through the thick folds of his green cape.

*Who are you?*

A pair of wide brown eyes looked down on her, full of sadness yet somehow hope as well. His lips were thin, like scars, and parted to speak.

*"I am Anon. I am your Savior."*

∞

*-- End of the Age of Death,  
The Seventh World*

The man's flesh became waves of black flame.

Alana took it in. All of it. Enough of the dark power to tear this world apart. Her own flesh was nothing but tatters, peeling from her bones every time she took on one of the black threads. Her feet stood in a constantly growing pool of her own blood.

*I will not fail.*

In that moment of pain and horror she somehow knew she had been meant for this. Her failures, her imprisonment, it had all led her to this. To save this one world -- to save the life of

her love and the children she swore to protect -- she had to take this darkness. Anon had known. Of that she was certain.

"Nathalia!" He screamed, naked and glaring at her with pure hate -- pouring every last drop of pain and darkness in his soul into Alana.

There was too much of it. He was tearing her apart now. Her flesh no longer held meaning. Her mind was his to devour, and he did so, lustfully. The man screamed in pure rage -- Alana in pain. One moment there was nothing left, the being known as Alana had all but ceased to exist, and then . . .

She fell to the blackened earth, her long fingers sinking into the blood drenched soil. The darkness was gone. She was whole once more. Of the pain, only a memory remained.

"You're just like her," the man said, his naked form drawing nearer -- his own pain transparent in his voice. "Pouring all your hope into them. Even if you could save them what would it matter? I've seen it, felt it, let it into my soul. In the end there is nothing."

He knelt down next to her, even rested his hand on her head of silvery white hair.

"Give it up. If you find him he'll tell you the same, your Adros. Your love, he knows . . ."

She never let him finish. Such power! It had to be contained.

Whatever energy she had left went into forming a cocoon around the man's naked body. She covered him in enough layers of power to contain a dying star.

"You know nothing of my love," she said, slow to rise and not daring to connect with his mind. "You have no right to even speak his name."

Somewhere on this world her lover yet lived. She no longer had the power to sense Adros, but knew in her heart he remained, as did his pain. Could she go to him? Did she dare risk releasing this human for the sake of her love? Whoever he was, he was altogether worse than the Plague. Immortality. Life. Such things meant nothing to this man. He was nihilism incarnate. Surely a child of the Void itself. If he remained, he would end it all.

They shimmered, appearing in a haze at the circular stairway to this world's Rift.

They weren't alone.

Shock began to spread on the faces of the defenders arrayed around the Rift; giants, armed soldiers, and robed wizards. A female mage with a half melted face turned her one good eye towards Alana's captive. The blue eye sparkled with sudden recognition. Through the slit in her face where her mouth should have been came the words; "Stop them!"

With a little effort, Alana silenced the woman and had her bound. The other mages summoned their fires but she stopped them with a thought. Only one had the strength to actually resist her, and could very well have bested her in her weakened state, but she sensed his lack of training and took his mind, left him numb to the world for enough time to reach the Door.

She faced the soldiers -- steel turned to fire and dropped from their hands.

Lastly the giants. Though strong, they were slow. She enhanced her speed then maneuvered through. Foolishly she paused as one's weapon caught her eye; a hammer glowing blue with the light of a star. But before the giant could bring the weapon to bear, she had traversed the stairs, her prisoner in tow.

The Rift hovered before her . . . an oval tempest of shadows.

She sent her power in. Lacking the strength for a deep trip she found something close -- a dead planet which she hoped was abandoned.

Before the defenders could reassemble at her back, Alana and the Destroyer were swallowed by the Black Door.



"What in the Dead was that?" Drau'd thundered over the stunned defenders.

"A God," the young mage Harple replied, rubbing his head. For the first time since Drau'd had known the man he was smiling. "Very impressive. I've so much to learn."

Rian and his "Warkids" had regrouped, their weapons no longer blazing to the touch. Rian looked sullen and humiliated as he massaged the blisters on his hands, his otherwise unbelievable training and skill seemingly worthless at the moment.

"Don't worry, Rian," Drau'd said, trying to sooth the boy's inadequacies, and his own. "We stood no chance against such a foe."

"Do you know who that was?"

Drau'd turned to the speaker; Nicola's scarred face twisted in anger.

"I've never seen, nor heard of such a being before, High-Mage."

"The man!" she hissed. "Don't you realize what happened here?"

Still recovering from the strange battle, they all stared at her dumbly.

"She took *him*, the Destroyer. Our one true weapon against the Plague has been stolen from us."

Even after she spoke, it still took a moment for the words to sink in. Blisters and humility were forgotten as Rian sent his men into formation.

Less precise and efficient, Drau'd took command of the rest of the soldiers. Raising Hell's Bane in one meaty hand, he pointed it to the Rift.

"Everyone!" he thundered. "Guard that Gate."



She was weak, insubstantial. He was there with her, unchained.

He seemed unconcerned with her corporeal state or his lack of bonds, but stood staring at the world's sun -- a hazy blue ball rapidly descending to the horizon.

She brought him here to die. Was disappointed that it hadn't been immediately. A haze of acid filled the air, giving the world a greenish tinge.

He spoke to the endless red desert before him.

"I control it now, Red Mage. For what that's worth."

He lowered his head to the sand. The blue sun sank quickly, abandoning them to darkness.

"I know I killed her. There were so many that I killed."

She focused her thoughts, gave them form.

*'Your love and your world had already been claimed by the Dead Gods. There was no saving them.'*

He laughed, shattering the stillness of the night.

"Don't I know it."

*What do you know?*

"I know about you, Alana -- everything. You and the legendary, Solo Ki. Or should I say the even more legendary, Adros? Humph . . . It figures. I can see how he survived the Rift. Honestly, I don't even think I could kill that guy."

He turned to face her.

"So Alana, Is that why you left him, your Elf Prince? Had he too been claimed by these damned Dead Gods?"

She found her real voice, a sweet airy tune.

"He left me."

"But he yet lived," the man countered.

"He lived only for hate. He required vengeance more than love. I was certain his path would lead to his death, for that is the only way such hate can be satisfied. To fight for vengeance and hate is not our way . . . so I was taught."

"And the one who taught you, this Anon. I would very much like to meet him someday. I've a feeling he's the only one in the damned universe who can make sense of it all."

*How could Anon have been so wrong? How could I have been so wrong?*

"And what about you, Alana? What do you require? Other than my death?"

There was a long period of silence, not because she didn't have an answer, but because she wasn't sure if she cared to share it with him. The man was dangerous beyond belief, against her will he had plunged the depths of her soul – something the Elders considered forbidden, akin to rape. Oddly, Alana felt unmolested by the intrusion. She was intrigued that something within her reminded him of his love. And it had to count for something that all of her secrets had been revealed and he had let her live. She knew nothing of the man other than his devastating power, but after he had seen her soul, was there really any point in hiding from him? Was it even possible?

"Adros did not fail, I did," Alana said, drifting closer to the man. "I thought him dead, so I welcomed the punishment of the Elders. My banishment almost seemed a kindness considering what I had done. All I want is to go back. Back to him. Perhaps somehow I can make things right. I failed him once before, but I will not do so again."

The Destroyer seemed to be searching for something in the darkening desert.

"Then go! If you have a chance to make things right then take it. If anyone can give him a reason to live it's you. Me, I never took that chance. I wasted mine trying to avoid the inevitable. Instead of pushing her away I should have held her close. If she was destined to die, at least she could have gone in my arms."

She felt the darkness building in the man. Though she feared incited him, she had to know . . .

"What will you do now?"

Alana, dreaded his answer. If he too chose to return, she would be forced to try and stop him. At her greatest, she was no match for the man. To face him now would be her death.

"Don't worry, Alana. The Seventh World is the last place I want to be. There's only one reason for my existence. I can't deny that any longer. It's time I play my part. It's time for these Dead Gods to meet the Destroyer."

It was growing again. The darkness seeped into the ground at his feet.

"Go, Alana. And when you find Adros tell him I'm sorry. I too failed him. After what he's been through . . . killing him would have been a favor. What I did to Nathalia, his child, I can never make right."



She wasn't sure if she had recovered enough from her last trip, but when the ground began to disintegrate below her feet, she knew she had to go. She turned to the Rift and gave everything she had for a journey back to the Seventh World.



His hood was up, his face hidden in the brown folds. He sat at the base of the Rift with his legs and hands crossed. Nearby, Rian and Drau'd were engrossed in a discussion over defense tactics for the coming battle. Rian was incredibly young, yet showed remarkable aptitude for battle, both mentally and physically. He was a born leader. Not only would his Warkids gladly lay down their lives for him, but every soldier in Lock Core admired the young man and took his orders without question. Drau'd was a genius builder, his talents easily adapting to defensive construction of the battlefield. He had already regrouped the remaining construction crews to focus on building a series of barricades around the Rift. The massive stones that were to rebuild the gap in Lock Core's northern wall were being positioned around the Rift instead. As for the hole in the wall, it was to remain open, for they meant to take the battle to the base of the Rift; engaging the enemy with a series of strategic withdrawals. The gap in the wall would be the only way to escape when the battle turned, and it would also be incorporated into their strategy – they meant to funnel the enemy to that point, and once there, they would hold the gap for as long as possible. After that . . . the battlefield would become the city of Lock Core; street by street, block by block, they would battle the dead until the last living souls were driven to the Outlands.

Unlike his companions, Harple had no mind for battle tactics, his talents lay elsewhere. He was certain that together, Drau'd and Rian would establish the best possible defense, considering their many limitations at the moment. Still though, Harple couldn't help but wonder if anything could stop the Plague, other than the Destroyer. That's where Harple decided to focus his thoughts, on the Destroyer and his strange abductor.

The goddess was remarkable; not only her power, but her physique as well. Her body was so thin and elongated, almost as if it was stretched. Yet she possessed an alien beauty; her features smooth and delicate lines, her movements graceful and fluid. And her hair; as shimmering and silver as any inlaid blade.

And how could one not admire her power? How easily she had disarmed them all! If such godlike beings couldn't stop the Plague, then what chance did they really have?

The encounter proved to Harple that he had so much to learn. Luckily, he was a quick student. He believed he had already found a solution to her mind paralysis attack, and that he could not only counter it, but reproduce the attack as well. But what else didn't he know? He had been at the High Tower for only a brief period, having been quickly relocated by Nicola herself before Lord LeCynic even knew he existed. But who in the Seventh could teach him? Even Nicola was now beneath him -- though he took no pride in that fact. Perhaps only the Keeper was his superior, but from what he heard, the only lessons that man had to offer were in suffering and death, considering he even yet lived.

What he needed was *her*, the pale Goddess who was able to overcome the Destroyer and every last defender of the Rift with ease. If he found her, then he would find the Destroyer as well. He was determined to find them in the Rift – go in after them if he must.

Thin blue filaments drifted from his body. He sent his Oneness into the Rift, and it was immediately swallowed by the dark abyss. His power went outward, searching in all possible directions.

He didn't know if what he attempted was even possible – but it was definitely forbidden. Should anyone sense his trace, he would likely be imprisoned if not sentenced to death, but he doubted anyone present could sense such fine threads – so many, yet so thin they were almost invisible to even him. His tendrils plunged to the depths of the abyss, brushing against such evil beings the mere hint of their existence made him tremble. Wisely, he maintained his distance from such horrors, lest they follow the pathways of Singularity back to him.

He continued on, moving deeper into oblivion.

Time seemed to have no meaning in the Rift; it could have been hours, possibly even days. He felt lost. He worried that perhaps he'd gone too far, stretched his will to thin, and that his soul would be scattered, forever drifting through the Void.

But finally he found her. At first he doubted it himself; she was so weak her presence was practically non-existent. Oddly, the powerful goddess seemed trapped, drifting between worlds and unable to crossover on her own.

That he even found her was a miracle. Had he not practically stumbled into her, he would surely have wandered right past her. He didn't even waste time pondering the odds of his chance encounter -- most likely the numbers would be inconceivable anyway.

He thanked the gods instead, then immediately moved to save her.

He gathered his power, focusing it on her. Every blue thread darted in her direction. Harple took her. The thin filaments latched onto her presence and pulled, dragging her back into the Seventh World.

It took a moment for his senses to return, and when they did, he found the woman unconscious and stretched across his lap. The goddess, once so powerful, was now so helpless and frail -- her opaque skin seemingly fragile as an egg shell.

“What have you done?”

Harple recognized the voice, and in dread looked up. The High-Mage Nicola was glaring down at him with her single blue eye. All around him, the rest of the defenders had stopped what they were doing to gaze at him and the goddess in awe.

There was little he could say to defend himself. What was done was done. Harple knew what he did was necessary. He didn't imagine he would have succeeded, but he knew he had to try. If he was to be imprisoned, it was worth it . . . the goddess was worth it.

“I did what I had to, High-Mage Nicola. You know we can't win this battle alone. We need help. We need the goddess.”

He expected Nicola to lash out at him, but instead she merely nodded her scarred head.

“Then I hold you responsible for her; see to it that she causes no further harm.”

“Yes, High-Mage. It will be so.”

Weakened as she was, imprisoning her was simple. As for her telepathic attacks, this time, Harple would be paralyzing *her* mind.

Alana awoke. She immediately thought to summon her halo, but found the Oneness beyond her grasp. Likewise, even her body – though it was flesh once more – refused to move. She was trapped. Her mind was held by another, someone very powerful -- possibly even an Elder God. Only her eyes could move, and in the chamber's dim light she took in her surroundings; what was obviously a prison. There were four walls of red stone, so close together she had just enough room for her body to lay flat on a bed of straw. The only exit was a single steel door speckled with silver spikes. Four circular holes in the wall opposite the door were the only source of light, and at the moment, they provided but a glow; enough light to determine shapes, but little more. Even so, she was thankful for the light she had. Given her current lack of power, had it been night, she imagined she would be blind to her surroundings.

Quickly, she assessed the situation. The last thing she remembered was the man, and fleeing from his incredible power. She had entered the Rift, but couldn't remember leaving it. Apparently someone had found, and captured her while she drifted helplessly in the Abyss. Alana had made plenty of enemies during her exile in the Dead Worlds; Dead Gods, Chosen, and even Elders were among them. If she had been too weak to escape the Rift, any one of them could have taken her.

Prisons came in many forms, and Alana had been in more than a few. Thus far, she had escaped them all. She planned on being long gone from this one before her captors ever made their intentions known.

She investigated the bond within her mind. At first glance, body and mind seemed completely severed. The Oneness was gone altogether, like it had never been a part of her. The one who crafted the bond was powerful indeed. Even with her power at its fullest, it would be impossible to break. But whoever held her bound, was also poorly trained, or simply not thorough. Cracks remained. Invisible to most, but Alana's skill and training went beyond that of even the Elder Gods. Unbeknownst to them, her banishment had made her stronger than they could ever be. All those years in the Dead Worlds, she had been honing her skills – a blade being sharpened to a razor's edge. Now, for Alana, even the invisible was plain to see.

She followed the cracks to her captor and found him. His presence was strong, incredibly so. He must be nearby. She felt that if she could move her arm, she would be able to reach out and touch him. She reasoned he most likely stood guard on the other side of the silver spiked door. If she did manage to escape his hold on her mind, she would have to move quickly if she hoped to disable him as well.

Alana continued to probe her mental bonds; all the while widening the cracks. Slowly, movement returned, her body was her own once more. Slower still, came the Oneness. She held little more than a thread, but that thread was enough to turn the cracks into a crevice. All at once her power returned, and with it awareness.

She understood her situation, and had no intention of leaving her prison – not that she could. The power outside that door suddenly grew tenfold. She knew who it was, and why she was able to escape her bond. The one who made it was indeed poorly trained, for he was just a child. But still, he was a god. And now he was not alone.

Bless the Maker, Alana was exactly where she wanted to be.

She let her halo fall, and calmly sat on the straw mat, waiting. As she expected, she did not have to wait long for her captors to make their introduction.

With a wisp of the Oneness, the door was unlocked. A single, shimmering blue eye peeked in, then, reluctantly, a white robed figure came into the room. The figure pulled back its hood to reveal a half-melted face -- more scars than skin. Her lips were bone.

The face was very unique, Alana had seen it once before, at the Rift of the so-called Seventh World. The woman had recognized the man who so nearly destroyed Alana (and this world) with his dark power. The woman had tried to stop Alana from taking him, and had failed.

Alana knew this woman – not personally – but she knew her type. She had met such women before, had probably become one herself -- women hardened by war. For them, love was a fleeting dream, long since lost. The Plague had taken from them what was most dear, leaving them with but one thing – vengeance. Some would say they were cold, heartless women who could never be loved. But Alana knew the truth – these women knew love more keenly than any. And they would live the rest of their days devoted to avenging it.

The Elder, Don’Cora came to mind, though it had been ages since Alana had seen that woman. For the first time in a long, long while, Alana wondered what had become of her. Since her banishment, Alana’s only contact with the Elders had been through Anon, and even he had said little. He mostly smiled at her, as proud as ever, as though her failure had never occurred. Beaming with confidence, he simply gave her a new mission, one which he claimed she would not fail. She was to journey to this Seventh World, to save as many Chosen as she could. She had learned the Elders had invested heavily in this land, filling it with a vast amount of their progeny. Her success seemed of the utmost importance. But considering her one and only mission had been a disaster in the eyes of the Elders, she couldn’t help but wonder why she had been chosen as this world’s Savior. She would forever trust Anon, and would accept the mission on that alone. But what was he keeping from her? Why had the Elders birthed such an unprecedented amount of Chosen in this land? Whatever the answers, she knew it was more than a coincidence that her lost love, Prince Adros, also dwelt in this world.

She studied the shrewd one-eyed woman before her -- perhaps she could start her inquiries with her.

“Are you a God?” the scarred woman said, jump-starting the conversation before Alana had a chance.

“There are no gods,” Alana flatly replied. “Only mortals, same as you.”

That gave the woman pause. She was forced to rethink her line of questioning, unsure of how to continue.

It was time for Alana to take control of the conversation.

“I am Alana, heiress to the former royal house of the planet Edroth,” Alana said, tired of secrets and wasting time. “My planet is long since dead. Of my people, only I remain. I owe my life to those who would call themselves gods. Before my world was taken, one of them came and took me away. Now I do the same. We are the Saviors of the Living Worlds.”

The speech left a bitter taste on her tongue, knowing the truth was that thus far, she had saved none.

“Saviors? Is that what you call yourselves? It seems such an ill-fitting title considering what you have done. And so, now we know why you’ve come. When the Plague arrives you take them. You take our greatest warriors from us, while the rest become food for the Plague. Like you did with him? Our true savior.”

*True savior? That man was death incarnate. Even the Elder Gods would not dare to make one such as him.*

“I did not come here for him. Whatever that man is, he is certainly no savior. I took him to save this world. Had I not, you would all be already dead. It was but a coincidence I encountered him when I did.”

*Was it a coincidence, Anon?*

“The Dark Army will come to this world. I have been commanded to save those I deem worthy, but for the rest there can be only death,” Alana continued. Never before had a Savior so bluntly laid out their mission to a non-Chosen, but as Alana had proven during her last mission; she was not an ordinary Savior.

“Then why bother saving us at all? Why not let the Destroyer have his way with us and be done with it?”

“Because . . .”

*I will not fail again.*

“I have come to save the Children and I mean to do so, no matter what,” Alana replied, matching the woman’s one-eyed stare, unflinching.

“And to save them you must take them? Have you ever considered that the best way to save them is to stay? To fight?”

*Yes, but that was ages ago . . . another life.*

“When the Dark Army comes, it will take everything from this world. It cannot be defeated. A lesson I once learned the hard way,” Alana replied.

“I do not doubt your power or experience, but I fear you are wrong on two counts, goddess. The Plague *has* been here once before, and it was defeated -- by one man.”

Alana was stunned -- speechless.

*Impossible . . .*

“But unfortunately, you’ve taken him from this world.”

She couldn’t deny the possibility – the man’s power had been unlike anything she had ever seen – but could it possibly be true? Her attempt to match the white-robed woman’s stern demeanor was shattered; the image of this Destroyer unleashing his power against the Plague brought a smile to her face. But when the woman continued, it quickly faded.

“With him gone, the Plague once more seeks to enter our world. So far it merely ‘investigates’ our defenses. Even without the Destroyer, the Seventh World will prove a mighty foe. But eventually . . . You are correct about one thing, Alana. The Plague will kill us all. Even though we have many brave and powerful warriors yet in our world, we are all fully aware that it is only a matter of time before we are overrun. I have seen many of these children of which you speak. What they can achieve with the Oneness is beyond anything I believed possible. With them at our side, the Plague will pay dearly for victory. But who am I to keep them here to die? If truly you can save them, then by all means please take them from this world.”

Alana wasn’t surprised that the woman had decided to show a hint of her sensitive side, after all, she knew her type well – ulterior motives were part of her nature.

“But consider this, Goddess. Because of you, we are vulnerable to the Plague. You may have saved us from the Destroyer, but in doing so you have certainly sentenced us to death. Also, need I remind you that you were lost in the Rift – a concept that causes me to tremble. Your mission would have ended in the Abyss if it had not been for our aid.”

Alana found both were good arguments. But there was another reason to stay, an even better one – and every moment, the Elf Prince drew nearer.

“I will stay for a time,” Alana replied. “But only to determine those who are worthy.”

The other woman’s skin twisted into a lipless smile. She too recognized an ulterior motive when she saw one.

Unlike Dona’Cora, Alana found she liked this tough, war-hardened woman very much.

“And in the mean time . . . perhaps I can assess this world’s defenses. I won’t guarantee you a victory, but I promise you one thing; I will make sure that when the Plague comes, the price to take this world will be high indeed.”

## LECYNIC

A chill wind came down from the north, rapidly gaining strength as it funneled its way into the canyon, buffeting the procession of traders stuck between the jagged walls. Most adapted to the biting cold by covering themselves in a haze of blue flames, leaving the icy wind all but ignored. Those lacking the Oneness, dug their winter gear from their packs and bundled themselves in thick layers of fur. Despite the cold, or because of it, they had to keep moving. The long caravan of people and supplies continued on, trudging through the small canyon town in a race to beat the winter wind southward, all the while the wind drove them on, howling at their backs.

Winter always came early in these lands north of the Gorian, but this year it threatened to bypass autumn all together. Many of the trees still had leaves of green. Quite possibly, they would miss their chance to change color this year, and the powerful northern winds would rip them from their branches as they were. Because of the abrupt change in the weather, the expedition had been forced to cut their trading short; else they find themselves stuck in these godless outlands for the entire winter. Or even worse, they could wind up buried in snow during their attempt at a southern crossing of the Gorian.

To Coba and the rest of the Magi, the weather was little more than a nuisance. The wind was unable to penetrate their blue shields, and snow melted as easily with blue flames as it did with red. The Magi would make the crossing either way. And if the *bloodless* fell along the way, what did Coba care? As for the goods they hauled, Coba would just as soon abandon his heavy burden – or squish the *bloodless* beneath it, for that matter. If he wasn't paid so well to safely transport the load, he likely would have done so long ago.

Coba scowled at the bundle of goods floating in the air before him. A thread of blue flames extended from his hand to the bundle like a tether, wrapping the cargo in a blue shell. To his back and his front, other bundles levitated in the air, similarly tethered to the other Magi in the caravan. The packages were as varied as the mages supporting them. Those of the Second Order -- the ones wearing yellow robes – held only small, though precious, items aloft; mostly containers of highly fragile artifacts. Such items sold well among Lock Core's wealthy, and were highly prized for their foreign beauty and craftsmanship. Depending on how they sold at market, a single piece could pay for the entire expedition into the outlands. Because of their value, the weaker of the Order were perfectly suited to transport them. With their limited power, large sums of goods were beyond their ability to lift. But smaller bundles, could be easily lifted, and contained in a billowy layer of blue flame.

The bundle Coba held was likely past a ton in weight – no small load. But even his burden paled in comparison to what the Reds held; floating above each of their heads were giant slabs of multicolored marble. The three Reds seemed highly focused on keeping their cargo suspended, no doubt the threat of being crushed giving them ample incentive.

Partly out of jealousy, and partly because he found such use of great power to be a waste, Coba's thoughts turned dark. To think, his kind were once gods. Look at them now . . . little better than slug mules. With the Oneness, he took hold of a nearby pebble and nearly flung it at the Reds – he would rather see them dead than lowered so – but he paused, as did the entire

procession. One by one, the Mages let their cargo gently fall – the yellows more careful than the rest.

Coba was grateful for the unexpected rest -- not because he was wearied, truth was, he could've held twice as much weight, but merely chose not to. He needed the respite to calm his mind. He knew he would not have harmed the Reds; to eliminate such a bloodline of power would have been a travesty. One day, the Order would rise again – to become worshipped as the gods they were meant to be. To achieve that destiny, the bloodline had to be maintained. As it stood now, the bloodline was diluted to near non-existence. Only four White Mages walked the Seventh World, and it had been ages since there had been a Black.

The High-Mage Andril'lin had been the last of them – so the rumors say.

Now, the Order was nothing more than laborers. Coba often wondered why he had joined them at all. The Oneness was truly a great gift, but what had it gained him? If anything, he was limited because of it. Meanwhile, the poor-blooded grew rich and powerful -- nearly more so than even the Keeper.

Take his employer, for instance. The young explorer Dane Langlia had gained a title for himself, simply by trading in exotic goods. The man had acquired his mass of wealth so rapidly the Keeper had no choice but to grant him a parcel of Lock Core's rich farmland. Had the Keeper not struck a deal with the trader, Langlia could have potentially bought Lock Core out from under him. The Keeper would have retained his title, but control of the city would have gone to Langlia, the true ruler of Lock Core.

Of course the Keeper would always have the Oneness; though a lot of good it would do him. If he lost possession of the city, the best he could hope to gain with his Oneness was a transporter position in Langlia's trade organization. The Keeper knew this as well. He hadn't been raised to the position by making foolish decisions, so wisely he struck a bargain with the man before he became Dane's servant.

On the occasions Coba had been near Dane, he did sense a flicker of the Oneness within the man. But it was doubtful the man even knew it was there. Nor did it matter, for his power was in wealth, something this age seemed to prize far above the Oneness.

However, his wife, Lady Corel, seemed blessed in every manner possible. During Coba's training at the High Tower, he had been able to admire her power and beauty on more than one occasion. Her red hair was only slightly less fiery than her swelling flames of mage-fire. But it was doubtful she ever acknowledged Coba's existence. She walked another path than he. For her, High-Mage, or even Keeper was to be her destiny – her entire training at the High Tower was devoted towards such. No doubt the Keeper and the High-Mage had been grooming her since birth. Meanwhile, for all the years he had spent in training, Coba was to become a drudge.

*If anyone could restore the Order to its former glory, Lady Corel could,* Coba thought, resting his back against his bundle of goods.

He noticed smoke rising from the head of the procession, but even as it grew he continued to ignore it.

Should her husband meet an untimely death, the wealth and the power would be her own. With the right man to advise her . . . anything could be possible.

Coba continued to indulge himself in fantasies of ruling the Triad of Races alongside Lady Corel, oblivious to the fact that the rest of the Magi had departed toward the front of the procession, where the smoke-filled sky had now become fire.



The nearby village and whatever danger it was facing, only marginally registered with Coba's thoughts. He mashed his brow together in disgust at the mere thought of helping the town. What was he supposed to do about it anyway? Save some *bloodless* from some sort of fire? That wasn't what he was paid to do. He had a contract to haul Langlia's goods. That was it. If his fellow Mages wanted to waste their power in the effort, then so be it. It was doubtful they would be rewarded – if even they were thanked.

What his brethren should be doing was demanding fealty from the town if they wished the Magi to save it. Then, if the townsfolk refused their bargain, let it burn. Damn the Gods! They should burn the place down themselves. Then demand their fealty!

Coba was delighting in the thought of the townsfolk scattering in fear of the Magi, when a sudden sensation flooded his mind.

Immediately he was on his feet, anticipating the appearance of a White Mage -- possibly the Keeper himself. Instead, what he saw was a woman covered in a motley array of animal skins – half of which appeared to be a large breed of rat. Her hair was so gnarled and dirty; he half expected to see one of the creatures come scurrying out of it. The stench emanating from her cape of animal carcasses was nearly equal to the woman's aura of power. But the strength of her Oneness was so great that Coba managed to ignore the woman's smell.

“Meshe Magi. Meshe. Iso, LeCynic. Basa no suth LeCynic.”

Wild-eyed the woman came at him, her language a meaningless jumble of words. North of the Gorian, the people often had thick, incomprehensible accents, but only the tribal peoples from the distant uncharted lands were so far removed from civilization as to have adopted their own unique languages. Few people from Lock Core had ever visited such places. They were so far distant even Langlia found them unprofitable.

She continued her unintelligible rant, when, to Coba's surprise, she lifted her thick coat of skins revealing a wiry little boy beneath it. The boy seemed in a daze, his dilated pupils consuming his brown irises.

“Magi . . .”

The woman continued to spout her gibberish. Hoping to gain some sort of understanding, Coba entered her mind.

He slipped in easily. It was the first indication that she was not the source of power. Even if Coba had failed to take note of it, what he saw in her mind made it abundantly clear. Her mind was a jumble of images, all of them centered around the boy child. And all of them filled with scenes of carnage and destruction.

No. This woman had no power. What he had sensed was the boy.

LeCynic . . .

A word the woman repeated over and over.

*'Fear not, woman. I'll take great care of this child,'* Coba said, hoping she would get a sense of his words if he sent them telepathically.

She backed away while pushing the boy toward him.

“LeCynic,” the woman said one final time before turning and fleeing.

“Well met, boy,” Coba said to the child, staring down into his dark brown eyes, which were slowly beginning to show signs of life.

He smiled down at the boy, basking in his potential.

“Well met indeed, LeCynic.”

Coba believed it to be the child's name, but he had no knowledge of her language or her people. Had he known the word's true meaning, would he still have taken the child?

Given the child's power and potential, most likely yes, but perhaps with a tad less enthusiasm.



She was one of the 'Children of the Lost Sun'. When humanity arrived on the Seventh World, most stayed at Lock Core, staking their destinies in a final battle with the Plague. Others fled the Rift, hoping to live peacefully in the Outlands until the day the Plague returned once more. There were others still, a handful of people who entered the Seventh World and never looked back. They walked the Seventh World for as long, and as far as they could. Only when the Plague and the Rift became a memory did they finally stop moving, settling in the deepest and most inhospitable parts of the Seventh World.

For the 'Children of the Lost Sun', the Plague, the Rift and the final battle were nothing more than a legend. But to the woman, the legends had become far too real. She had birthed a *Sira'coll*, a fire-wielder. It was half a star before she knew it was so, and over a full star before her secret was revealed. She should have immediately given him to the Frozen Lord, to forever be a babe, and sleep eternal. But she so dearly cherished the boy; and refused to let him go. It wasn't until the Great Father came to take him from her that she realized her error. As the warriors ripped him from her arms his flesh became fire. The warriors melted at his touch. Along with the Great Father, they thought to flee, but the boy's fire was alive. As though hungry to feed, the flames engulfed them all, leaving not but ash. By the time his fire was sated, their village was a charred ruin.

Homeless, she took her son and fled. At first, she thought to enter the land of the Frozen Lord with the boy in her arms, but the child anticipated her thoughts. To head in the direction of the open water gave her such headaches she fell to her knees, blood pouring from every orifice of her head. As soon as she changed her mind, and direction, she was restored, healthier than before.

For several stars they traveled the southern lands, but every village they came upon they were met with hostility -- and the hostility was met with madness and death. Her path lead ever southward, any other direction meant pain. Until one day they came upon a great village. And within it was a blue-robed man who took great interest in her son. He knew bits and pieces of her language, and was able to communicate that a gathering of fire-wielders dwelt in a great tower in the south. These Magi would gladly take her son, and give him a home within their High-Tower.

He even offered to take her there, but before making good on his offer, the woman and her child were recognized and once more trouble began. Afterwards, even the blue-robed fire-wielder couldn't escape her son's wrath, his flesh melting as easily as the rest.

Despite his death, the words of the fire-wielder offered her hope. And for once, the will of the child matched her own. Thus, with thoughts of this 'great tower' at the forefront of her mind, she continued on, heading southward . . . always southward.

Finally, her prayers to the Frozen Lord were answered. She found no tower. But surely the gathering of Magi she beheld contained every last member of their order. Clutching her son's hand in fear and excitement, she watched as the multi-colored procession of robed figures filled the canyon below.

She had only recently found shelter in the town of Cliffmore. The townsfolk were warm and kind, and had no knowledge of her son or his prior atrocities. They took pity on her and her young son. They gave her food and water, and to help her survive the coming winter, the kindly townsfolk even provided her with accommodations in one of their many, cave-like chambers carved in the canyon wall. Half cave, half rotting wood, the room was still welcome shelter for the woman and her son -- having spent the prior months on the road.

From her perch atop the cavern chamber, she watched in awe as the caravan approached, wondering how so many fire-wielders could exist in the entire world. And what power! Massive packs of goods floated before them as though weightless. Slabs of stone that seemed impossible to lift by a thousand hands, moved to the will of but one man. She had witnessed the failure of one of their kind to control her son. But surely, with so many of them together, his evil could be contained.

It wasn't.

The rotting timbers of the city's structures burned first . . . its stone walls took flame soon after.

As always, her son shielded only her from death. All others fell to the flames, including many of the Magi.

Once more she fled -- a city in flames at her back.

It wasn't until she stumbled into the grey-magi that she felt her son's evil go silent. It seemed his search had ended, for her will suddenly became her own -- gladly she thrust her son at the man, and equally glad, he took him as his own.

At long last, she was free of her son . . . 'the demon'.

She tried desperately to warn the man of what her son was. But little did she know, the man had thought she spoke his name. And that he fittingly named the boy 'the demon'. For that was what 'LeCynic' meant in her tongue. And that was most certainly what the child was.



"Betrayer!"

LeCynic couldn't help but smile at the man. The Red Mage raised his arms, gathering his remaining power for a final blow.

The Grey Mage, Coba was well on his way to joining LeCynic's army, so he let the man fall. He knew that when next they met, Coba would be thanking him. Of all people, Coba would understand what a gift the Plague truly was. After all, this was to be as Coba dreamed -- they would be like gods once more, and together, they would make the Seventh World bow before them.

"You've killed us all, LeCynic!" the Red Mage screamed, his face constantly shifting from a mask of scars and burnt flesh to flawless, smooth skin.

The man was clueless. Very soon he would see the light . . . or in this case, the darkness.

"Fool, mage. Haven't you learned?" LeCynic replied, practically laughing in the man's face. "You were already dead."

The Red Mage struck him.

His attack was feeble, and it was certainly his last. The Red Mage plummeted to the earth.

LeCynic chose not to damage that one, but rather, he let the man drain himself dry of the Oneness, savoring his every last pitiful attempt to stop the Black Mage. The Red Mage had been the last of them, the last of their so-called defense of Shattered Rock. Despite his less than impressive use of the Oneness, he had to give the man a little credit; he did somehow manage to get a city of murders, chopa addicts, thieves and beggars to join together in defense of the city. Truthfully, LeCynic hadn't expected that. He had hoped the fall of the city would have been simpler, less costly. But it would fall, nonetheless. With the mages no more, the skies would be his, and soon the city would be as well.

Up next, Lock Core. Then, he will rule them all . . .

. . . 'Kill them all.'

He felt the vein throbbing on his neck, pumping him full of the tainted blood. It was larger than ever, and had been growing at an accelerated pace. He longed to rip it from his flesh, but knew his life would vanish with it. It was deeply entrenched in his body now, despite his efforts to stop its continued growth. He feared it would soon take his mind, and rightly so. He had seen what had become of his men. For now, they fought as allies. But LeCynic knew they were no longer his to control. Evil, LeCynic may be, but something far more corrupt than he possessed them. It drove them towards but one purpose – utter annihilation. If the evil force had its way, there would be nothing left. Where was the pleasure in that? What was the point of ruling over nothingness? The evil being's motive was beyond comprehension. Power, pleasure, wealth . . . it was meaningless to the being. It understood only chaos and death, and sought to reduce all that existed into such.

It had to be stopped. His battle with the being began within his own flesh. LeCynic wasn't about to relinquish his body, his power, and his greatness without a fight. He *will* rule this world. Not as a soulless puppet, but as a god.

He had to maintain control for just a while longer. He was certain his undead servant, Hollabrand was nearing his objective. The power of the Destroyer could free him. He had to have it. Without it, he was doomed to become a slave.

But for now, what he needed was an army.

Summoning those he had already *turned*, he drifted down to where the Red Mage had fallen. He would enjoy this moment; transforming the city's greatest defender into his greatest soldier. He directed his army to gather where the man had fallen. When the Red Mage arose, he would have the honor of leading them in the final assault.

Wait . . .

Someone (or something) else was down there. A presence LeCynic knew all too well.

Just when he thought his day couldn't get any better . . .

*It appears you will be mine once more, Destroyer.*

He already had a list of experimental procedures ready for them man. This time, he would hold nothing back.

They were together, the Red Mage and the Destroyer.

The man held the Red Mage and wept.

*Save your tears, Destroyer. You will have need to shed them soon.*

"Well, well. Haven't you strayed far from the flock," LeCynic said to the man, gathering the full brunt of his power in case the man tried to live up to his name.

But LeCynic feared no man.

He approached him, even dared to bend over and inspect him.

*And they called this man Destroyer?* LeCynic laughed at the ragged looking wretch. *Soon I'll claim that title as well.*

"Finally . . . I have you back once more," LeCynic continued, unafraid of the pathetic looking man. "Now I *will* have your power."

"Yes."

The man's voice was everywhere. It was everything.

His voice alone nearly tore him asunder.

*Oh shi . . .*

Then, his true power was unleashed, and LeCynic got a first-hand demonstration of exactly how the man earned the name, 'Destroyer'.



Coba almost died – it would have been his second death in a single day. He had a feeling his latest brush with death would have been a more permanent state than his first. LeCynic replaced his life with the Plague, but the Destroyer nearly erased his entire existence. Luckily, Coba found himself on the fringe of the man's devastating blast. Even so, had he been but a man – even a Grey Mage – he would have been washed away in the tide of dark power. But Coba wasn't a mortal any more. The Black Mage had changed him.

LeCynic . . . he always knew he had the potential to be a Black Mage. But he had become even more. To say he was any sort of Mage belittled the man. Now, LeCynic was a god . . . and Coba's master. Finally he had found one worthy of his fealty.

At first, he hesitated to embrace the *gift*. Coba awoke to his new life weak from hunger. He no longer felt the Oneness – only a hole remained where the source of his power had once been. He fought the desire to engorge himself on the life of others, but the hunger was unbearable, and every moment he fought it served to amplify the pain. He sensed his Maker in the distance but feared to join the man, knowing that once he did, he would be fully committed to serving the Dark Army.

Unsure of his destination or purpose, Coba wandered the battlefield. Unbeknownst to him, his new senses had taken him on a path toward living flesh. The scent, the sensation . . . it was all so new to him that he didn't even recognize it until he stumbled into it. They were a group of soldiers fleeing from Shattered Rock. Once they saw what he was – what he had become – they immediately attacked. Even weakened, they were no match for Coba. During his battle with the men, he realized the Plague was a gift. It was *true* power. His prior dabbling with the Oneness paled in comparison to the power he now held. The Plague made him more powerful than any mortal could hope to be. And the more he fed, the stronger he became. By the time he was through with the soldiers, he was powerful indeed.

Soldiers . . . Coba still scoffed at that notion. The men he fed upon were thieves and murderers, if they had been anything. Now what they were, were his – the beginning of his own Dark Army. Unfortunately, not all of them withstood the Destroyer's rage. But Coba knew all too well how quickly the Plague could spread. His army would grow. And in time, the bloodless would bow before him. But for that to happen, he needed his master, LeCynic. Coba was powerful, but not nearly strong enough to conquer the Seventh World on his own. Some

White Mages remained who could pose a potential roadblock to his destiny. The High-Bitch Nicola was one such obstacle. But against LeCynic, Nicola would be easily trampled to dust.

But what had become of the Black-Mage? Following the Destroyer's recent rampage, Cobra's link to LeCynic was severed. For a time, he couldn't sense him at all. Fearing he perished, Cobra and his men went to investigate the blast zone. As they neared the wreckage of Shattered Rock, he felt something. It was incredibly faint, and vastly different than what he sensed before the blast. Nevertheless, Cobra was certain it was LeCynic.

Once more the man had changed, but into what?

Following the dim sensation, Cobra moved to join his master. He just hoped the Destroyer hadn't ruined the man completely, and that together, they may still achieve the greatness of which Cobra always dreamed.

His hopes drained when he found the pile of black sludge that was the remnant of his master.

It contained some sort of life, whatever it was. Slowly, it crept toward Cobra and his men.

"Master?" Cobra asked, attempting to communicate with the black mass.

'... *feed* ...'

Cobra laughed. Apparently it would take more than even the Destroyer to put an end to LeCynic. His chances of conquering this world had just increased ten-fold.

"Return to the city. Find any stragglers and bring them to me," he ordered his men.

'... *no* ... *these shall do* ...'

Before his men could move to obey, strings of black fire shot out from the sludge, burrowing into Cobra's undead followers. Cobra moved back to avoid a similar fate. But he was ignored. The dark fire became an inferno, each soldier a pyre. In moments, they were blackened husks.

Cobra watched in awe as the pile of sludge rose up before him. It continued to rise, until it towered over him. Then, it became a man – a man of black flames, his eyes blue fire.

It was the greatest thing Cobra had ever seen. He knew he was insignificant to the awesome being. All he could do was bow before it, and hope he was spared.

"*Arise*," the being commanded.

Cobra stood up, daring to look the being in its fiery eyes.

"I am free now," LeCynic said, his voice restored to its typical, cold baritone. Except for his flaming blue eyes, his body transformed to a humanoid shape – the handsome, dark-haired youth Cobra so fondly remembered.

Cobra didn't understand what he meant by being 'free', but he did not dare to question the being.

"It is time now . . . join me, Cobra. It is time for me to return to Lock Core and claim my army . . . and then, my vengeance will begin."

Cobra smiled. Finally, his dreams will be fulfilled.

## EMILY

Every step he took jolted the various crystal vials, hollowed out gourds, and metal canisters dangling from his waist with a thick leather cord. The jarring symphony created silence in the fields around him; the sheep stopped bleating, and the crickets ceased chirping as the stooped figure drew near.

He was noisy enough to wake the dead. But Adel was old, and he no longer feared the dead . . . or death for that matter. He had seen more than enough of both in his life, and was well aware that his time was soon to come.

Adel continued down the rough country road, a lantern held before him, its weight nearly too much for his frail arms to support. His hands were once so steady and precise he could sew torn blood vessels and flesh as easily as any fabric. Now, the lantern shook so uncontrollably in his grip, the gravel road was lost in the flickering light. Truth be told, lately even in the best light, Adel couldn't see clearly for more than ten feet in front of him. His eyes had seen the Midnight Sun cross the sky just over eighty times – a feat few humans could claim. Adel had lived so long that even his skills as a Healer were beginning to prove inadequate protection against the ravages of time. He knew of but one 'cure' for that. But all would agree, the Plague was more curse, than cure. Adel was well aware that his time would come . . . no matter what he did to stop it.

It was always so.

If his long career as a Healer had taught him anything, it was that.

Over how many deathbeds had he stood vigil in his career? And no matter the affliction, or the 'cures' he applied, the end found them, one and all.

Long ago, he had learned that when it was time for one to pass, his job as Healer was best served by consoling the terminally ill – easing their way into the afterlife. His advice to them was, and had always been, for them to find peace and acceptance with what little time they had left. They should find peace in the fact that death is the natural order of things, and is meant to be a permanent state; anything else was an abomination – much like the Plague.

Death. Despite his years of fighting it, he knew nothing of it. As far as he knew, none had ever returned to tell their tale of the 'great beyond'. Many claimed knowledge of it, but their theories were at best guesswork – ungrounded in knowledge, unlike Adel's own healing science.

As his own death drew ever nearer, Adel often found himself wondering if he would heed his own advice, and graciously embrace his own inevitable end. It had been a long life – and a difficult one – and in all honesty, he was a little more than eager to see it pass. After so many suns, eternal peace seemed such a pleasant concept.

But so few find acceptance in the end. So many wish to live, if even for another day – another hour. Even those in the greatest pain always fight like mad to have but one more moment of life.

The struggle to live often made Adel wonder if there truly was peace in death? Or near the end do the dying see the truth; that death is an unimaginable horror? And to escape it, they would do anything – even embrace the Plague.

His job was indeed a difficult one -- the difficulties only compounded with the coming of the Plague. In his life he had acquired more than one bad memory he wished to be freed of.

One such moment nagged at his mind as he made his way to the small farming village of Havenwood.

It was shortly after the War of Lock Core, when the newly raised Keeper, LeCynic, had commanded Adel to study the infection. Eager to test his skills against this horrendous disease, Adel agreed to do so. His eagerness, however, was short lived, for it quickly became apparent to Adel that the Plague was far beyond his abilities -- to even tamper with it was a risk he did not dare to take. He felt that all samples of the active infection should be destroyed, not studied, lest they give rise to another full scale Plague.

The Keeper strongly disagreed.

He was furious at Adel's suggestion, and deemed him a failure. He sent in other, less respected Healers to continue the project, and ordered Adel banished from the city and stripped of his official title as Master Healer.

Adel had been humiliated.

Thankfully, his work among the citizens of the Seventh World was remembered, and he was still respected. Since then he has been able to make a decent living in the Outlands, doing what he can to heal the people beyond Lock Core, or -- failing to heal them -- at least offer them peace during their final moments.

Still though, Adel often wondered about the Keeper and his experiments with the Plague. The man was so obsessed with finding a cure that Adel knew the man would stop at nothing to find one. He shuddered to think what horrors the man could potentially unleash on the Seventh World. Through the years, Adel kept hoping the rest of the Seventh World would see through the man's madness, and LeCynic would end up being the one banished from Lock Core. But thus far, it had been a long wait, and Adel's hope was dwindling with his lifespan. He imagined by the time justice was done, his hope and life would be no more.

Now, he journeyed to the town of Havenwood, where a man lay dying from a grievous injury suffered during the fall harvest. From what he heard of the severity of the man's injuries, he imagined his mission was more about easing physical and emotional suffering than it was about 'actual' healing.

He came around a bend in the road, then saw a distant haze of light coming from the valley down below. With his poor eyesight, he couldn't discern details, but he had walked this path before and knew the glowing light signified the village Havenwood. He made his way down, wondering if the injured farmer would even be alive by the time he arrived.

Halfway down the path, he was greeted by several of the villagers, the eldest of which did the majority of the talking. He had met and befriended the man on his prior visits, and knew him to be Jorge Hamthist, the Mayor of Havenwood.

"Thank you for coming, Adel. And at such a late hour," the Mayor said, moving to take Adel's lantern and guiding him forward by the arm.

"I heard of the injuries, and knew haste would be required," Adel replied, wearied from his travels and not hesitating to accept the Mayor's aid. "Please, Jorge, tell me, am I too late?"

The Mayor exchanged a worried look with his companions before replying.

"Surprisingly no, Adel. Admittedly, I am all but untrained in the healing arts, yet to the best of my knowledge, this man should not be alive. He lost an arm in the threshing, and though his legs remain . . . I dare say they are horribly mangled. Surely, the amount of blood this man lost cannot have come from but a single man."

Adel was intrigued . . . and worried. Was he about to be reacquainted with the Plague?

"Perhaps you should have sent for the Death Guard instead?" Adel said.



“Aye, one would come to such a conclusion, is true. But the man doesn’t appear to be infected, only injured . . . and forever at the verge of death.”

Adel was more curious than ever. His curiosity in human anatomy was what brought him to the Healers. Over the years he had come to learn the human body had many wondrous traits. And the more he learned, the more mysterious and miraculous the body became. To learn something new, especially at his age, would be a miracle unto itself.

The Mayor guided him into the village of thatched roofed cottages. Even with Adel’s limited vision, it was clear to see where his patient was to be found, for a group of villagers surrounded one of the cottages. The Mayor quietly ushered the people aside as he neared, then led Adel into the timber-walled structure.

It all made sense the moment he stepped through the door.

“The child . . .” Adel whispered.

“Yes, poor thing. She refuses to let him go,” the Mayor responded.

In front of him, a curly haired child sat, and wept. Her small fingers clung to her father’s remaining hand. There was blood everywhere . . . and blue fire. More of both than Adel had seen in a long, long time. Somehow, the scene was vaguely familiar to him. He had only witnessed such a great display of the Singularity once before. Like the child, Merrick too had refused to let go . . . and it had cost him his life. This child was far younger than Merrick, but held equal – if not greater – power. Her father’s injuries were clearly mortal; it didn’t take a Healer’s expertise to determine that. How the child had managed to keep the man alive for as long as she had seemed a miracle. Adel doubted even Merrick could have done as much.

Adel’s role in all of this was obvious; he had to convince the child to let him go. If she didn’t, they both would die.

“Take me to her,” Adel requested, unable to do so himself, for suddenly he felt his age more keenly than ever.

“Yes, Adel,” the Mayor said, practically carrying Adel to her. “Child, this is the great Healer, Adel. We have brought him here to help your father. To . . .”

Adel knew what the Mayor wanted to say; that he had brought Adel to help ease the man’s passage to the afterlife. For that was truly what the Mayor desired; an end to the man’s suffering and the circus that accompanied it. Adel wanted as much as well.

“ . . . To heal him,” the Mayor finished.

Adel saw what his friend Jorge could not, the girl had great power, and she could easily see through his lies, if not read his thoughts outright. There would be no point in pretending, he would have to speak truthfully with the girl.

“I’m sorry. I cannot save him, child. Sometimes, all we can offer them is freedom from their pain. We are not immortals. The end must come to us, one and all.”

Her tears came faster.

“I don’t want him to leave me,” the child said as she wept. “He says he’s ready . . . but I don’t want to let him go.”

“It’s all right.”

Adel bent down, risked penetrating her aura of flames to lay his hand upon her.

“He will have peace, and one day you will find it too. It will not be easy, but through the sadness and fear you *will* one day find your peace. This I promise.”

If she was reading his mind, she would know it was not a lie.

“But where will he go?”

Adel faltered, searching for an answer. But even with all his knowledge and years of experience, he still didn't have one.

He didn't need one. She was, in fact, reading his mind. To the child, his mind was a library of information on life and death. Of particular interest was his knowledge of the Plague, a thing both 'life' and 'death'. She saw it through his eyes as an atrocity. It was meant to make immortals, but instead it created monsters.

She turned her wide brown eyes on her father – saw the limbless monstrosity that he had become, and she let him go.



Two suns later, Adel still searched for an answer to the child's question, "Where will he go?" He knew he would go there himself soon enough and have the answer firsthand. But he felt he still owed the girl some sort of an explanation.

His quest took him deeper into the Outlands than ever before. Being as decrepit as he was, it was an arduous journey indeed. But every sage with supposed knowledge of the afterlife had to be met, their lessons learned. For the most part, they spoke of the same belief, but in variations. They all agreed there was *something*, but what that something was, was tensely debated. He wanted to return to the girl, but wanted to give her more than "There's definitely something, I just don't know what?"

Then he heard of a Red Mage. A man who spoke freely, openly, and often to any and all who would hear him. This man claimed to have knowledge of the Gods themselves. He even suffered his own sort of banishment from Lock Core, which would have drawn Adel to him if for no other reason.

And so it went . . . Adel followed him by way of his stories, until one day their paths met. How the man smiled as they talked. And when at last Adel left him, he was unable to stop his own face from grinning. It all made so much sense now . . . not just the girl child, but Merrick as well. There was a plan for them all. Their lives guided by a power greater than any mortal.

And the girl child . . . he finally had her answer. It was in the form of a man, his name was Brice Langlia. He told him where to find her.

And that her name was Emily, from the city of Havenwood.



All around them the earth was black; a grim reminder of the Destroyer's apocalyptic power. They had walked the entire day, but to escape it, they marched well into the night. The Elder Moon, Harbos, rose above them and then fell, sinking into the charred land. As Harbos vanished on the horizon, his dying light fell on the ragged group of travelers, stretching their shadows into oblivion. The moon Minos eventually followed suit, briefly sharing the night sky

with his Brother Moon. And for a time, the Brother Moons illuminated the Seventh World, giving the weary travelers a vision of life in the distance – a forest of tall pines, and fields of ripened wheat. They all breathed a sigh of relief at the sight, for in the back of their minds was the fear that perhaps the Destroyer had put an end to it all, that his tidal wave of death had encompassed the entire Seventh World. At last, their feet stepped upon soft grass, confirming the vision of life was no mirage. Even so, they continued on, for the stench of death still clung to them, even beyond the Destroyer's circle of ruin. But it wasn't merely the stench of death they hoped to outrun; it was the memory of it as well. The Archenon could still be seen in the distance, a now solitary and stark black pillar. Behind it, the orange remnant of Harbos sent the tower's shadow across the land, chasing the travelers.

As they fled from it, many succumbed to exhaustion, stumbled and fell. Yet they refused to stop, and always managed to return to their feet. Many relied on canes or crutches for support. For them, every step forward was a miracle and a testament to the horrors they had witnessed in the town of Shattered Rock. Many were just children. Now orphans, one and all. Their families and their city were gone. They had nothing left, and nowhere to go. But onward they trudged, their tiny forms empowered by a dim spark of hope. They believed a new life could be found in Lock Core, and that Emily would be the one to guide them to it.

Hope . . . they saw it in her smile, and soft brown eyes. Despite all they had suffered and lost, they truly believed that under Emily's care, there could yet be hope.

More exhausted than them all, Emily moved along the line of travelers. Her blue flames always there to lift the fallen, and strengthen the weak, while her smile and her kindness lifted their spirits and strengthened their hearts. She wouldn't stop, nor would she let them stop. Not until death had left them, and the Archenon was nothing but a memory.

*"You have to rest, Emily. You're safe now,"* a gentle voice whispered in her ear.

Emily understood the speaker's concern; her power had long since dried up, forcing her to draw on her own life-force to heal the weakened refugees. In a day, she seemed to have aged a year. The soft layer of baby-fat that recently covered her bones had become pale, gaunt skin. Her bouncing black curls were a dirty mat plastered to her head.

She knew the speaker feared for her safety – still sought to protect her – but she couldn't stop. They weren't safe – may never be safe again.

And death was all around them.

It wasn't just the Destroyer, or the remnants of Shattered Rock. It was something far worse, even more horrifying than what they had faced thus far. A new evil had awoken in the land, an infection in the heart of the Seventh World itself. To cleanse it, she had to get to Lock Core.

*"Enough, child! Even you have your limits. Stop, or I'll make you stop."*

She didn't doubt the speaker's ability to accomplish the threat, but knew the being would never follow through with it. Undead though she may be, Emily knew she would never harm her. Regardless, she couldn't deny that she was right. Emily couldn't prop these people up forever. If she continued this pace much longer, their deaths could very well be at her hand.

And she dared not discount the other undead member of the party . . . If she was to face him once more, she would need her power to be at its utmost.

So far, he kept his distance and remained out of sight from the rest of the travelers. But Emily clearly sensed him, and knew he sensed her too, and that he was out there in the darkness watching her. She was still uncertain of his intentions. If he had wanted to feed, she figured he would have already made an attempt. Maybe he was waiting for something? Waiting for her . . .

But Emily wasn't about to go out to him again. She had learned her lesson the first time. She knew he couldn't infect her, but she now had others to protect. And weakened as she was, she doubted she could do much to save them.

If he did decide to attack, there were few in the party who could fight him. Of Rafe's soldiers, only one chose to join them. The few that survived the Destroyer's attack, immediately scattered, never giving a second thought to the safety of the orphans or the elderly. As for their leader, Rafe, after the battle he was nowhere to be found. Likely, the man had taken what treasure he had left and sought to bury it, and himself, in the most distant and secluded corner of the Seventh World.

The only one of Rafe's men to join them was the giant Boulder Dwarf, Gunt – his body now a maze of scars, even after Emily's best efforts to heal him. She wasn't sure why he decided to join them, but she was glad he came. Not just for his protection, but surprisingly, for his companionship as well. The giant greatly changed since the battle. The cruelty had left him. Gruffness remained, but only to mask his kindness. Emily was also grateful for the help he provided. The youngest of the children took turns resting on his massive shoulders, or in his hands. Often, he even took pity on the elderly, scooping them up in his arms until they were able to continue on once more.

She had seen him fight, and knew he was a great warrior. But how much protection could one warrior truly provide? She could count on him to fight, of that she was certain, but what of the other "warriors" in the party?

She wondered if Tetloan sensed their undead stalker too. But it seemed he noticed little – other than his missing arm. She often glanced back at him and found him rubbing the stump, a look of pain and anger on his freckled face. Since the battle at the Archenon, he had withdrawn into himself. He hadn't said a single word to another living soul, and his mind was impenetrable even for Emily. Clearly, what once was contempt for people had become hatred. His anger at the world was now rage. He never neared the rest of the party, but kept his distance at the end of the procession, glowering at anyone who neared him.

He was tremendously powerful. But Emily often worried that he would rather use his power to harm them than protect them.

Ironically, the imp Galimoto was now bound to the boy, though Emily swore he was still unable to even see the creature. Galimoto had become more like an extension of his will – much like the Oneness. Emily feared their new bond had resulted in Galimoto transforming from fiendish, to just plain evil. For the most part, Galimoto hovered around him, matching the boy scowl for scowl. She used to think the being had a soft spot for her, but now he only had dirty looks.

There was another warrior in their party – perhaps the greatest one ever. But there was no more fight left in him. No more fight and very little life. She thought to warn Solo Ki of their undead follower, but then thought better of it. She knew he wouldn't care. He probably wouldn't care if the creature came out of the darkness and ripped out his heart. For all practical purposes, Solo Ki was already dead. After what had happened at Shattered Rock, Emily couldn't blame him.

But what of their other undead party member? He had a right to know. But would knowing make matters better, or worse? Thus far, the spirit revealed itself to only her, so maybe it wasn't Emily's decision to make. And when the time was right, she would make her presence known to Solo Ki as well.

For now, Emily decided to heed the being's advice and make camp. She signaled for a halt to their march. The majority of their goods were strung to Gunt's back, so she helped him unstrap the heavy burden, while he hoisted the children down off his back. They hadn't brought a great deal of food with them – little was left in the Destroyer's aftermath. Rations would have to be maintained if they were to make the two week journey to Lock Core. Normally, the trek could be made in a week, but even after marching into the night, the group moved incredibly slow.

Emily knew it would be a problem, but she refused to leave these people. The elderly wouldn't stand a chance without her, and the children would have but a slim one. She heard that Lock Core had some sort of institution that took in orphans, and she planned on seeing those of Shattered Rock safely transported there. As for the elderly, she wasn't sure yet what was to become of them. She couldn't just leave them on the streets of Lock Core, though. She could only hope the city would take kindness on them, and care for them as well.

Because of their pace, the Death Guards had journeyed ahead of them – though it was difficult to convince Theodorous to leave his hero, Solo Ki. The tale of Shattered Rock had to be heard, and the sooner the better. Theodorous and Bri Lynn made haste to warn their order of the fall of the Outlands and the Archenon – and the possibility that Lock Core could be next.

“Gunt?”

A wisp of blue flames gently lifted the pack of supplies and settled it on the ground.

“Can you take some of the children to the forest and gather fire wood?”

The giant issued a deep grunt in reply.

“But be careful. Just because we're out of the dead land, doesn't mean the dead aren't still out there.”

She knew for a fact, they were out there.

Nodding in agreement, the dwarf unslung his massive war pick from his back, and simply said, “No harm will come to them.” And then he ambled off, a flock of children running at his side.

Emily directed a couple of the elder children – some very near her own age – to help distribute meals and organize camp, then she went from one weary soul to another, making sure they had something to fill their bellies and a blanket to keep them warm.

She came upon an old blind man dressed in rags. Emily had taken note of him before – she sensed the Oneness in him, enough of it to indicate he was obviously a high-ranking member of the Order. Also, before the Death Guards left, they spent a great deal of time speaking with the man. And the way they regarded him, seemed to indicate he was their superior. But most unusual of all; back at the Archenon, the blind man consoled Solo Ki – even put a sympathetic hand on the One Elf's shoulder. Solo Ki actually acknowledged the man, nodding his head in gratitude and respect. Those curious bits of knowledge combined to peak her interest in the man, clearly indicating that he was no ordinary refugee.

She draped a wool blanket on his back, and held a chunk of bread in front of him.

“Something to eat, sir?” she asked, his frail hand already going for the meal before she finished the question.

“Thanks, child,” he replied.

Though his eyes were gone, he somehow managed to grab the bread as if he knew its exact location.

No . . . This was no ordinary traveler.

“It has been so long since I’ve eaten a proper meal. I fear I’ve grown accustomed to the hunger pangs, and often forget I must eat, lest I wither away and die.”

“There will be soup as well . . . once our campfire is started,” Emily said, desperate to learn more about the man, but not certain how to proceed.

“I thank you, child. But your bread will suffice. It should be enough to keep me alive . . . for a while anyway. As for the pain . . . I’ve learned to live with all kinds of pain. Please, give my portion to one who cannot.”

“Forgive me for asking, but I couldn’t help but notice you seemed acquainted with Theodorous and Bri Lynn,” Emily said, deciding she needed to trust this man if he was to be a member of their party. And to do so, she had to unravel his mystery. “And your power . . . if you aren’t a Death Guard, you’re obviously a member of the Order.”

“Once upon a time, I was both.”

*‘I was Keeper of the Wall, the day the Plague stormed Lock Core. After the Destroyer sent them into the Rift, I began the Death Guard.’*

Emily was so taken aback by his blunt response she nearly dropped her basket of bread.

*‘You can trust me, Emily. Just as I trust you with my secret. I know you can feel it . . . the death of this land. The world itself is dying. I know you don’t want to hear it, but many of these people are already dead. You need to save your strength, Emily. No matter what you do you cannot save them all. But perhaps with your power you can save their world.’*

He tore his bread in half and handed a piece to Emily.

“You take my share, child. I wouldn’t want you to end up like this old man, forgetting your own need to eat. You need your strength more than us all. Besides, you’re far too young to be growing accustomed to pain.”

Emily stared in shock at the man. She didn’t even realize she had taken his bread. Nor had she realized how great her own hunger had been. She truly was spent. Tears hung at the corners of her wide brown eyes. She knew the man spoke the truth. She had given all to see these people free of Shattered Rock and the Destroyer’s swath of destruction. But now they had to stand on their own, for something greater was at stake. No longer could she waste her power healing a few, when she needed every last bit of it to heal the world.

She shed her tears for those who wouldn’t make the trek to Lock Core, then she stuffed the bread into her mouth.

## TETLOAN

Argor. It was the second largest city in all of the charted Outlands – its defenses surpassed only by the great Red Wall itself. Like Lock Core, it too was carved from the Gorian, though this far west of the Capitol, the stone was all white. Rarely could even a thin vein of red granite be found. In the winter months – which were incredibly long so high up the Gorian -- the city was unreachable. In the spring thaw, the roads were treacherous. In the fall, they were risky. Only during the summer was trade and travel feasible. For the most part, the inhabitants of the white-walled city of Argor lived in isolation from the rest of the ‘civilized’ Seventh World. Such was the wish of its founder; to create a city even the dead couldn’t reach. Lock Core may have its giant red wall, but Argor had the elements themselves to keep it safe. And there were miles of narrow passes as well, and a million opportunities to trap the dead within them. If one day the dead truly did seek the city, it would cost them dearly to reach it. And if they did reach it, they would face Argor’s own wall, and the hearty people born to defend it.

Unlike Lock Core, the people of Argor never forgot the sacrifice of their ancestors and what the Seventh World meant in the struggle to maintain life. When the Plague came to Lock Core, they didn’t join in its defense, but awaited it upon their own wall. It never came. The Destroyer sent it back into the Black Door . . . or so they all thought.

But there remained one who was infected. He raised his own army -- but not in Lock Core. Town by town, city by city, LeCynic took over the Outlands. Eventually, even Argor fell as easily as the rest -- infected from within. Its walls and weather meant nothing.

So it goes with the Plague . . .

But there was one Argorian who did escape, just days before the coming of the Plague; a boy of great power -- given to him by the Gods themselves.

His name was Tetloan of Argor.

And had LeCynic encountered the boy, and faced his power and rage, even the undead Keeper might have thought twice about taking the city.



Tetloan stood on the balcony of white stone, scowling at those down below. His orange head of hair appeared to catch fire as the sun rose over the Gorian. He wore a rich burgundy cloak, fastened at the front with clasps of silver. In the sandy courtyard beneath him, the Master-at-Arms took a group of children through various offensive stances, the students’ wooden blades rapping against one another as though they were keeping rhythm to a fast-paced song.

The boy crossed his arms, sneering at them.

“I’m not going down there,” he stated, continuing to regard the other children with contempt.

“I don’t give a dead, lad. By the Gods, true and false, I command you to go. Everyone must train, Tetloan. Since the days of the Exodus, such has been the way of the Argor,” his father said, waddling onto the balcony.

Had the balcony not been made of stone, and of dwarven craftsmanship, the cantilevered structure might have collapsed under the man’s weight of well over four hundred pounds.

Gemstone rings set in gold were nearly enveloped by his meaty fingers. Despite the late season and cool mountain air, the man wore a loose tunic, deeply cut, exposing a wiry mass of grey hairs on his chest.

“I have been far too soft on you, lad. You’re to be a man soon, and should begin to act as such. Part of that means acquiring the ability to protect yourself, and perhaps one day your family as well.”

“Protect them from what?” the boy asked, continuing to glare into the courtyard. “If you ask me, it’s a waste of time. All of it.”

“Well, I ain’t asking you. If you had lived during the War, you would not be speaking so. When the dead come to our wall, we must stand against it, one and all. Besides . . .”

He tried to settle his flabby hand on the boy’s shoulder, but Tetloan shrugged it away.

“I have spoken with your instructors, and they tell me of your difficulties with the other children, particularly some of the boys. You must learn to stand up to them, especially if you wish to one day follow in my footsteps.”

“I hate them.”

His father answered with a hearty laugh.

“I never said you had to like them, lad. All you need to do is teach them that you’re not a man to be trifled with.”

There was a time when they feared him and left him alone – called him cursed (but only behind his back).

How he longed for those days, but they were no more.

Lately, they’ve grown braver; spurred on by the Smithy’s brawny son, Gregor. Now, never a day goes by that Tetloan isn’t pushed around, or made fun of for his natural red hair . . . or his ‘curse’. On more than one occasion, he returned to the Keep with a bloody lip or bruised flesh. He was the Mayor’s son, yet they humiliated him, and made him feel insignificant. Even worse, they made him feel like there *was* something wrong with him, as if he were evil.

Was he evil?

As much as he hated to admit it, there were truth to the rumors – strange things did happen around him. For one, there were the fires. Objects happened to spontaneously combust when he was around, and he couldn’t deny that their frequency coincided with the level of his anger. Even the weather took on his mood. Once, when he was at his grumpiest, an actual raincloud appeared and seemed to follow him around. It wasn’t until his mood changed that it finally dissipated and drifted away.

*Maybe they are right, he thought. Maybe I’m a freak, possibly even evil.*

Whatever the case, he knew that he didn’t belong with them.

No . . . he absolutely did not want to go down there.

Not to mention, these children had all been born with a sword in their hands, while Tetloan was fourteen suns now and had never actually held one. He blamed that on his caretaker, who forbid it. It was her duty to ensure his safety, and things such as weapons generally came in conflict with that role.



Everyone else in Argor had been raised by their parents learning weapon skills as they learned to walk. Even before the Plague entered the Seventh World, such was the case. And so it remained, even though the Plague had been defeated by the Destroyer, the fear of its return had been passed on to Tetloan's generation.

But unlike the rest of his peers, Tetloan's father was a busy man; and had no actual fighting skills to bestow his son. In truth, he was purely a diplomat who spent most of his time away from the city – especially during the winter, when he always had some excuse to visit the southern Outland cities. And if he wasn't away from the city on official business, he was tied up dealing with the never-ending stream of grievances from the Panel of Elders.

Until today, Tetloan had been forced to endure the situation on his own. He had no friends, and the closest thing he had to a mother was the House Matron, Eneta. His true mother died during childbirth. Eneta had been the one to raise him – but she did so with little love. When she held him to stop his crying, it was because she couldn't stand the noise; not because she actually cared how he felt. Tetloan had been born with the understanding that shedding tears received no sympathy, and that he had a better chance of finding it by spilling his sorrows to the white curtain wall than he did speaking with Eneta.

Now, he never cried – even when the other children were at their cruelest. He wasn't entirely incapable of it; mainly he just didn't want to give them the satisfaction. He knew they would love nothing more than to see him weep. Then their victory would be complete; the cursed Mayor's son fully degraded and broken. No. He wouldn't cry. Not for them. Not ever.

His father was right. They would never respect him until he had power – and to have power, he had to learn how to fight. Once he was able to defeat them, then they would know he was not a man to be trifled with.

With that thought in mind, he brushed past his father and headed to the courtyard. He was determined to master the sword – after all, if every commoner in Argor could do it, Tetloan believed he should be able to pick it up with relative ease.

Besides, he knew his father would be watching, and meant to make him proud.

The moment he stepped onto the sandy training grounds he knew he had made a mistake. Everyone stopped what they were doing to stare at him. Whispers became chuckles. And then the Smithy's son spoke, and the chuckles turned to outright laughter.

“Better hide your practice swords, or Little Red's gonna use em as kindling,” Gregor said, shoving his way to the front of the crowd.

He was shy of his seventeenth sun, yet was larger than the average adult male. He stood a full six feet tall – every inch of which was packed with solid muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the boy – which was visibly apparent, for he wore a sleeveless fur vest that revealed his sculpted chest and arms. Had his father been a baker, he still would have been unusually big and strong, but his years as a smith gave him unnatural strength; something one could only acquire after years of pounding steel into submission at the forge. And whatever free time he had, was spent swinging a giant two-handed sword (often with only one hand). He was a born warrior. Even without the existence of the Plague, Gregor would still seek out something, or someone to fight – someone like Tetloan.

“Oh, oh. Looks like his hair's already caught fire,” Gregor continued, receiving further laughter, even though Tetloan and the rest of the inhabitants of Argor had heard a variation of the insult at least a hundred times before.

“Enough of this, Gregor. The boy's come to train, and all are welcome to enter this ground in Argor.”

The speaker was Evan Groll; a thin, wispy man who was without a doubt the greatest swordsman in Argor. He was also the city's Master-at-Arms, making it his duty to train Argor's citizens to peak efficiency. Groll was nearing the twilight years – his short, once chestnut colored hair was now dark grey, while years of staring into the wind from atop the white walls had hardened his face into leather. But like a fine wine, Groll grew better with age. The rugged landscape and weather eventually wore most people down physically and mentally, but Groll was strengthened by it. It made him a stronger and tougher fighter than would have been possible had he lived in the soft, southern lands.

"Fine, then. I'll let him use mine," Gregor said, throwing his massive log of a training blade at Tetloan's feet. "I'll even partner with him . . . teach him how to use it," he continued, picking up a standard sized sword – which seemed like a twig in his hands.

"Tetloan, are you fine with this?" Evan Groll asked, striding to him.

How could he say no? Tetloan wasn't about to show weakness before his training had even begun. He nodded his head of red hair and picked up the weapon. He thought it could actually be a blessing in disguise. If he could hold his own, sparring with Gregor, then the rest of the children would come to respect him – maybe Gregor would as well.

Groll leaned down to Tetloan, who was fumbling with his grip on the massive wooden weapon.

"Don't be intimidated by his size, child. Speed and grace count for everything in battle."

Despite the man's reputation, his advice stank. Tetloan had neither speed, nor grace. And it was impossible not to be in awe of Gregor's brutish strength – even with the smaller sword, a blow to the head could crush Tetloan's skull. What he needed was real advice; like how to keep Gregor from killing him.

Groll seemed to see the doubt in Tetloan's eyes and said, "Take it easy on him, Gregor. He hasn't the skill for a true contest."

Tetloan knew Groll meant to be helpful, but his words felt like an insult.

Gregor didn't respond, merely cast a wicked grin Tetloan's way . . . he wouldn't be taking it easy -- not on the cursed, spoiled son of the Mayor.

"Let's review some basics . . ." Groll said for Tetloan's sake, directing the students into formation.

The lesson began simple enough; Groll demonstrated some rudimentary footwork, stances, and the importance of maintaining balance – all of which Tetloan managed to replicate fairly well. When he failed to catch on, Groll's training staff was there to whack him into place.

Then things got tougher. The students paired off for a light back and forth. However, the exchange between Tetloan and Gregor was neither light, nor back and forth. Gregor rained down blow after vicious blow, never giving Tetloan enough time to even think of mustering a counter attack. He must have thought Tetloan was an anvil the way he hammered down at him. The large training blade was tiring to wield and incredibly awkward in Tetloan's unskilled hands, but somehow he managed to stand his ground. His arms grew numb from the shock of the strikes and the weight of the blade as Tetloan fought to keep the Smithy's son from crushing him. Eventually, his luck, desperation, and strength wore out and Gregor's sword began to 'work' Tetloan's flesh.

Groll watched him closely; offering pointers on his stance and adjusting his footing with a rap of his stick. But mostly, Groll watched to make sure Tetloan was safe, that his many bumps and bruises didn't become broken bones. Tetloan's father watched closely as well.

While picking himself up off the ground, he often looked up to see his father's jowls wagging as he shook his head in disappointment.

Growing ever more battered and bruised, Tetloan never failed to get to his feet and face Gregor again.

"I'm not afraid of you, Little Red," Gregor said, glaring at Tetloan who was struggling to get back to his feet after suffering a blow to his ribs that had left him momentarily breathless. "Argor is the safest place in the Seventh, but you threaten that. You know what you are?"

He wished he knew.

"Let me guess . . . a red-haired freak?" Tetloan managed to reply between breaths.

"You're an infection. And I mean to cut you out."

He'd been called many things: cursed, evil . . . red-haired freak. He had endured them all. Even learned to live with it, and accept it as part of his life. But somehow this was different. Being called infected didn't make him feel sad or small, only . . . angry.

The anger gave him focus, clarity. He felt the world around him as though it was an extension of his will – a part of him, as tangible as his own flesh and blood. With a thought, he could control it, as easily as his own limbs.

He was too absorbed in the strange sensation, marveling at his sudden new-found power, that he failed to realize Gregor's wooden sword was coming at him harder than ever, and that it fell squarely on top of his head. The blow should have killed him instantly, but it only dropped him to his knees. He was dazed and disoriented – but miraculously, he was not dead. Blood spilled down his face – covered his eyes.

With his vision tinged red, he saw his father high up in the balcony. He didn't look worried, or concerned . . . merely disappointed.

Gregor paused for an instant; stunned that Tetloan wasn't flat on his back. The wooden blade was cracked in half so he picked his original two-handed weapon off the sand and raised the huge wooden blade for another attempt to see him laid out, or dead.

Groll moved to stop him, his own blade of silver and steel was unsheathed and moving impossibly fast to intercept Gregor's attack.

But it wouldn't be fast enough.

Infected . . .

Tetloan's blood boiled . . . it turned to fire.

The air around him . . . the earth below him . . . he felt it all . . . even Gregor's wooden sword.

The blade touched his hair and turned to flames.

He even felt the Smithy's son. His flesh was his to control – he could transform it, or simply erase it. How easy it would be to turn him to flame. They wouldn't laugh at him then.

How small Gregor seemed as he stumbled back. How weak, nursing his burnt hand.

Infected? Evil? They will know what he really is.

Tetloan became fire, a living inferno. The students all fell back, even Evan Groll joined them. Tetloan wouldn't have thought it possible, but the man's leathery face showed fear. Good. Tetloan wanted to show them all what he was . . . the flames rose higher, forty feet in the air. He faced his father, watched him waddle away in fear. All of Argor would know him now . . . what he truly was – pure power.

No. They would never trifle with him again.

In Argor, it was law that no less than ten mages stand the white walls at any one time. Within the walls, there should be no less than thirty. Though the High-Tower lost many Magi in the War (and even before then they had been in short supply), Argo still adhered to the law, and paid dearly to see it maintained.

And so it was, when Tetloan unleashed his power at the training grounds. Atop the white walls, ten mages saw a pillar of blue flames unlike anything they had ever seen before -- which was saying a lot, for two of the mages had seen a great deal at the battle of Lock Core. No matter where the rest of the city's Magi were, they too saw -- or felt, the great eruption of Singularity.

It filled them with fear.

When they learned it had come from the Mayor's son, they were even more troubled. They knew he had mage-blood, and had sensed the power in him before. Long ago, he had been tested. Though it was there, the boy lacked the ability to detect it. They thought if they were lucky, it would simply never manifest. But it had. They had seen him use the Oneness, even when he had not. They knew that what the others called a curse, was in fact the blessing of mage-blood. His use had been minimal, and thus hadn't warranted containment. But now, his power was so great they feared nearing him. Like another Destroyer, the boy could at any moment obliterate them all.

He was beyond containment.

They sent to the High-Tower for help. In the meantime, like the rest of Argor, they either avoided him, or if unable to do so, they submitted to his every whim -- lest his anger gives rise to their deaths.

They endured the passing of winter and spring, living in fear of the child. It wasn't until summer's end that they finally had a response from the High-Tower. And when it came, it was in the form of one man; a Red-Mage named Brice Langlia. He had two other children at his side, both of which held their own incredible amount of power. His arrival was met with great disappointment, for the man had a reputation as a fool, a man many thought had been outcast from the order altogether.

And indeed, he lived up to the reputation; smiling with joy at the sight of the child when he should have been trembling with fear. When it was time for the Red-Mage to claim the boy, many Magi hid. Those that stayed remained partly out of curiosity -- they wondered how one Red-Mage could possibly contain such a child -- and partly out of need to save the city should his anger arise.

The boy grew angry indeed; practically throwing a tantrum as his father the Mayor ordered him to accompany the Red-Mage. His power manifested, greater than ever before.

When they saw his blue flames arise, the Magi didn't move to help, but to flee, for surely they would all die. But instead of finding the white walls collapsing around them, nothing happened.

They turned back.

What they saw was a weave of blue flames more delicate and intricate than any silken tapestry. They were amazed that a mere Red-Mage had managed such a feat, for even with their powers combined, the Magi of Argor could not have created a shield so complex.

It covered the boy -- who raged against it, even though he was utterly oblivious to its existence. The blue shield flexed and expanded. But in the end, it held and his power was depleted. Believing his magic was gone, and having no other option, the boy was forced to join the Red-Mage.

For days afterward (until the Plague took their city) the Magi spoke of the weave of flames; the most beautiful and elegant display of the Singularity they had ever seen. But most amazing of all was that it had been created, not by a White-Mage or a Keeper, but by a curly haired little girl.

After the Red-Mage left, his reputation as a fool was greatly diminished among the Argorian Magi. Unfortunately, none of them lived long enough to spread the tale to the rest of the Seventh World.



With Galimoto flapping in the air at his side, Tetloan stalked the outskirts of camp.

*The bastard's out here . . . I can feel him,* Tetloan thought, rubbing the pinkish scar where his arm used to be.

Through blue-fire, he scanned the distant darkness; the field of charred earth that was once the city of Shattered Rock. Something had been following them ever since they left the city, but thus far, the being had eluded detection.

*Show yourself, coward,* Tetloan wanted to scream to the darkness. If the being attacked, he would be ready – more than ready. He longed for the encounter; a chance to avenge all the evil the Plague had done, not only to himself, but more so for her . . .

After his next encounter with the Plague he would leave the undead in piles of ash, same with the encounter after that. As long as he lived he would burn them all to ash.

He still couldn't believe she was gone. And he hadn't done a thing to save her. He had been wounded, his power nearly depleted. When the wave of darkness washed over them, it took everything he had left just to save himself.

He wouldn't make that mistake again.

If he ever saw the Destroyer . . .

The flames around his body became and inferno. Even the imp, Galimoto had to distance itself.

“Do not think to rob Galimoto of the honor of killing the foul one,” the Imp said, reading his thoughts as he often did. The small, blood-red creature hovered in front of Tetloan, wagging a claw at his face.

Tetloan could see the imp now, unfortunately. Not only could he see him, but the fiend had somehow bonded itself to him. Even if he wanted to be rid of the pest, he doubted it was possible, for their bond felt almost physical – like the creature was a part of him now. He had lost an arm but gained an imp. The creature was wicked, crude, and annoying, but their mutual loss and their hatred for the Destroyer made the imp bearable. He was also Tetloan's only ally, companion, and the closest thing to a friend he had ever known.

*'Don't worry, Galimoto. I mean to make his suffering last, just like ours. There'll be enough time for both of us to have our revenge.'*

The imp grinned, revealing row after row of jagged little teeth.

*'But we need something first . . .'*

He turned his back on the darkness, and the mysterious undead follower, then headed into camp.

A pair of young 'guards' gave him a nervous greeting as he neared the camp's perimeter. They held their silver etched swords awkwardly before them. The blades trembled in their hands, but didn't lower as Tetloan came closer.

They feared him. And rightly so. Tetloan was a living weapon now. He didn't give a dead about them. If they wished to give him trouble, he would return it tenfold. That applied to anyone else who tried to stand in his way. None of them mattered.

On second thought . . .

*She matters*, he decided, walking past the guards and turning to watch the curly haired girl, who was no longer content to just heal people, but was now pouring her power into a withering oak tree. He scowled at her, not because he bore her any ill will, it was quite the opposite. It angered him to no end, seeing her waste her power so. She would kill herself for these wretches, and for what? He didn't want to see her die for nothing . . . like Nathalia. She had saved Tetloan's life, her and Nathalia. In that sense, he supposed he owed her as much as he did Nathalia. She deserved better than this. She was too good of a person to be consumed with all this suffering and death. He wanted to wrap her in his power and take her far from this place. He would find a safe place somewhere in the Seventh World. And if he couldn't, he would use his power to create one. Tetloan would face all the evil; she could have peace. He meant to do it, even if she refused him. But he had to do one thing first . . . find the Destroyer.

Did he love her?

He wasn't sure. The only thing that was certain was that since the Archenon, his feelings for her had grown. But grown into what?

As foolish as she was, he couldn't help but admire her. And even filthy and run-down she was still somehow adorable. Maybe it was her wide brown eyes, or plump red lips. Or maybe it was her caring nature he found charming. She was definitely an odd girl – who tries to heal a tree, for dead sake? But as inexplicable as her actions were to Tetloan; no one would dare deny Emily was a good person. And if they did, Tetloan would burn them to dust.

He wanted to go over to her, to talk about Nathalia, and how empty he felt without her. He never had a real mother – or anyone that actually ever cared for him. His feelings for the elf woman were complex, to say the least. He definitely loved her, he just wasn't sure how. Her beauty was undeniable. Perhaps one day, Tetloan could have matured to love her on a physical level. But he could never match her age, experience and wisdom. And one day he would grow old, while she would remain virtually unchanged.

But she had loved another.

What she ever saw in that loser boggled Tetloan's mind. She was the most beautiful, talented, and loving woman in the entire Seventh World and she gave her heart to a drunkard. Tetloan would have treated her like the goddess that she was. She shouldn't have died because of him. She shouldn't have been anywhere near such a disgusting and thoughtless man to begin with.

In the end, her love for Alec cost Nathalia her life.

Tetloan vowed to avenge her . . . but he needed some things first – it seemed only fitting that her fight continue on, and that when the Destroyer finally receives justice, it will be at the end of her orchid blades.

Under Emily's care, the tree was healthy and now blooming. She turned to Tetloan, the smile dying on her lips when she realized he was glaring at her. His remaining hand was clenched into a flaming fist. She opened her plump lips as though to speak, but before she got a word out, Tetloan stormed away.

He was too angry to speak with her now. He had to finish this. Maybe afterwards, he would take her to a place, absent of death, and tell her how he felt.

There was someone else he needed to find now. He searched the camp for the One Elf -- he wasn't hard to find. There was a large tree clear of refugees. Everyone avoided it and the being napping beneath it as though he was infected. The 'great' Solo Ki was a heap of soiled cloth and hair. His face was almost completely hidden beneath the filth. Whether it was his hood or his hair that covered his head, it was impossible to tell so filthy were both. His back was to the tree, his legs and hands were crossed in front of him. Leaning against the tree trunk was the legendary weapon, the Graelic, its tip a constant blood red hue. A worn leather scabbard could be seen at each of the elf's hips, the leaf-shaped crossguards sparkled in the flicker of the camp fires.

*'I'm gonna need your help with this, Imp.'*

Tetloan was well aware of the One Elf's skill. He wasn't certain even his flames would be a match for the elf if things went bad.

"Has the child gone completely insane?" the imp asked in his musical voice. "Steal from the One Elf? Galimoto would rather jump back into the Rift?"

*'Maybe later we'll do exactly that,'* Tetloan replied, willing to go wherever he had to in order to find and kill the Destroyer. *'But first I need her swords, Imp. It's only fitting that his blood is spilt with them.'*

Galimoto grew serious.

"The boy child is right. They *would* make a fitting end to the foul one."

*'Good then. You know what to do.'*

Their wills as one, the Imp flew off, his blood-red body blending with the shadows. The One Elf never stirred as the imp found a perch above him. Though Galimoto moved in utter silence, Tetloan held his breath, worried that even the most subtle shift in the wind from his beating wings would be enough to rouse the famous warrior. But the One Elf seemed oblivious to the intrusion.

Tetloan sent his power in -- doing his best to imitate Emily's subtle thin blue threads. He was getting better, though not as hair thin as hers, he still managed to avoid sending a blue fireball straight towards the One Elf. His small candle-sized flames slithered across the ground while Galimoto drifted down from his perch. The blue flames left only the faintest trail of black grass in their passing, only a slight curl of smoke to indicate they even existed to any other than those of the mage-blood. Galimoto was as sneaky, if not more so. Halfway to the ground he dug his claws into the trunk. Clinging there, his tail uncoiled. The forked barbs moving silently to the hilt of the weapon on the One Elf's left hip. His tail was about to wrap around it, when at the same time Tetloan's blue flames had also neared their destination and were preparing to hoist the other weapon free from its scabbard.

All the while the One Elf never moved, not even to draw breath.

But the One Elf never truly slept . . .

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Came a raspy voice from somewhere beneath the pile of filthy hair and cape. Suddenly the Graelic was in his hands.

At the sound of his voice, Galimoto vanished back into the treetop. Tetloan plowed ahead. He was afraid, but he needed those blades. He needed Nathalia's blades!

"I'm taking them, Solo Ki. And you can't stop me."

His candle flames became bonfires.

But still, the One Elf never stirred.

"Is that so, thief?" the elf calmly replied. "And what would you do with them, if somehow you could take them from me?"

"Put them to more use than you ever will."

Tetloan's missing left arm regrew into blue flames and shot out at the One Elf in a flaming fist.

"In her name, I'll turn them into a whirlwind of silver-fire. Until my last breath I'll make the undead pay for what they've done. All of them."

Solo Ki calmly raised the Graelic to intercept Tetloan's attack. His flaming fist vanished; all that was left was a thin wisp of smoke curling out from the Graelic's tip.

Tetloan's failure only incited his anger. The earth trembled as he summoned more of his power; as much as he could possibly hold. His body was a pyre; the earth itself was cracking beneath his feet. Even the air around him ignited, becoming a churning sea of flaming de . . .

The Graelic slammed into his chest, flinging him backwards and draining every last drop of his power with one blow.

Tetloan was on his knees, gasping for breath. He tried to push himself to his feet, but like a fool, he had forgotten he was short one arm and fell face first into the earth. He was laying there, trying to figure out what happened – how he had been so easily defeated – when a pair of orchid blades fell to the ground but inches from his face.

"They're yours. But if wish to last for even a second against the Plague, you have much to learn. I'll let you keep the blades, but only if you let me teach you how to use them. If you falter or defy me even once, I take them. If you try me again with your mage-fire, I'll kill you. Otherwise, I look forward to seeing your vengeance fulfilled."

Tetloan made it to his knees and ever so delicately grabbed one of the weapons. He knew nothing of swords – their use or their crafting. But nevertheless, from the silver orchid inlay on its face, to the razor-sharp edge, he was amazed by the blade's perfection.

"I won't disappoint you," Tetloan said, as he admired the blade.

It was perfect . . . just like her.

He held the weapon and wept.



## NATHALIA

Death . . . it was denied to her – as was life.

She was adrift . . .

Her flesh had become like a dream, ethereal. Only with focus was she able to take form, and even then she was but a silhouette of her former self -- a memory . . . a memory of flowing golden hair and eyes of grey and white.

Reality remained, but to her it had become meaningless -- nothing more than a blur; a collage of images warped by the stream of time. She watched it fall before her, all of it inexorably sinking into oblivion. She tried to follow it, longing to end it all and become one with the spiraling pit of light and darkness. But the closer she came to it, the stronger the forces worked to repel her – both energies; light and darkness working as one to keep her away.

She truly had nothing now, even the Void denied her.

Her friends, her family, her love; they were forbidden to her. Even if she could reach out to them through the current of time, what would they think of her? Would they condemn her as infected? Call her *Shal'in Ome*? Or would they see a monster -- the result of their own monstrous act?

Love . . .

It had only been an unattainable dream. The moment she dared to believe it had finally been fulfilled, life itself was taken from her. And because of her death – because he was the cause of it -- her lover had become such a dark stain on reality that, for the first time in her existence, she feared he could no longer be redeemed.

Since the day she had found him half dead in the High Tower, she had always believed in him -- in his innocence, goodness, and strength -- even when he had not. She had always believed he would one day prove himself a great man, and that only the infected would come to call him 'Destroyer'. And to the living, he would become a savior.

But now . . .

Her love for him would be consumed, along with the rest of reality. And in time, the dark stain would erase everything. Even the pit of coalescing light and darkness would be no more. Only darkness would remain . . .

. . . and Nathalia.

She was damned to watch her lover put an end to reality.

And of course the Destroyer would be there as well. In the end it would be just the two of them, together, but more alone than ever, forever drifting in the Void.

*"Unnerving isn't it, sister? To see reality this way,"* a soft voice spoke, somehow breaking through the thunder and roar of reality's death as it fell into the maelstrom of the Void. Nathalia would have said the voice spoke in her mind – but she no longer had one. It was more like the sound moved through her, vibrating her soul until it formed sound.

Soon after, the speaker materialized -- a lithe, adolescent form. Her golden hair shimmered in and out of existence. Her white pupils locked on Nathalia's own, and seemed filled with sadness and sympathy. She wore a dress, embroidered at the neck and sleeves with golden thorns. The dress was as white as her skin, and with every motion, fabric and flesh

blurred into one. Where her feet should have been, there was only dress – trailing behind her like mist.

Her pointed ears, and white eyes made it plain she was an elf, cursed as was Nathalia. But unlike Nathalia, she would forever remain a child.

Imagined tears fell from Nathalia's eyes. How could one so young know the sadness of *Shal'in Ome*. . . and to succumb to the welcome of death through suicide? It seemed unthinkable. Suddenly her own suffering was insignificant to what the child must have endured . . . both in life and death. To think, this child had a millennium of life before her, and she had willingly thrown it away. What a horror her life must have been. What the elf child must have lost.

*"In the beginning we found it so as well. But in time we learned . . ."*

The being took a single step, yet somehow closed the distance between them – what seemed like twenty feet. She was over a head shorter than Nathalia, but drifted upwards so they were at eye level. Her white eyes appeared a mirror of Nathalia's own.

*"Who are you?"* Nathalia asked, discovering with a bit of concentration she could cause vibrations in the air, recreating the sound of her own voice.

*"I am Carillign . . ."*

The ghost-child hesitated, her body nearly vanishing altogether.

*". . . or so I once was known. Now, we are but Shal'in Ome. And I am Carillign the Cursed."*

She solidified; her white flesh momentarily lifelike.

*"Where am I, Carillign? What happened to us?"*

*"As far as we know, this place has no name. In our time here, we have met few in this land, and even the most ancient of them knew but little. We know only that we exist outside of reality, and that we have been forsaken. The gift of Adros' blood, which makes us immortal and immune to the Plague, becomes a curse when spilt by one's own hands. Now, we are death to the living, but ourselves unable to fully die."*

*"Like the infected,"* Nathalia cursed.

*"No. Thank the Gods you are not like them. You still control your soul, sister. We can steal life, but we have no 'hunger' for it. We are not slaves to our need to feed, like the Soulless. Forsaken we may be, but it can even be said our new home grants us a unique perspective."*

She nodded her own golden curls at the vortex.

*"Eventually you will learn to read the 'stream', and when you do, the path of those you left behind will become clear."*

One such path was already all too plain to see.

*"By looking in, we can see what the living, and even the dead, cannot. We can see the end."*

Nearby, another elf child shimmered into existence, female as well, though shorter and thinner than the first. They were obviously sisters. Expect for their difference in size, the pair of girls could have passed for twins.

*"For some time we watched it – the end,"* the newcomer said. *"Many souls came and went, came and went. Like a pattern that seemed to repeat itself for all time. No matter what occurred, the pattern remained the same – new life born, another link in the chain, but the end . . ."*

*"Was never the same,"* another voice spoke, lighter than the others, yet so powerful Nathalia's imagined body shook. *"It . . . evolves."*

It took a great deal of her willpower to quiet her form, and try to focus her ‘vision’ on the latest elf child. Before she could compose herself, she felt something soft on her right hand; a touch so gentle and calming it instantly filled her with peace. Nathalia saw a delicate little hand gripping her own. It was milky white, and though it was soft, the hand seemed solid and real – not like her own ghostly flesh. The cherubic bald-headed elf was no taller than her hip, and had eyes so wide and white just to look upon them vibrated her soul.

*“It was then we realized . . . the Void was alive,”* the small, elf child continued. *“And since the birth of time it has been changing . . . but changing into what, we did not know.”*

*“We watched as it continued evolve, wondering what it sought to become,”* the middle child said. *“We delved deeper into the ‘stream’, and it became clear to us . . .”*

*“It was becoming was an abomination,”* youngest child interjected. *“Guided by the hand of chaos, it entered our reality. Where it went, the barrier between life and death dissolved.”*

*“The Plague . . .,”* Nathalia replied.

The sisters nodded as one.

*“The ‘stream’ itself, was corrupted, reversing its flow.”* Carillign said.

Nathalia saw it now. Not all of the darkness was consumed. Some made it out -- black threads creeping back up the stream.

*“Death should be objective; neither good nor bad, merely adaptable to completing its purpose: an end to the living,”* the eldest child continued.

*“But it adapted to the Plague,”* the smallest child said. *“Becoming more than it was ever meant to be – pure evil.”*

Nathalia took the child’s hand and gripped it tightly; desperate to hold on to something real.

*“We saw the coming of an end to it all . . . all of creation. We thought surely in the end reality would die,”* the middle child said.

*“We see far . . .”* the children said, their three voices echoing one another.

*“But the end of time is farther still,”* the smallest child said. *“At some point, reality will cease to be. If we fail to stop the spread of chaos, that point in time will come soon. And it will be because of him.”*

The child’s hand dissolved, slipping from Nathalia’s grip like smoke, then reformed, pointing to a section of the ‘stream’.

Nathalia dreaded to look, fearing the obvious conclusion – that Alec was now her enemy. But the child showed her a new enemy; one she would have feared to face even at her boldest moment of life. Wherever Alec went, reality crumbled. Wherever this being went, reality was infected. It didn’t just devour it, it possessed it.

*“There is but one path,”* the smallest child said. *“We have seen that path, and the one who can stop the chaos . . . and the one who can heal it.”*

It was as the elder child had said; she could read the stream now, and the path of those she loved became suddenly clear. The children were right; there was only one who could stop the spread of corruption that was the latest incarnation of the Void.

Nathalia had been right too.

Alec dealt annihilation in droves, but only to the Dead Worlds.

Alec was a great man.

But if he was to become a savior, he would need help.

Nathalia could also see that his own destructive path was on a direct collision course with the avatar of the Void.

*'Looks like I'll be saving your ass once more, Alec.'*

Her thoughts turned to such a riotous laughter that two of the ghostly elf children appeared startled, and faded away. The littlest one stayed, giving Nathalia a smile that was every bit as honest and innocent as a true elf child.

*"If he is to have a chance he will need the girl."*

*"Emily . . ."*

She saw it . . . the one who could heal . . . and she knew what she had to do.

*"You can return, but beware; you will be death to them,"* the elf child said, as if reading her thoughts.

*"Not to her."*

She saw Emily through her new 'unique' perspective. She had always known the girl was powerful, but could never have imagined her true potential.

*"No,"* the elf child said, looking at Emily's lifeline with obvious admiration. *"Not to her. Only the Abomination is death to her . . . if he cannot stop it."*

Nathalia grew somber, her body rigid and poised as if she once more faced a field of opponents – orchid blades in her hands. And for a moment they were, flickering with a silver light. But she quickly sent them away . . . she had other weapons now.

*"I won't fail,"* Nathalia said, glaring at the timeline. *"I died to save them once . . . no matter what hell I'm in, I would gladly do it again. If I have to give my soul to save them, then so be it."*

*"So be it . . ."* the elf child said, still smiling as she faded away . . .

Nathalia became death, and she too faded away, her soul flowing back into the stream of reality.

## BRICE

Brice did his best to keep pace with his mother. But his mother was tall; her legs lean, strong and long. Only by clinging to her hand was he able to remain with her, though he was more or less dragged along the rich marble hallway. Servants and soldiers passed them by, many shoving or pushing Brice and his mother aside. They once devoted their lives to serving the Langlia household, but now such things as 'rank', and 'position' were forgotten and ignored in their own haste to abandon the manor.

All that they cherished, they abandoned. Unless it could be used as a weapon, it had to be left behind. Anything else would only hinder their escape, for even their greatest treasures would hold little value while fighting their way through the streets of Lock Core.

Brice's mother on the other hand, had no need for weapons. The only thing she took from the mansion was her son.

It all began two days ago, when, for the first time ever, the Death Bell was sounded. The hollow gong reverberated through the streets of Lock Core, filling its citizens with fear. Though they never heard it before, they all knew that the constant, deep clanging could mean only thing - the Black Door was open. And so it was, for soon after the echo of the Death Bell faded, the Plague poured into the Seventh World.

Thus, the battle to save their world commenced, and for two full days the citizens of Lock Core waited in fear, hoping the forces of the Seventh World could do the impossible; stop the Plague. But today the word was spread: "Lock Core was doomed. The city was to be abandoned".

All was lost. All must leave.

Everyone fled.

Since it began, Brice knew fear. But now, that fear had grown greater than he ever thought possible. He knew what awaited him in those dark streets. As much as his mother had struggled to shelter him from the truth of the last two days, he had heard the rumors. He had seen the flames rise above the sky, and the shadowed figures they revealed.

Without a doubt, Brice was worried about what his mother and he would soon face, but even more so, he was afraid for the fate of his father, Dane Langlia, who fought atop the fallen wall. Brice was well aware that his father was used to danger, but not even his great Outland adventures could prepare him for the horrors of the Plague.

It was typical for his father's journeys into the uncharted lands to last for months at a time, but never once did Brice doubt that his father would return . . . until now. He had only been gone two days now, but Brice and his mother had lived every second of those days in dread.

Unlike the rest of the noble families of Lock Core, the moment the Death Bell tolled, Dane Langlia took the majority of his garrison and marched out to the great Red Wall. They were some of the first *true* soldiers to stand the wall. Though the soldiers of Lock Core's garrison were trained to fight, they existed mostly for show. Few, if any, had actually fought a real battle. For the most part, they spent their service walking the Red Wall. If they ever lifted a weapon, it was to salute a tourist.

But Dane and his soldiers were hardened warriors, adventurers who spent most of their lives walking the wilds of the Seventh World, the specter of death always at their side. Over the

years, they earned a great deal of fame and respect among the citizens of Lock Core. Because of their explorations, much of the “uncharted lands” were now thoroughly charted.

Likewise, the items they returned with brought great wealth to the city: sacks of priceless gems, gold and silver objects of every shape and size, artwork from distant foreign cultures. But, perhaps most impressive of all, they often found ancient artifacts, items many thought to be relics of the Exodus – perhaps even older, from a time before the days of the Plague.

As impressive as their treasures were, the stories they returned with were even more impressive. There wasn't an Outland child who didn't know the tale of ‘The Companions' Curse’, or ‘The Blade of the Unholy’. To the citizens of Lock Core, the tales were legendary, and often retold. Dane and his soldiers had become a great source of pride for the city; heroes to the children, and celebrities to the general populous.

But Dane's greatest fan of all was his son. One of Brice's greatest joys in life was his father's homecoming, and the plethora of new bedtime stories that were sure to accompany him.

The last two days had seen Dane's fame and legend grow exponentially. Many new stories of his father's exploits along the Red Wall filtered down to Brice.

It was said, that with only a handful of Magi and the soldiers of Lock Core, Dane and his men were able to hold the Dark Army back for the first day. Dane himself was credited with that small victory. His ability to coordinate a quick and effective defense kept the Plague at bay. Many even claimed it was a slaughter, that Dane's cleverness turned the field of battle into a pit of ash and silver-fire. And for a moment, they even believed themselves victorious; the Plague seemed to fall back to the Rift . . .

. . . then the second wave came, and the third, the fourth . . .

Remarkably, the defense held. Dane continued to adapt to the efforts of the Dark Army, no matter what the Rift threw at him.

His efforts may have been responsible for repelling the initial wave of the Plague, but his greatest achievement was being an example for others; getting them to aid in the defense of the wall, thus allowing the fight to continue on.

When the Death Bell first rang, Dane never hesitated to do his duty to protect the city, nor did he cower in his manor – as did many other lords, and city officials. Dane's bravery brought them all to the wall, rallying the city for a fighting chance. Had the rest of the nobles turned and fled, surely the battle would have ended after that first day. After the stories of his bravery spread, even soldiers from the Outlands poured in, and continued to come.

Until now . . .

But none of it was enough. And where was Brice's father now? Was he still fighting atop the wall, or lying dead upon it?

Or was it even worse . . .

Brice had to know. He wouldn't leave the city until he knew.

Squeezing his mother's hand, he joined the exodus, realizing that to get closer to his father he first had to survive his flight from the keep.

His mother took the lead, effortlessly guiding them through the crowd.

Everywhere they stepped, his father's artifacts, and his mother's art, littered the floor.

Ancient tapestries were left to be torn and trampled upon. Stone statues toppled from their pedestals, scattering across the floor in broken chunks. The art his mother had once nurtured to life with only the magic of her imagination, and the many priceless objects his father risked life and limb to acquire, had turned to trash, becoming little more than obstacles for the fleeing mob to avoid.

Brice tripped on one such obstacle. He slipped from his mother's grip, landing face-first into the floor. His mother's white robe vanished in a press of servants. Even her flowing red locks, which normally towered over all others, began to fade from Brice's sight. Brice struggled to his feet, but alone he was too small, and was jostled to the ground as the fleeing crowd surged on. They were as oblivious to his small body as they were to the many priceless tapestries strewn along the corridor floor.

Their heavy feet began to kick and trample him.

A boot landed on his back, stomping the air from his lungs as he sought to scream his mother's name . . .

Though Dane may have taken his fiercest and most loyal troops to the wall, he didn't leave his son unprotected. In fact, he left Brice with the greatest protector of all – his mother, Lady Corel.

A wall of fast moving blue flames plowed toward Brice, flinging everyone it touched to the wall.

The onslaught of feet stopped.

Blood pouring from his nose, Brice looked up.

Engulfed in fire, his mother, Lady Corel was hovering over him.

*"Enough!"* She screamed, her voice amplified by the Oneness.

*"I know your fear. As I know too that I can no longer order you as Lady of the manor. But I beg you, please, stay calm. We may have lost this battle, but the least we can do is try not to kill each other before the dead have a chance to do so. I promise you, there will be time enough for us all to leave the keep. But to leave here safely, we must work together. However, once beyond these walls, we are all on our own. I know not what lays waiting in the streets, only that we each must face it on our own. I believe sometimes, it's not our lives that are important, but how we face our deaths that matters; with bravery, or cowardice. Sometimes, the manner of our death is the only choice we have left. Please, in what may be our last moment, be brave."*

Many bowed, falling to one knee while they whispered, "Pardons, my Lady" or "Forgive me, Lady Corel". Others lowered their heads; simply too ashamed to face their former mistress.

Her words brought their judgment back. They remembered why they served the house of Langlia; the pay was good, but they loved their masters.

The house began to empty single file.

Brice's mother reached down to him with a slender hand covered in blue flames. She rested her palm on his forehead. Licks of fire crept down his body, mending his bruised body.

"Come, Brice," she said, helping him to his feet. "We must leave this place."

*"The sooner the better. Despite what I said, haste is essential,"* his mother continued, relaying a more honest assessment of the situation through her powers of telepathy.

Brice nodded his head while smoothing out his ruffled silk coat. He took his mother's hand and they continued on, joining the, now orderly, procession heading out of Langlia Manor.

All was well until they reached the foyer – the place where his mother's most prized possessions were once displayed for all who entered Langlia Manor.

At the sight of the destruction, one would have thought the dead had already ravaged the place.

A sigh left his mother's lips. Her eyes misted over. The works were scattered along the stairways, their frames broken beyond repair, and their canvases torn.

As tattered as they were, Brice recognized many of the paintings. The images filled his mind with memories of the hours spent at his mother's side, watching as she transformed the

blank canvases into rich images filled with color and life. She never once summoned the blue fire while she worked, yet to Brice, her paintings seemed birthed of magic none-the-less.

They would be lost to her now. Even the few that remained unscathed could not be carried to safety. They would be left to rot along with the rest of the city.

She took a moment to glimpse them one last time – possibly trying to burn their images into her mind – then tightened her grip on Brice’s hand and continued on.

“Come,” she said, carefully guiding him down the grand central stairway.

Blood spills slicked the steps, a clear indication of the prior, hasty retreat. His mother side-stepped them with queen-like grace, her shimmering white robe never brushing the red pools.

Once at the bottom of the stairway, the great double doors leading to the courtyard loomed before them. Brice felt his mother’s urge to flee, but she buried it, and patiently waited for their turn to exit.

She spared no more final glances to her abandoned home, but kept her light blue eyes fixed on the doors before her.

The moment they crossed the threshold, everything changed.

In the courtyard, chaos reigned. The calming words of Lady Corel were forgotten. The sky poured rain, yet was on fire. The heavens burned with lightning and blue fire, driving the mob into a deeper frenzy. As one, they bolted toward the eastern gate – the exit leading away from the great Red Wall.

The pounding rain, and feet, had turned the courtyard into a mud pool, causing many to lose their footing in their mad dash. Those who fell were trampled and ignored. The sight of the eastern gate – and the promise of safety beyond – again filled the servants of House Langlia with mad panic. And when they did reach the gate, the surge of bodies plugged the twenty foot wide opening, forcing them to claw and punch their way into to the city streets beyond.

Aghast at the sight, Brice followed his mother as she stepped outside -- into the darkness and rain.

Instinctively, Brice moved to join the fleeing crowd, but was halted by his mother’s thin, but deceptively strong, arm.

“I know another way,” she said, guiding him away from the madness.

His boots filling with mud, he trudged through the courtyard. To avoid slipping, or having one of his boots swallowed in the muck, Brice had to keep his focus on the ground.

But his mother was ever vigilant on the path before them. There was a single misplaced shadow hidden in the rain, and the moment she saw it, she instantly ignited into blue flames.

Luckily for the newcomer, her flames illuminated his features. She recognized him just moments before burning him to dust. But even so, Brice could tell by her tense grip on his hand, and continuing swell of flames, that Lady Corel didn’t think the threat of danger had passed.

“*Stand where you are, Mal’tavoy,*” she called out, her voice booming with the Oneness.

An often friendly playmate and instructor, Mal’tavoy was the teenage son of Hansel, House Langlia’s master-at-arms, and garrison commander.

Brice recognized him, but barely. The young man looked haggard and half dead, not the lively youth so full of laughter and warm smiles that Brice was accustomed to. Also, his black cloak was shredded, and the plates of armor beneath were heavily dented. He was hunched over, and favored his right leg as he walked. His once sharp, pointed nose was smashed in, his upper lip swollen to twice its size. Blood poured down his face, washed away by the rain before it passed his chin.



“My Lady,” the young man said, limping forward and doing his best to accomplish a bow. To avoid collapsing in the mud, he had to prop himself up with his silver etched long sword. “I know what you fear, but on my father’s immortal soul, I promise you I am uninfected.”

Lady Corel didn’t hesitate to confirm his words for herself – her blue flames danced his way, and began delving into his flesh.

“Yes, uninfected . . . but not long for this world, Mal’tavoy. Not without help,” Lady Corel said.

Mal’tavoy managed to stand without the aid of his blade as Lady Corel’s flames began weaving in and out of his body.

“What’s happening out there, Mal’tavoy?” Lady Corel asked.

One look at his mother, and Brice could tell she was dreading the young man’s reply. His mother was normally so cool and collected, but now her fear for Dane was as visibly apparent as Brice’s own.

“My Lady, the city is lost . . . and I dare say the Seventh as well. The good Master, and those of us that lived, chose to stay for what would undoubtedly be the final assault. I saw it coming with my own eyes, and surely it would overwhelm the Wall. Master Dane wished only to buy the city time. Any thought of victory had long since been forgotten. He knew it was over, so he left me a message, and sent me to find you and the young master. The city is overrun, but I reached the manor through the sewage tunnels and hidden passways. They have yet to be infested, but for how long I cannot say. I only know that to take the streets is certain death.”

“The message . . . ?” Lady Corel said, dropping Brice’s hand and striding toward Mal’tavoy, her indigo eyes filling with tears. “What of my husband . . . what of Dane?”

“My Lady, please,” the young man said, casting a nervous glance at Brice. “Master Dane wished his final words to remain in my mind, for only you to see.”

“I keep no secrets from my son, nor would Dane.”

“‘For Lady Corel only’, on this he insisted.”

Covered in swirling flames she went to him, silently probing his mind. The flames, and tears, surged as she found her husband’s message.

She spun around, scooping Brice up in her arms.

*‘I love you, my son,’* she thought, consumed in grief.

Her wet, red hair draped over Brice.

There was another thought in her mind as well, one she sought to hide from Brice, but was so overwhelming it filled her mind.

*‘Such horrors . . . greater than anything we could have imagined.’*

Brice glimpsed the horrors as well – images of the battle at the Red Wall that his mother had viewed while probing Mal’tavoy’s mind. In all of his short life of seven sons, Brice never had a nightmare as terrifying as what he saw in his mother’s mind.

*‘You must leave now,’* his mother commanded. *‘Mal’tavoy will lead you through the tunnels and out of the city. Once you are free of this place, do not stop. Never stop. Leave this city as far behind you as possible. This place has become death.’*

Brice didn’t bother to ask why she was leaving him, or where she would go. Their fear of the evil spilling into Lock Core was mutual, as was their shared love for Dane Langlia. Even with the macabre visions of the fall of Lock Core at the forefront of his thoughts, Brice’s love for

his father was the stronger force. And like his mother, he felt that force pulling him to the northern wall.

“Go now, Mal’tavoy,” Lady Corel said, gently setting Brice down on the mud. “Please Gods, see my son safely from this place.”

Despite her words, she still clung to Brice’s hand.

“On my life, my Lady,” Mal’tavoy said, grabbing Brice’s other hand and forcibly pulling him away from his mother. “We shall leave this hell far behind us.”

*‘You know why I must go, Brice?’*

Brice nodded, as ever his mind was as one with his mother, Lady Corel.

*‘Never forget us, my son. And remember how we fought so that others could live. So that you could live.’*

With that, his mother turned and left. She ignored the eastern gate -- where a crowd of people continued to fight for a chance at freedom in the streets -- but continued through the courtyard, running in the opposite direction of the fleeing mob. Lady Corel went instead to the western gate, and the road to the Red Wall . . .



. . . No more than twenty feet into the tunnels, Brice stopped. Silently, he watched as Mal’tavoy’s torch faded to a dim flicker . . . a distant glow . . . and then vanished in the darkness.

Before Mal’tavoy even realized he was missing, Brice was back in the courtyard heading for the western gate and the dark streets of Lock Core.

The flashes of lightning fell more sporadic, but the darkness and rain were as thick as ever. Even so, Brice could see it. The Red Wall loomed in the distance; a silent shadow. The bursts of Mage-fire illuminating the skyline were no more. Because of their absence, the wall appeared almost peaceful. But even Brice’s young mind knew what the silence meant. He knew the defenders had failed, and that the wall had fallen. Even so, it was all the more reason to go there.

He had to get to the wall. He had to find out what became of his parents.



*Disgusting*, the creature thought, averting his large yellow eyes from the sight. As usual, he squeezed his wide nostrils together to fight off the stench of his ‘companions’; careful to keep the hooked claws of his thumb and forefinger from cutting his face.

Though he no longer looked, the wet slurping sound was enough to nearly make him wretch.

*One would think*, he thought. *Galimoto should be used to this by now.*

After countless standard years of servitude, he should have gotten used to such horrors, but thankfully he had not. Without-a-doubt there was a vein of wickedness within his own soul,

but compared to what The Master had become, he seemed more a seraph than an imp. Yes, Galimoto was very thankful he was still repulsed by The Master and his appetite for brains.

The slurping sound continued, accompanied by an ecstatic moan from The Master.

Galimoto waited for the sound to subside before opening his eyes. The Master was hunched over a humanoid being with a hollowed out head. Fresh brain matter dripped from The Master's long, angular beard.

*Please don't eat that*, Galimoto silently begged.

The Master wiped off the remaining chunks with a blood drenched hand, then licked his fingers clean, giving one final moan of pleasure.

Unlike the rest of the Rotten Ones, The Master maintained a strict diet of only brains. A diet The Master had begun the day he was infected by the new and viler version of the Plague. After the Dead Tree took root within his flesh, it was no longer just his body that rotted away, but his soul as well.

Despite his repulsion, Galimoto had to admit that The Master was wise, and knowledgeable of many things. And he knew that what he did was essential to both of their existences. As implausible as it seemed, there were worse things . . . Galimoto knew it to be true.

The Master was a pureblood Makii, one so powerful he crafted life with the Oneness – of which Galimoto's own existence was accredited. But unfortunately, that very same power played a part in the creation of the Plague as well.

The Virus . . . it was his last creation.

And afterwards, he brought only death.

When the tree took over the Dark Army, like the rest of his kind, The Master had no choice but to accept the new Plague. Otherwise, the Void itself would or rise up and destroy him.

Even Galimoto wouldn't stand for that.

So, in order to save his soul, The Master devised his diet. He discovered that by devouring the minds of others, he could maintain his own.

Before they came to this world, it had been so long since his last feeding that Galimoto feared The Master had left, and only the tree remained. The Master never spoke – rarely thought. Galimoto often tried to spark a conversation, just to kill the boredom, but it was like talking to a tree – one that wasn't possessed by the evil incarnation of the Void.

But after eating a few brains, The Master seemed well restored, nearly as good as ever.

*At least he is happy now*, Galimoto thought, noting the ecstatic look on his face – the way his soggy grey eyes rolled back in his head.

Galimoto would prefer it if The Master didn't have to eat brains – or flesh, but an undead Master was better than none at all.

Galimoto knew that The Master liked his brain diet for another reason as well; those he ate stayed dead. He spared them his own fate, for The Master was one of a few Makii that had come to realize the creation of the Plague was a grievous error. There was a time when The Master was a peaceful giver of life. He devoted himself to unlocking the secrets of creation. To bring life from nothingness became his singular obsession. The Master believed the Virus would grant him such a power, and if it failed to do so, he would still have an eternity to discover a solution. But after he was infected, it soon became apparent that he was a slave to the Hunger, and the 'feast' had become his new singular obsession. Even in the midst of his lustful cravings, The Master still had enough sense to realize what that meant, and what he had lost. He knew he

had become a monster. But the hunger drove him on. Despite how repulsive he viewed his own existence, all he wanted was to feed.

And so it went, for more days than Galimoto could possibly remember . . .

His latest meal complete, The Master stood up. Wasting no time, he began sniffing the air to catch the scent of his next meal.

Like a pack of wild animals, The Master's other servants moved in, tearing into the poor humanoid's flesh with their bony hands and rotten teeth. In moments, the being was picked clean. Then they moved on, continuing to hunt the streets, as hungry as ever.

The scene was repeated, over and over. After a while, Galimoto lost count of how many they took.

All Galimoto could do was pray for it to end. Even the boredom of a living on a lifeless world, talking to a lifeless master, was preferable to the massacre he was now forced to witness. He didn't bother trying to flee or hide, Galimoto knew all too well the depths of pain The Master could inflict when angered. He understood the nature of his existence, his position in the hierarchy of servitude, and that his life was tied to The Master. It was all quite simple really -- the Hunger controlled The Master, and The Master controlled Galimoto.

In the beginning it was different -- The Master was different. But The Master had become a demon. As for the demon he once created; Galimoto was the sole remaining testament to his goodness.

His wings of black leather beat hard to keep pace with the hunters as they tore through the city. With every feast, The Master and the other hunters grew stronger, killed quicker, and took on larger prey.

Foolishly, many actually thought to hunt them. But they had little time to contemplate their error before The Master and his minions were upon them. When it was over, they too became a feast.

Galimoto buried deep the hope that one of the planet's defenders would prove a match to The Master. But it had been ages since Galimoto had seen his Master so strong. Few had ever stood against him -- as a true threat. And those that did, ended up proving themselves inadequate to the task. Not to mention, The Master had a distinct advantage over those he faced -- the magic of the imp, Galimoto.

Galimoto was pretty certain, The Master was invincible.

Still though, he enjoyed the hope it brought him when creatures did try to kill The Master.

The hunters found another, helpless victim. Galimoto felt The Master exerting his willpower to the utmost to hold the hunters at bay. The Master always wished to be the first to feed, saving the choice parts for himself -- the brains, of course. It seemed to Galimoto, that The Master's struggle to control his minions grew stronger with every passing day. They too were infected with the new Plague. It was only because of his Master's strength that they obeyed his commands above the will of the Void. But like his wise Master, Galimoto realized that soon the day would come when they would be beyond even his Master's power, brain diet or no.

Galimoto zipped through the air, barely able to keep up with the speed of his engorged Master. They found his skeletal minions surrounding their latest victim -- a frightened, sandy-haired young boy. The boy cowered in the circle of undead, a meager aura of blue covering his skin. The child believed his barrier was the only thing keeping the hunters from tearing him apart, but unbeknownst to him, it was the will of Galimoto's Master that kept him alive.

Empowered as they were, the boy's thin veil of Oneness would be torn asunder as easily as his flesh.

The undead parted as the Master approached. The boy's fear visibly increased, along with his barrier of flames. But it would amount to not.

Galimoto closed his eyes and turned away, all too aware of what came next.

But instead of a wave of pleasure emanating from the Master, he sensed shock – and perhaps even a hint of fear.

Galimoto opened his eyes, but had to immediately close them for he was nearly blinded by a sudden brilliant blue light.

As they adjusted, he squinted at the scene, taking note that a woman now stood over the child – her red hair alive and encased in blue flames. Galimoto couldn't remember having seen a more beautiful creature. Her legs were so long, Galimoto wished nothing more than to climb them, perhaps make a nest amongst her ample bosom. He watched them heave with her every moistened breath, clearly so plump and round through her white, rain drenched robe.

She stood fierce, powerful, and unafraid before The Master.

Almost stronger than his desire to suckle her, Galimoto felt that sense of hope again – oh how he longed for this woman to kill The Master.

Perhaps the powerful beauty could become his new master?

Several of The Master's hunters were headless, their bodies scattered across the street. Galimoto wondered how it was possible, until he saw several of them charge the woman, only to be lifted skyward – a noose of blue flames burning through their necks.

The Master seemed impressed, but also angry. His minions were precious to him; each one hand-picked from his many battles throughout the universe. Many had served him for a millennium. They were irreplaceable, especially in this age.

Galimoto was glad to see them go. Every headless body flying through the air left him with a wicked grin.

Then it was The Master's turn.

A blur, he charged the woman. A dozen threads of light whipped out at him, hoping to snare him like his fallen minions. But The Master moved impossibly fast, and continued to charge right through. The woman barely had time to raise a blue shield before he bore down upon her. Wisps of black smoke rose from his alabaster fists as he hammered down upon the shield of flames. Galimoto had seen those fists crush stone with a single blow – and that was when The Master was at but half of his current strength.

Galimoto expected the shield to crumble, and feared that with every coming blow The Master's fist would tear through it and her body.

Remarkably, her shield held. She even had enough excess energy to begin forming another attack.

But the Master was wise, and had fought and defeated many strong opponents through the ages. He sensed the coming attack, and redirected his own attacks on the boy -- forcing the woman to increase the size of her shield.

They entered a stalemate. As long as The Master continued his attack, she was forced to defend. Perhaps The Master's strength would prove superior in the long run, but he wasn't going to wait that long to find out.

The Master's summoned others of the Dark Army. He knew for certain, his strength would hold out long enough for aid to arrive, and then together they would tear her barrier asunder.

Galimoto also sensed that after her defeat, this brave flame-haired woman would get to keep her brain, but she would join the likes of Galimoto and become a servant of The Master.

*“Attack her, Galimoto!”* The Master commanded.

Galimoto didn't want her to become a servant, he wanted her to become The Master.

“No,” Galimoto replied. “Galimoto is done fighting for The Master.”

The look The Master sent him assured Galimoto an eon of suffering, should the woman fall.

She was going to fall.

Many came to the Master's call – Galimoto smelled them coming.

He thought to aid her, turn his magic against The Master. But his ability to be disobedient to The Master only went so far. If The Master wasn't so focused on killing the woman Galimoto would have to do what he willed, whether he liked it or not.

An army of the dead filled the streets, swarming down upon the red haired woman. The woman must have been special indeed to illicit such a response from the Void, it seemed as if the entire Dark Army had been redirected to fight the woman.

Buried under a pile of rotten limbs, her shield glowed . . . and continued to hold.

But it was fading – slowly, but definitely fading.

It was only a matter of time now . . .

Galimoto distanced himself from the scene, and once more covered his eyes.

Then it happened . . .

A miracle.

. . . The Master was destroyed.

Galimoto sensed it coming and opened his eyes.

A wave of darkness arose, engulfing the sky. With an ear-shattering roar, it spread across the city, spilling into the streets and laying waste to all it touched.

The Master sensed it too. He paused his attack and turned to face it.

The wise and ancient Master looked on . . . confused.

Before he decided what to make of it, the wave washed over him . . .

Then, just like that he was gone.

In all of the madness, the beautiful woman sensed it coming as well. Unlike The Master, before it fell upon her she decided how to face it.

She gave every last ounce of her strength to her shield, and then focused it solely on her son.



When the darkness passed, there was little left; no Master, no woman, no city . . . and Galimoto was soon to join them in oblivion.

A single thread of magic remained.

Galimoto understood that, if he was to live, he had to bond with it.

So he followed it . . . and he found it faintly beating in the charred little body of the boy . . . his new Master.

## DESTROYER

The Void . . .

It was power -- it was truth -- it was death . . . It was Alec . . . and it could not be escaped -- the Dead Gods had been fools to think otherwise.

*Damned Dead Gods! Face me!*

World after world he sought them -- the Dead Gods, the cause of it all.

Thus far he found only their Dead Worlds -- planets once full of life, now abandoned and desecrated.

One after another he found these "Dead Worlds". When he left them, they were particles of dust drifting in space, waiting to be reclaimed by the universe.

He stepped out of the Rift, found himself on yet another lifeless world. The moment he entered, he knew it was vacant, even the Dead Gods were long gone -- only their scent remained, as though taunting him ever deeper into the Rift.

Lighting fell like rain from the orange sky. While the rain itself was acid, drenching his naked body. He let it all wash over him, hoping it would cleanse him, eat away his sins -- or his flesh, thus ending his pain. But it wouldn't be that easy, the darkness was a part of him now -- it was him. The rain and lightning merely tickled his bare skin. He ignored it, just as he ignored the cyclone of sand and wind tearing apart the distant horizon. A storm was coming, one powerful enough to reshape the very landscape of this world. But Alec didn't care. He only had eyes for the marvel before him.

It was unlike anything he had seen before. It seemed impossible, but a structure remained . . . a tower -- a shining black rectangular tower that rose hundreds of feet to the sky. While all else had been obliterated in this world's harsh environment, the tower somehow stood -- seemingly untouched. He left the Rift pulsing at his back -- the sky broiling in front of him, and he went to investigate.

As much as he wished to continue his pursuit of the Dead Gods, he felt compelled to satisfy his curiosity; he needed to know the nature of the tower; why it alone was left standing when all else turned to sand.

Besides, he had time . . . he had all of eternity to find the Dead Gods. Sooner or later, he will catch up to them, and when he does, he will put an end to what they started. He will show them how truly laughable their immortality is; that even their lives have an inevitable end -- and he will be the cause of it.

The rain stopped, replaced by driving gusts of sand. The wind should have carried him away, the sand should have scoured his flesh, but he ignored it as easily as he ignored the acid rain.

Calmly, he strolled to the tower. He didn't give a thought to the impending storm, choosing instead to indulge his mind with thoughts of how he would end the Dead Gods, and how happy he would be when his dark power washed over them -- erased them. He laughed, picturing them vanishing in a wave of the black wind . . .

Just like they did when last he faced the Plague . . .

. . . *Nathalia . . . oblivion.*

He wasn't laughing any more.

No matter how deep into the Rift he went, he couldn't escape the knowledge that he sent her to the Void as well.

He knew it would come to be . . . he had always known. All those he loved would die. All would die. It was what he was born to do – to erase the error of the Dead Gods.

He was made to destroy it all . . .

*But who in the dead made me?*

He was often plagued by that thought.

He could imagine only one possibility -- that he was son to the Void itself; birthed to enact his father's vengeance.

But he didn't give a dead about the Void, or its war with life and the Plague. This was his war, his decision to make. And he had decided . . .

He *was* going to destroy it all.

It was ruined, corrupted now. If ever there was goodness in the universe it had long since ceased to be. Nathalia was the only good thing left in it, and he had destroyed her. She alone kept his power at bay. With her gone . . . he couldn't think of a single good reason not to destroy it.

He knew deep down that no matter what he did she was doomed – but for it to happen because of him, made it insufferable.

But was it because of him?

He had asked himself that question on every world he visited, and the nearer he drew to these supposed "Gods", the more he found them to blame.

Yes, the Dead Gods were the cause of it all, and they would pay for what they have done.

Soon enough . . .

But first he had a mystery to solve.

*What in the dead hell is this place?* Alec wondered as he stood at the base of it, trying to find some kind of entrance into the strange structure. The walls were all smooth, like glass. As far as he could tell, there wasn't a single nick or scratch on any surface.

The winds intensified. On the horizon, sand dunes flowed like waves.

Alec knew that he had to solve this mystery soon, or else he would be plowing through a mountain of sand to get back to the Rift.

He could think of only one thing to do . . .

*Why not,* he thought, sending his energy outward to bore a hole into the tower . . .

. . . he awoke on his back, still outside. The storm was on top of him. The air had been replaced by clouds of whipping sand.

"That was interesting . . . But please, human, do not do that again."

The speaker was very near, had he not been, the sound of his raspy voice would have been lost in the howling winds.

Alec saw the man's shadowy outline at his side. Because the air was thick with sand, his features were indistinguishable.

*No . . .*

It was no man. He saw the creature quite clearly.

"Dead God . . ." Alec grumbled, getting to his feet. "Prepare to die."

"Gladly," the being calmly said, even bowing in acceptance.

Alec wasn't interested in playing games. His power went out, tearing the being apart almost instantaneously.

*No . . .* he thought. Halfway through dissecting the being, he had entered its mind.



*Death would be a blessing for this one.*

The being reformed on the ground -- a pile of shadows.

Alec had learned a great deal by tearing apart its mind, but there were many gaps; blank white spaces where answers should be. Somehow this Dead God was able to keep secrets, even from Alec. It would have been another mystery, if Alec hadn't seen a familiar face in the Dead God's memories; a face he had seen often in the mind of the goddess, Alana.

*Anon . . . Why are you working with a Dead God?*

He was dying to meet this, Anon; he had more than one question he would like to ask the man (or god, which he honestly seemed to be). But he had to solve one riddle at a time.

"I know you've been here before, Imorbis. But what is it? And more importantly, why have you brought me here? Speak up, destruction isn't my only gift, I can create pain as well."

"Pain?" the crumpled form responded, slowly lurching to a humanoid shape. "You have seen my pain, human. Surely you know that you have nothing new to show me."

Alec was at a loss, unsure how to deal with the being. Killing him would be a gift, and torture was meaningless. With all his power, he had no means by which to make him speak.

"Think, human . . . Yes, it was I who brought you here. But why else would I have done so, if not to tell you what you must know; the truth of the Plague, and why you exist."

Alec felt like a fool . . . a powerful godlike fool. He had been following a path through the Rift that had been laid out before him by this Dead God – he had seen the truth of it in Imorbis' mind. He had thought he was going to simply lay waste to it all – Dead Worlds, Dead Gods, and all they had wrought. He thought it was his choice, his war . . . but he was just a tool - a dumb, omniscient, world ending tool.

He remembered his fights with Nathalia; how they always ended with him feeling as foolish as he did now. He also remembered there was a way to avoid such arguments, or failing that, at least dig himself out of a hole.

"Please, Imorbis', can you tell me what in the dead hell this thing is before we are both buried in sand?" Alec said, attempting his best effort at politeness.

The creature's face split into a grin.

"Your kindness is appreciated, but not necessary. The only thing that would have kept me from speaking would have been my death . . . which you have decided to withhold. I guided you here because there is much you must know before you meet your true enemy. To begin with, would be the tower. We, the Makii, have named it 'Alpha' . . . we believe it is the beginning of it all, as ancient as the universe itself."

"So, what is it? And how in the dead did it get here?" Alec asked, resting his hand on the smooth black wall.

"We know not. As I said, it is ancient, and existed before there was life, possibly before the universe itself. For a time, Alpha was known to the Makii as only a myth. On occasion, we heard stories from those we conquered. Stories of a black pillar that moves through worlds, and where it lands, change and revolution are sure to follow. They called it the 'God Stone', and even worshipped it as if it was the creator itself. But the Makii were the only true gods, all others religions we burnt in the flames of the Oneness . . .

Our conquest of the universe continued, and stories of the 'God Stone' were all but forgotten. It wasn't until our dominion was complete that we encountered it. After our victory, our quest to understand existence had begun. And to gain this knowledge, we tracked the spread of life back to its origin, back to the chaos that is the universe's core. The core is a place where galaxies collide, and black holes are more abundant than stars. Virtually all of the races

considered it uninhabitable. For a starship to even venture near such a place, would be a risk no captain would dare take. But with the power of the Darkbridge, the Makii took one step and we were here.

And what we found on this planet, this world . . . was the pillar, Alpha. Here it stood, as though it had been waiting for our arrival the entire time. And yes, human, once it was found, there was a great change.

You wish to know what it is? The Makii sent their most gifted to answer that very question, of which I was one. And though theories abound, all we could determine for certain was that beyond a doubt this is where it all started . . . creation. Right here, on this world. The secrets of the God Stone defy all our logic, powers, and technologies. Whatever it is, we only know that it started us on the path to the Singularity, the Oneness, and yes, even most recently, the Plague.”

“How do you know that?” Alec asked, though he didn’t doubt Imorbis’ words for a moment.

“The universe has known suffering and death, even before the creation of the Plague. The Age of War was one such time. The blessings of the mind -- invention and creativity -- were devoted to one thing, murder. To achieve the death of one’s enemies, faster and more efficiently than your opponent – this was the key to victory, and the goal of every planet and every race. The carnage lasted for millennia, and seemed as though it would continue without end . . . Until one man made a remarkable discovery. His mind had evolved. In an age where technology and machines held the key to victory, he changed the balance of the war.

Many had the power to control the machines, but this man did so unaided, with only the power of his mind. With a thought, he could tap into and take over any machine. Eventually, this ability became known as the Singularity. His descendants carried on his power, and enhanced it. They became known by their ancestor’s given name, Makii. When their numbers grew, they dominated the universe.

But many powerful enemies remained. As did many technologies that even the greatest machines could not defeat. So again we, the Makii evolved. This time we achieved the Oneness. No longer did we simply control machines . . . we controlled all things. When at last we opened the Darkbridge, we were unstoppable. We called ourselves gods, and ruled the universe as though we were truly such. But we died. We all died. To hold such power, yet be faced with mortality was an inconceivable notion to the Makii. So, once more we had to evolve . . . to be Gods in truth that was our goal.”

“But you made the Plague instead.”

“No, it was then that we found Alpha – an encounter that could be no coincidence. The Plague came later . . . As I said, theories abound. Some say it is a door, or a ship, perhaps even a god. Me, I believe it is the Void -- a shard of the abyss that ended up in our reality and warped the universe, forming matter, the stars, planets, and eventually life as well.

. . . I thought I could control it, harness it. Use its power against itself. And at last, the Makii would have a chance at immortality and could escape the Void forever.”

“Nothing escapes the Void,” Alec blurted out.

“Yes, with much regret, I see how foolish a notion that was. I now see the God Stone in a new light. Yes, it is the beginning and the end, but more aptly, it is *a* path. Evolution. We, the Makii tampered with that path, redirected it. We were so consumed with the importance of our own existence, we failed to realize we put the entire universe in peril.

But know this before you go further, human; the Void itself has come to claim us, all of us and everything. The Dead Gods are empty vessels the Void has filled. Your true enemy – the one which you were made to face – is chaos itself. The Plague was most certainly a grievous error, but it pales in comparison to what it has birthed into this reality. Creation itself will crumble if it cannot be stopped. That is why I brought you here, to where our path began. Before you go further, you must know that your powers were meant to pave way for a new beginning, and not just an end.”

“I’m a tool,” Alec bluntly stated.

Not since he first met the Red-Mage had he wanted a drink so badly.

“Yes, human,” Imorbis replied with all honesty. “You are a tool to bring us back to the Maker’s path.”

*The Maker?* Alec thought, not even bothering to voice the question out loud. He already had enough to ponder.

“Who are you, Imorbis, really?”

“You must have realized it by now, human . . . possibly seen it in my mind.”

Alec knew, but he didn’t want to say it. He would never say it.

“I am *your* maker, of course.”

*Of course . . .*

“Great, just don’t expect me to call you, dad, Imorbis.”

The Dead God sent him a warped grin.

“I would not dream of it . . . son.”

Alec almost scattered the Dead God’s particles to the wind, then and there. But there was more that he needed to know, and as much as he hated to admit it, he needed the Dead God.

“Now, human. What else would you like to know?”

“Just one thing.”

There was more to the story. He had to know it all.

“Where is Anon?”

“I thought you would never ask. You will find him when you find your enemy, on the world Ki’minsyllsil . . .

The End

Please look me up @ <http://infinitelimitstheboo.wix.com/jcbell>. Also, would love to hear any comments or critiques as well.

Thanks, J.C. Bell