

∞ LIMITS @ INFINITY ∞

THE SERVANT OF DEATH

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## INTRO

The beginning of the Age of Death —

*So close now . . .* the young man thought, intricate wisps of blue flame drifting from his fingertips.

He sat at a rectangular desk of black stone. A lone glow-globe hovered over him, casting the room in a stale, yellow light. Upon the desk, a small, fur-covered mammal frantically clawed at a cage made of silver bars. Its red eyes alighted on the man's oncoming threads of energy, further triggering the animal's sense of fear to the point it began gnawing on the bars with its large front teeth.

Its efforts would be to no avail — even once the experiment was underway. It would bite and claw with all its might, but nevertheless, the man was confident the silver bars would hold . . . it was perhaps the only element that would do so. He discovered the secret to containing his creations, and it existed in the molecular structure of silver. Even the strength of the Oneness paled in comparison — a lesson the young man had learned the hard way. He failed to realize the effectiveness of his own experimentations, and more than once, the infected creatures threatened to escape their confines. It was but one of the many problems he had to overcome. In order to avoid a full-scale outbreak, it became necessary to eliminate such threats. That became his second problem — their destruction. Technically, once the infection set in they were already dead. The difficult part was convincing their infected cells of this fact. Transforming the Oneness into actual fire proved an adequate solution to that problem. Likewise, silver also functioned well in this regard.

Thankfully, after all was said and done, containment had been sustained. Whether or not the virus was lethal to a humanoid host had yet to be determined — there was much more trial and error to go before he dared to make that assessment. Regardless, He worked under the assumption the virus was anything but safe — as it proved itself to be, one experiment after another. Thus far, only one of the animals lived beyond the 'impregnation' stage for longer than a standard day.

Out of curiosity, he had yet to discard that creature, his greatest 'success'. He kept it close, tucked away in the corner of the room bound in a similar cage of silver — which was in turn encased in an even larger cage of silver -- the young man wasn't taking any chances with that one. The creature had survived for months, and in theory, could possibly exist for all time. Its cellular death had entirely ceased, while cellular division only occurred during trauma — to replace permanently lost cells. All virus infected cells, though essentially dead, continued to function as dictated by the genetic material of the virus. It was rotting, to be sure, the horrid stench was a clear indication of its continued decay. However, the virus kept it animated, fooling the cells into thinking they were yet living no matter how foul its flesh and organs became. As far as the young man could tell, the being required no sustenance to continue its existence. It had a rather voracious appetite for meat; the rarer the meat, the more voracious. Yet it could live for weeks without eating a single morsel. The young man surmised, that most likely, the brunt of the energy it needed to function was derived mainly from the virus itself — an entity born of pure energy. The act of feeding almost seemed a remnant of an instinct it once possessed, an instinct now warped into a gluttonous replica of what it used to be.

Behind him, the creature curled into a ball in the darkest corner of the cage, constantly wheezing as if every breath was its last. All of its hair was long since shed, revealing white flesh riddled with throbbing black veins. Even the red of its eyes had clouded over, covered with a glossy layer of black. The creature's skin hugged its bones, stretched tight like a drum, making the creature skeletal in appearance.

Throughout the day it remained motionless, dead by all accounts except for its labored breathing. Yet, should the young man draw near, it would spring into action, howling and thrashing as it threw itself against the silver bars in a frenzy. The man didn't doubt that given the opportunity, it would feed from him, biting his flesh with as much abandon as it did the bloodied chunks of meat he tossed into the cage.

But it wouldn't bite the silver bars – not after its first attempt to do so had nearly set its mouth on fire. As long as the double layer of silver remained between him and the beast, he was confident he wouldn't become its next feast.

Despite its appearance, and demeanor, the young man *did* consider the creature a success. It was as close to immortality as any Makii had yet to come. Quite possibly the creature would live forever . . . even so, he couldn't deny that its existence was nothing to be admired. No, not yet. But he was close now, so close . . .

Soon -- perhaps even with his current attempt -- the young man would finally find an immortality worthy of the Antevictus.

Concentrating to his utmost, he forged ahead, hoping to at last achieve such a level of success. The man's flames met the cage and melted through. Next, they took hold of the creature. As if calmed by their delicate touch, the animal grew still. The tendrils of flame washed over its flesh, then slowly began to sink in. As they did so, the man developed a sense of the animal, both mental and physical. Though it possessed mainly base emotions, considering its limited intellect, it was surprisingly resilient and adaptable to adversity. Its survival instinct was incredibly strong. As for its physical, cellular structure, it was essentially similar to higher forms of warm-blooded creatures, making the animal a perfect subject for experimentation. Another blessing of the breed was their high rate of birth; to reach this stage of success, the young man had "literally" burned through hundreds of them.

He sent his power deeper into the core of the creature, making his threads of energy even thinner – so thin the blue filaments became invisible to the unaided eye. He guided them to the animal's reproductive organs, then focused them on one single cell – an unfertilized egg in her womb. His goal was to fertilize it, but not with spermatozoa as the Maker intended. Today *he* was playing the Maker, creating his own diminutive life-form that he would unleash upon the animal's unused ovum. Depending on how he crafted his virus, the union could have incredible results. His virus was born of the Oneness, and as such, the qualities it bestowed could often be considered powers in their own right; great strength, increased speed, heightened senses, and of course, immortality. To combine all of these beneficial traits into a single specimen, that was the young man's goal. To do so would make the Makii gods, not just in name, but in truth.

. . . *so close* . . .

He pressed on. He flames merged into a pattern so intricate it appeared a jumble. But to the young man it was perfect – hopefully so.

He stepped back, wiping the sweat from his brow, then using the dampness to slick back his long black hair.

The creature squirmed, then entered a fit of seizures. Every muscle in its body tensed to the breaking point, and meanwhile it shrieked, a shrill high-pitched cry of utter pain.

In the corner of the room, the ‘successful’ experiment joined its cry, the young man didn’t dare take his eyes from the creature in front of him, but at his back, the sound of flesh and bone smashing against the silver cage was a distraction he could hardly ignore.

As if it wailed away its soul, there was a final cry, then the new experiment was silenced.

Afterwards, thrumming his fingers on the table in nervous anticipation, the man watched and waited. Time passed . . . and the creature remained lifelessly still.

*That’s unfortunate*, the man thought, halting his rhythm with a final rap of his knuckles. *Oh well then . . . try, try again . . .*

His Oneness went out once more, this time to burn the creature to ash, but before it reached the animal the creature stirred . . .

It dove at the cage, latching onto the bars with its sharp, long front teeth. Wisps of smoke rose from its mouth as its teeth burned, but still it bore down. Even after its teeth became melted nubs, it continued to chew . . . and stare at the young man with its beady red eyes – which were slowly being covered with a blackish tint.

Blood frothed from its mouth like spittle. To the man’s horror, he noticed the cage bar was bending, flexing outward as the creature continued to push and gnaw on it with bloody gums. The amount of smoke rising from the cage greatly increased, caused not only by the creature’s burning flesh, but from the silver bars as well. Its blood, like acid, was deteriorating the silver.

*Now that, is truly unfortunate.*

From his feet to the top of his head, the man’s body suddenly ignited in a pyre of crackling blue flames. The flames left him in a torrent, engulfing the infected animal. He *tuned* his power to actual fire, hoping to incinerate the creature instantaneously. But surprisingly, as the flames washed over the animal, it squirmed, shrieked and burned . . . but it didn’t die. His power encompassed the cage as well, the heat of which melted the silver bars faster than it did the creature’s flesh.

*Imorbis, you fool*, he inwardly cursed. He had no intention of being the first humanoid test subject of his virus, so he summoned as much Oneness as his body could hold. Never in his life had he held as much. The table began to crumble, the cage became a pool of liquid silver, the glow-globe burst into crystalline shards. Even the walls and floor of reinforced tungsten began to show hairline cracks. Still the animal lived . . . and it jumped at Imorbis.

Every bit of Oneness he could hold, he focused on the animal. He stumbled backward to avoid the creature, tripping over his own feet in his desperation to escape its bloody, wide-open maw. Still pouring energy at the animal, he fell backwards, landing with a thud on the hard floor. The animal flew over him, then with a loud “pop”, it exploded in a burst of bloody pieces – several of which fell on Imorbis to quickly burn their way into his black cloak. Luckily, the majority splattered against the back wall, burning deep holes in the ultra-dense, bi-metal structure.

Imorbis rolled over, untangling himself from his cloak as he did so. He leapt to his feet, leaving his cloak a now smoldering pile of rags on the floor. In the corner of the room, his ‘success’ howled louder than ever before. If he had the strength, he would have instantly sent his Oneness out and destroyed that one as well. He studied the marred wall speckled with chunks of burning flesh, and wondered if maybe it was time to rethink his experiments – or at the least, rethink their method of containment.

Not that he would quit his endeavors, after all, he was so close now . . . Imorbis just worried that perhaps he was getting too close . . .

Even if he wanted to quit, he couldn't. His project was not only sanctioned by the Antevictus, it was fervently supported. The Ancient Ones had a lot resting on him, him and his companions. It was fair to say their very lives were at stake.

Such was the mission of all Makii, as dictated by the Antevictus. The Antevictus were the most ancient of Makii, those that began, and finished the conquest of the universe. It was they who created the God Door, thus binding all the worlds as one – one Dominion. And throughout their Dominion, they were beheld as gods – perhaps the most powerful beings to ever exist in the universe. Because of them, the Age of War finally came to an end, and through their strength in the Oneness, peace was imposed throughout the entire universe.

The Antevictus were now decrepit shells of useless flesh. Only the Oneness kept them alive, but that's all it did. Their bodies were no longer theirs to control. Telepathically they dictated their will to their followers, meanwhile they sat on their royal thrones in pools of piss and watery feces. They were dying, these most powerful beings. It was their decree – their last dying command -- that those with the blood of Makii were to strive for immortality – by any means necessary.

Of all the Makii, Imorbis was the closest to a solution.

He couldn't stop, but he would have to start over, approach the problem in another way. Imorbis unstrapped the silver dagger from his waist and headed toward his 'success', which continued to thrash and howl in the corner of the room. As he passed the damaged wall, he noticed a glob of black blood carving a channel as it dripped to the floor.

*Perhaps, he thought. I should first understand my error before I start anew.*

Instead of killing the remaining creature, he used the knife to scrape the blood from the wall. He found a vial of thick crystal and deposited a drop of the viscous, black blood within. He set it aside on the burnt and cracked table, then began searching the room for something more secure to store it in. He eyed his personal locker, which had walls of synthetic plaz-steel. The locker was manufactured specifically to endure all manner of intrusion – Imorbis just hoped acid was listed among them.

*Besides, he thought. One lonely drop, how much harm can come of it?*

Worse case, the infection would spread, and encompass the few inhabitants of this world. Here it would remain, contained . . . Imorbis took a second to rethink that outcome. Would it be contained? What if the infection somehow made it through the God Door, into the inhabited worlds? He could barely conceive what sort of catastrophe that would unleash. His supposed 'cure' for death would become a plague.

*Safety first, Imorbis pondered. Yes, that would be best.*

He planned on storing it in the locker, then, when his power returned, he would delve the sample. If the cells remained whole, he could find his virus, and perhaps uncover its properties, good and bad.

He took up the knife again – he was still going to kill his 'success'. Not because he feared its escape, mainly he just wanted to silence the beast.

But once more, the being's life was spared, this time because there came a knock on his door.

It was a welcome coincidence that the creature grew silent with the sudden noise.

He pondered cleaning the room before greeting his visitor, but Imorbis recognized the presence, and knew he had nothing to hide.

With a flicker of blue flame, the door to his chamber dissolved, revealing a middle-aged man with a long, triangular beard.

“There was a surge of power . . .” the man declared. “I worried your experiments had finally gotten the best of you, Imorbis.”

“Despite appearances, Mastecus,” Imorbis replied. “My creation is not nearly as disastrous as your imp Galimoto,” he finished, grinning at the man.

He had to admit, the annoying red demon was instrumental in his own work. Mastecus had shared the secret of its creation with Imorbis, and though the familiar was not entirely ‘real’, the ability to simulate life with the Oneness took Imorbis’ experimentation to a whole other level. But unlike Mastecus’ creation, Galimoto, to create life with the Oneness, Imorbis dared not work on such a large scale – nor did he wish to bind his own life-force to his creation till the end of his days, as Mastecus had done. But with a minute, well-crafted virus, he believed even the largest of creatures could be changed. The possibilities were as endless as the genetic code itself. The next step in his experiments had been finding the right code . . . a process that involved endless trial, and constant error – of which, the latest error was yet displayed on his wall in a splatter of burning flesh.

But he *was* getting close . . .

“Dare I ask, Mastecus, where has your fiend run off to now?” Imorbis questioned. He had no love for the man’s familiar, but now and again the being proved a source of amusement – which typically came at the cost of its staunch master, Mastecus.

“Galimoto has been confined to my quarters by direct command of the Supremis,” Mastecus replied, his cheeks blushing.

Imorbis smiled at the man’s discomfort. Perhaps he offered it too often and too freely, but for reasons unknown to him, many were misled by that smile and thought it equated to kindness on Imorbis’ part. To their error, they failed to detect the wickedness inherent in his soul.

“It appears he wandered into the female barracks,” Mastecus said, hesitant to continue. “The ensuing chaos nearly roused the sleeping Antevictus.”

“There’s only one thing the Ancient Ones would awaken for . . .”

“Yes, immortality. And the old fools believe we will be the ones to find it, here, in this hell that is the universe’s core,” Mastecus fumed.

“If this star-system, or more aptly, fusion of colliding star-systems doesn’t kill us first,” Imorbis replied.

“Speaking of which, before I rushed here to save you, I was trying to talk some sense into Sevron, and at least convince him to leave the open-air, if only for enough time to recoup his shield. But no matter what I said, my words seemed to fall on deaf ears. He has become obsessed with the obelisk, as if his gift of empathy has somehow bonded him to the relic.”

Imorbis was very familiar with his friend’s latest obsession. Since the moment they arrived, Sevron had changed. They were all fascinated with the mystery of the black pillar, and diligently studied it to the best of their abilities. But Sevron was addicted to it. The one man in the entire universe that could read your soul in the first moment he met you, had finally found something he couldn’t readily understand – and it was tearing him apart.

“I will meet with him.”

“You had better hurry. The third sun is on the rise. He has been out there too long as it is, with the little power he has left, he will not make it to see the red sun set.”

Imorbis’ experiment would have to wait, his friend needed him now. He bid Mastecus a half-hearted farewell then used his power to store the vial in his locker. He took a moment to make sure the drop of blood didn’t suddenly disintegrate a hole through the bottom, then Imorbis threw on a spare cloak and headed for the open-air.

The sun beat down upon the land of orange and red sand. Plumes of sand lifted from the desert, spiraling upwards to form miniature tornadoes. In a burst of speed they tore through the dunes, breaking apart the waves of sand in a frenzy of energy. Their power expended, the ribbons of sand broke apart, drifting back to the earth in a cloud.

On the horizon, what once was a field of jagged mountain peaks was now but a towering mound of polished stone. Tucked beneath its shadow – safely sheltered from the searing wind and blistering sun -- was the expedition's makeshift base; a fortress of interlocking slabs of grey bi-metal walls.

Covered in a dim shell of blue flame, Imorbis left the structure, his destination the stark black pillar rising in the distance, and the lone figure sitting in front of it. Imorbis walked out into the howling wind, and as always, felt humbled as he stood before the giant monolith. The structure rose hundreds of feet skyward and was a perfect geometric rectangle. The surface was jet-black and utterly impenetrable, what dwelt within was yet a mystery, as was the material the object was made of. Three dozen of the best and brightest Makii were sent to study it, but thus far, nothing they did seemed to reveal a hint at the object's nature or power – except, perhaps, for one man – Sevron. Sevron had an unusual gift. Without using even a trace of telepathy, he could see the truth of one's heart and soul. If the structure possessed some form of life, or intelligence, Imorbis was willing to bet Sevron would be able to understand its intent.

“So, Sevron, have you uncovered its secret yet?” Imorbis asked, grinning at his friend, who sat at the base of the structure, his sandy brown eyes transfixed on the object. “I've placed a sizable wager that it's a vessel of alien descent, please tell me I haven't been mistaken.”

Sevron continued to sit in silence. Mastecus wasn't exaggerating, his friend was deeply engrossed in the monolith – too much so for his own good. His shield was practically non-existent, already the harsh sand was blowing through, peppering his exposed skin with red dots.

“The odds favored interstellar flotsam,” Imorbis continued, drawing nearer. “The wreckage of an ancient starship left-over from the voyages of the Origin Race. Most believe they came here, as did we, to seek the beginning of life. But lacking the God Door, the chaos of the core prove unnavigable.”

“. . . it doesn't exist,” Sevron suddenly interjected, his voice icy-calm. “That's the only thing that makes sense . . .” he continued, never taking his eyes from the monolith. “Either that, or we don't exist . . . and what we're seeing is a true sliver of reality, something our imagined minds simply cannot grasp.”

*So, it was to be like this . . .* Imorbis thought, sighing. *Very well.*

Normally, he would love nothing better than to sit with his friend and philosophize the time away, but judging by the blood-red horizon and their failing shields, neither of them had a great deal of time left.

“We know but one fact, my friend -- it is the foundation of life, of that we are certain,” Imorbis said, trying to coax his friend toward reason.

“No, nothing is certain . . .” Sevron said, lowering his head of dark-brown hair. “That's the crux of it. That's where we're wrong. It's not what they think it is. It has nothing to do with creating life . . . it spawned chaos, the *true* reality.”



*And the half-full glass is now half-empty.*

Clearly there would be no reasoning with his friend.

“You should leave, Sevron. Your shield is dim, and the third sun is soon to rise.”

“I need a moment longer, to test my theory. I’m so close now . . .”

His words were hauntingly familiar . . .

“When the red sun sets, I’ll know if I was right.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“It would be the first time.”

Sevron managed to tear his gaze from the pillar and turned to Imorbis. As he smirked up at him, Imorbis was surprised at how gaunt he had become. His once, well-muscled friend was all wiry muscles with loose, yet sunken flesh. Imorbis tried to smile back at him but couldn’t summon the lie – Sevron would have known the difference anyway.

“I won’t let you die out here,” Imorbis said. “Not for this thing, not for them.”

The red sun was coming, and with it came a tempest of scouring winds.

Sevron turned away and stood up, letting his robe slip to the sand. His bare chest was immediately blistered by the wind . . .

“I’m sure you won’t,” Sevron replied as the horizon was suddenly filled with fire. “But I have to do this . . . I have to know that my life has meaning . . . or that it does not,” he continued, walking forward to lay his hand on the smooth black surface. “Until I know for sure, everything you, or anyone else does is meaningless . . .”

Sevron no longer had a shield of power to protect him, and the majority of his flesh was bare and exposed to the elements. Wearied from his experiment, Imorbis had a difficult time maintaining his own shield, and he very much doubted anything he could summon would protect him from the coming storm of burning sand. Nevertheless, he stepped forward, calling to his friend. He made it barely three steps before he was blinded by the howling storm.

His shield no longer sufficient protection, he was forced to cover his eyes. He took one final step. Gave one final shout of, “Sevron!” But even he could no longer hear the sound of his own voice. A gust of wind sent him airborne and flung him onto his back. If Sevron was still out there, he would never find him in time. Blinded, and disorientated, Imorbis was doubtful he would make it back himself.

His shield was all but useless, so he focused what little power he had left on a final moment of sight. He filled his eyes with flames of the Oneness and peered into the wind.

He distinguished two shapes; one a lumpy mountain of polished stone, the other a rectangle, towering to the sky . . .

His flesh peeling, Imorbis faced the mountain and crawled his way back to the base camp . . .



The red sun had yet to fully set, but Imorbis rushed out none-the-less. This time he was ablaze in blue flame, and flew over the scorched sands. He sensed his friend, though faintly. The entire time the sun rode through the sky he could sense him, sense his pain. How he yet lived was nothing short of a miracle.

Imorbis followed the sensation and found Sevron curled up at the base of the obelisk, a charred and fleshless husk.

In futility, he poured his Oneness into him, hoping to restore his broken form, but clearly, Sevron was on the verge of death. No amount of Oneness would ever bring him back. There was only one possible cure for that . . .

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick crystal vial.

He looked at the vial . . . and he looked at his friend. If anyone could handle the virus, Sevron could. Either way, he was sure to die. Perhaps it was time . . . time to find out what effect the virus had on one of the Makii blood.

With his head cradled in his lap, Imorbis tipped the vial to Sevron's lips . . .

## DONA' CORA

Age of Death —

There it was . . . the Kandorian High-Bridge, the last road to Castle Kandor.

At last, she had reached her destination.

Her eyes were small and round, her pupils black pinpoints swimming in a pool of yellow. They took in the High-Bridge – the final obstacle in her century long path.

The bridge spanned a canyon hundreds of feet deep. Below it, serrated rocks littered the cliffs on either side. At the bottom, the churning river could barely be seen; a broil of foamy white liquid crashing through the rocky river bed.

The Kandorian Bridge was a gleaming structure of white metal; seven sets of flowing arches each a hundred feet long. Steel, web-shaped gussets connected the arches and tied them to giant support towers on either side of the canyon.

The infected filled the length of the bridge; a horde of growling, blood-thirsty monsters, awaiting her arrival.

From head to toe she was covered in blood, both black and red. The hair on her head was long, black and drenched in filth. Likewise, the smooth, silken layer of black hair on her arms and face was also soiled and sticking to her flesh. Her golden, form-fitting dress was torn and tattered, also soaked in the gore of her enemies. The gossamer train of her dress dragged behind her, leaving a bloody trail in her wake.

This world's orange sun slowly set at her back. In front of her, a star-filled sky twinkled behind Castle Kandor.

How many had died for her to get here? How many had she killed . . . ?

All of them . . . and the killing wasn't even done.

*No. Not yet.*

She may have lost the long, hard-fought battle that had started it all, but she wouldn't stop, not until he was dead. Nothing else mattered.

She stood at the entrance of the bridge, as if daring the undead to come to her. They came, howling for her blood. Just as the swarm threatened to engulf her, she covered herself in a thick blaze of blue flames, turning their charge into a storm of ash and fire. Those foolish enough to draw near were incinerated. Others, wise enough to sense an end to their corrupt immortality, tried to backpedal, but were swept up in the press of the throng and likewise shoved into the fire. By the time the mob learned its lesson and reversed direction, she was knee deep in a pile of ash.

They tried to flee, but it didn't matter. They couldn't hide from her. She was a goddess. She was more powerful than any Makii, even after they had infected themselves with their 'Dark Gift'. She not only shared their genetics, but possessed many new and powerful variants that allowed her to control more of the Oneness than any living being before her. The Makii thought that by altering their blood with the Plague they could achieve perfection.

But Dona'Cora was perfection incarnate. She was born with her abilities -- the ultimate achievement of evolution.

She was going to remind them of that fact. She would teach them all what it meant to anger a true goddess.

She could have burned a hole through the crowd from one end of the bridge to the other, but why waste the effort? Wisely, she conserved her power, lest the Makii try to force their 'gift' upon her later.

Dona'Cora melted the bridge supports instead. The western tower toppled. With an ear-wrenching groan, the entire High-Bridge slowly spilled into the canyon, the steel beams and supports bending like rubber as it fell. The forces of the Dark Army tumbled down it like a giant slide, disappearing in the frothy river below.

Dona'Cora drifted upward, covered in a halo of burning blue flame. In front of her, Castle Kandor loomed, a giant keep of stone surrounded by a curtain wall of pure steel. The wall was magic-wrought and never meant to fall – but fall it had. Somewhere inside resided her fallen lover, the God-King Thane. How she dreaded to face him again, she could only imagine what he had become. Her proud, handsome lover was most likely a demon now, his flesh desecrated, his soul corrupted.

She had failed to save him in time. But she wouldn't fail him in this . . . not in this.

No matter what, she wouldn't leave this world until she put him to death.

She flew over the canyon. Below her, the flailing bodies of the undead continued to spill into the river. Some of the stronger ones were able to pull themselves up the bridge and to the other side. A crowd of them formed at the gate, but she sent a wave of flames their way, scorching a clearing for her to land. She drifted to the other side, standing at the collapsed and bent iron gate leading to the citadel. The undead were all around her, snarling, clawing the air in her direction, but otherwise they remained in place, their rotting brains finally comprehending that attacking her was pointless.

Dona'Cora encountered no further resistance as she entered the keep. She sensed the Makii were still lingering in the area, but even they feared to challenge her, and rightly so. They knew her well by now, she had sent many of their kind to the true death through the course of the battle, and would do the same to any more that chose to bar her path.

She strolled through the citadel. The once luxurious entrance hall was in ruins. The round, marble fountain spewed blood; the gilded statues circling it were toppled. The castle had fallen many years past, but the signs of battle remained, the Dead Gods hadn't even bothered to clean their mess. Flaking stains of black blood marred the floors and walls. Skeletal corpses filled the hallways. What flesh remained to them was sunken and black, but beyond that, their clothing was the only part of them that hadn't rotted away. The stench of death and decay clung to the keep, but Dona'Cora had grown so used to the smell she no longer even noticed it.

She ignored the remnants of slaughter altogether, well aware that her own blood-covered body was equally gruesome. She headed for the throne room, where he most likely would be found. Her flames led the way, searing a path through the corpse-filled keep. She cared not for cleaning up the carnage, but was more concerned that the skeletal figures were possessed by the Plague, and could suddenly rise up against her. She didn't want to take that chance, so she turned them all to ash instead.

Dona'Cora left the hallways glowing red with heat as she moved through the castle. By the time she reached the throne room the entire castle was ablaze, its stone walls near melting from the magic wrought fire.

The giant double doors of the throne room had been torn from their hinges and flung to the floor. The force that struck them must have been incredible, for it nearly folded the solid iron

doors in half. On a raised dais just beyond the broken doors, sat the Kandarian Throne -- a polished chair of black marble. Surprisingly, the Makii left the chair untarnished; every last jewel and precious gem was yet encrusted into the black marble.

Her God King hadn't been so lucky. He sat on the throne, his clothing remained; he was dressed in a purple silk coat, a velvet surcoat and black satin mantel. A skeletal hand held a scepter with a large, perfectly transparent diamond at the end. Like the rest of the dead she had come across in the castle, the flesh visible on her dead lover was taut and black -- and very little of it remained. For the most part, his bones were fully exposed. His head was eyeless, hollow, and hung back awkwardly. A stain of black blood covered the front of his coat, and surrounded the throne as well. Some blackened flesh remained on his neck, as did a deep horizontal gash.

His right hand hung to the side, below it rested a jeweled dagger.

"So often this occurs . . . such a waste of life. To see it happen still saddens me."

She was too absorbed in the horror of what her lover had become that she failed to realize the presence of the Makii, and that she was surrounded by them. There were dozens of them, and every moment more of them appeared, slinking out of the shadows.

"I offered Thane peace . . . immortality. What more could one want in life?" the speaker said, then sighed deeply. "Alas, in the end, Thane thought death was the better bargain."

One of the Makii stepped out from the crowd, stopping just short of entering her personal space. He was strange (even for a Makii), it wasn't just his manner of dress that was odd, but his physical features as well. There was something very familiar about him, as though they had met before, but she couldn't put a name to his face -- and what an unsettling face it was. Surely if she had seen him before, the memory of the man would have been hard to erase.

All of the Makii were essentially human, and were often thought to be the progenitors of that race. But after they were infected, they became something altogether different; their skin was pallid, their eyes pure black. All of their hair eventually turned gray, their teeth and fingernails purple and black. Their veins grew swollen and filled with the dark, Plague infected blood.

This being was altogether different, even more gruesome.

He wore a stark white top hat on his head and a suit of matching color. His shoes were white as well and sparkling clean. Gloves of silk covered his hands, which were fixated on twirling the frilly white lace around his collar.

His skin actually had hue -- though it was mostly purple and black, and it was stiff, as though it had been unnaturally stretched to fit over the man's face. It was so taut, the simplest facial expression was impossible, leaving the Makii with a constant, emotionless stare.

And his eyes . . . they weren't just black, they were empty.

He approached her without fear . . . without feeling, as though he was standing before a wall.

Dona'Cora tried to recollect his name (perhaps something with 'annihilator' or 'death-dealer' in it) but nothing seemed to suit him.

*Desecrator . . . yes, that seems more fitting*, she thought, returning the Dead God's emotionless stare with one of her own.

She knew the Makii had a fondness of such titles, but Dona'Cora made a conscious effort to ignore them. Even if she cared enough to try, she couldn't possibly remember them all, for according to the latest estimates, the Makii yet numbered around two million (Dona'Cora took great pride in the knowledge that she had played a large role in reducing that number).

Typically, their haughty titles were meant to strike fear in the hearts of the living. But no matter how well deserved the titles may be, Dona'Cora found them to be a childish indulgence.

They merely served to foster the Dead Gods' own immortality fantasies. But no matter how ominous their names, Dona'Cora put them to death just the same.

Honestly, she really didn't care what the white-dressed Makii's name was -- it didn't matter -- he was soon to be dead and forgotten.

"I told Thane there need not be war between us, that we could be as brothers, if he only partook of the *blood*," the Dead God continued, his lips cracking as he spoke. "What heights he could have risen to in our ranks? But in the end, he denied our gift. He took another path . . . When at last they realized the battle was over and they had lost, Thane, and the rest of his soldiers took their own lives."

The Dead God took off his hat and shook his head, as if in sadness – though his face was as impassive as ever.

"Even though we fought as foes, I admired his courage and power. In life, he was a valiant warrior, holding Castle Kandor far longer than we had anticipated. Had he been blessed with the *blood*, he would have been fearsome indeed."

The Dead God was putting on such a credible show of sympathy that Dona'Cora half expected to see tears spilling from the pits where his eyes should be.

"His death is truly a great loss. But on behalf of my Brethren, we beg you, please do not hold us to blame. After all, Thane's life ended by his own hand."

Dona'Cora had seen enough of the Dead God's act.

She burst into flames. Every inch of the throne room was bathed in brilliant blue light, leaving the Makii with no more shadows to lurk in. All in all, there were around fifty of the Dead Gods present. She wasn't intimidated or afraid. Instead, she only found their pale dead faces pathetic to behold.

"You wish me to believe you are without blame in this?" Dona'Cora coldly stated, throwing her own fearless self-confidence back into the man's face.

She was a goddess! These beings were but corpses.

"To believe you actually give a damn about him?"

Her halo flared even brighter. Her blue flames crackled and roared as they leapt from her flesh.

"There is only one thing your kind cares for, the Hunger. If truly you are sad, it is only because you were denied the blood of a God."

The white-clad Makii was through pretending.

The man gave up the charade of mock sadness. He stood before her, calm, still, and utterly devoid of emotion. He replaced the hat on his head and raised his eyeless gaze to Dona'Cora.

"I see . . . We had hoped you would be wiser than Thane, Dona'Cora, and joined us willingly. It's true, his blood would have been savored. But, judging on how difficult you have been to dispose of, I think yours will be sweeter yet. And I promise that with you, we won't let a single drop go to waste."

The Dead God slowly approached her.

As if oblivious to the fact that her life had just been threatened, Dona'Cora ignored the man, and turning to the others she said, "This isn't over. We will fight again one day, and when we do, I promise your lives shall have a permanent end."

With that, the Dead God came at her . . .

He *was* powerful! He moved so fast she could barely see him -- despite the vast amount of Oneness she held. But she didn't have to see him. His actions were predictable; he was overconfident and moved too fast for his own good. He also underestimated her power. He

never expected that she could do in an instant what took others hours. She opened a Rift right in front of her, right in the path of the Dead God. In the last second he tried to halt his momentum, but it was too late. His left leg was severed at the knee, his right arm vanished at his shoulder. His top hat was cut cleanly in half . . . so too was his head. What was left of him crumpled to the throne room floor. His leg, arm and face disappeared into the oblivion of the Black Door.

. . . So too did Dona'Corra.

The rift hovered in front of her; a pulsating tear in space and time. She casually stepped into it, not worried for a second about the fifty Makii she was leaving behind. It would be easy for them to track her . . . but she knew they wouldn't. The Makii's greatest weakness was their fear of death, and she had just accentuated it by making short work their white-clad leader. She was also confident they were wise enough to realize her statement wasn't a boast, and that if they saw her again, she truly would put an end to their immortality.

Dona'Corra was a harsh, cold, arrogant woman. Only one thing in the entire universe had ever proven to soften her heart. But now the love of Thane was no more. She had failed him. As she drifted through the abyss, she had an epiphany. Her heart grew colder than ever, her power grew stronger.

The war was lost, her lover had died, but in the abyss she found a new purpose to her existence.

Dona'Corra left the Rift, entering a gray and desolate wasteland. The dense atmosphere nearly crushed her; the powerful wind nearly lifted her off her feet. Her power saved her from both. In the distance, a white sun burned the horizon. Above it hung a shiny black moon; a ball of melted obsidian glass.

Dona'Corra took a step toward the horizon and the hovering black moon -- her first step on a long pathway to vengeance.

In the millennium that followed, her every action became focused on fulfilling her threat of one day destroying the Makii. To whatever god that would hear her, she vowed that when next they meet, she would be the one who was victorious.

## SEVRON

Sevron fell away from the Rift, collapsing onto his back. Black blood poured from his severed arm, leg, and head – which had been neatly sliced in half, leaving a gaping wound where the man’s face used to be. The only recognizable features were a pair of holes where his nose once was, and his soggy grey brain. His once immaculate jacket and pants were rapidly transforming from pure white to black as the fine fabric soaked up his blood. His remaining leg flopped around uncontrollably, splashing the black blood around the room. His top hat had been cut along with his head, only half of it remained, sitting in a spreading dark pool.

The Makii gathered around, watching the man go through what should have been his death throes. They exchanged glances with one another. Some, shared looks of knowing; others fear. But mostly they appeared uncertain.

“We should end him now. We may never have a chance like this again,” one of them dared to voice. “I believe in victory and conquest – such is the way of the Makii – but Sevron desires only corruption. It was never meant to be as such,” the speaker continued. She may have once been a young woman fully blessed with natural beauty, but it was hard to tell for certain, because now her flesh appeared to have been soaked in bleach, the blood in her veins replaced with ink. Her eyes were like black marbles, her hair was thin, coarse and grey.

Her body, however, retained its youthful shape. Her legs were long and lean, with a muscle tone that was firm and well defined. A fair amount of her ample alabaster breasts were exposed through the split of her dress, their size further accentuated by the dress’ sleek fit and the color-shifting scale mail material from which it was made. Depending how the light hit them, the tiny metal scales alternated in color from silver, purple and gold.

“The glory of the Makii will end in ruin if he is allowed to live . . . the entire universe will end as such,” she declared, her black eyes staring at the thrashing Dead God.

“If you wish to try, I shall not stop you, Melina. But I warn you, be certain you can actually succeed in such a task. We have all been witness to his power, and I have had the misfortune of seeing it more than most,” a Dead God replied. The speaker was handsomely dressed, wearing a black silk shirt with matching cape, and shiny boots of black leather. His gray hair was short and slicked back. The Dead God’s face was clean shaven and had smooth, soft features that would have appeared friendly on any other face. “Believe me when I say that Lord Sevron is the only one of us who is truly immortal.”

As if in response to his words, the movements of Sevron’s body became more purposeful, his limbs stopped thrashing. His remaining arm actually pushed him to his knee. With blood still pouring from his head and his brain exposed, Sevron turned to face the rest of the Makii.

“Galimoto agrees with Melina,” a piping voice spoke, followed by a fluttering of wings as a tiny red-bodied creature with yellow eyes flew into the circle of Makii. The being had large wings of black leather and a long, whip-like tail that ended in twin barbs. He hovered in front of the Makii, keeping one yellow eye trained towards the fallen Dead God to make sure he didn’t get too close, then he continued, “Lately, Sevron reeks of death . . . even more than the rest of you. Perhaps, Master, if you help her . . .”



Sevron turned to the creature, blood bubbling from his gaping throat as he attempted to howl at the little imp.

As soon as Sevron turned to him, the imp instantly fled the circle . . . and he didn't stop, not until he was far from Kandor Keep.

"I *will* end him, Imorbis. Of that you can be certain. This has to stop. For the *gift* I willingly accept the Hunger, but what he has become, I cannot accept," the woman said, her white fist emanating with waves of black. "If you cowards refuse to help, then to the dead with you."

She closed in on the wounded Dead God.

Imorbis shook his head and took several steps back – the other Dead Gods followed him, none of them moved to Melina's aid.

"Look at you now, 'Sevron, The Servant of Death'," Melina said as she stood over him.

He gurgled in response to her, blood spurting from the hole that was his face, covering her steel scaled dress.

"Foul creature," she said, her face twisting in disgust. "Time to join those you've despoiled, Sevron."

Both of her fists were humming with power, the waves of black energy throbbing with the beat of her heart.

She raised her arms, preparing to unleash the full might of her power, ending the Dead God once and for all.

With surprising speed, Sevron stood up, his black blood formed into a leg . . . and into an arm as well. His new-born black fist plowed forward, penetrating her dress of metal scales, and continuing onward, plunging into Melina's chest. Briefly, her face registered shock, then, once she realized her doom, it showed only fear. The power she held sputtered and faded. All of her energy was diverted to keep her already dead body alive.

She should have let herself go.

Sevron's hand of black blood heaved her upwards. Her blood sprayed through the air, raining down on Sevron. With his other hand, he grabbed her arm, and ripped it from her body, tearing it off as easily as if he was pulling the limb from an insect. Melina's screams filled the throne room. Sevron grabbed her face, turning her screams into gurgles. His fingers melted into her skin and bones, then he tore her skull apart, face and all. Her brain spilled from her head as Sevron flung her to the floor.

Lastly, he took a leg. He planted one foot on her body and pulled. There was an awful slurping sound and then . . .

"Mastecus . . ." Sevron called, his black blood had formed the semblance of a face.

He began incorporating Melina's arm to his body. His blood filled her veins, animating the woman's severed limb and controlling it as his own.

"Yes, Lord Sevron," one of the Makii responded, a thin, elderly looking Dead God with a long, angular gray beard.

"Learn to control your creation, the imp, or I will."

Mastecus fully understood the threat; for Sevron to control Galimoto, Mastecus would have to die.

"I apologize, Sevron. It shall not happen again."

"As for you, Imorbis," Sevron said, fusing Melina's leg to his body.

Imorbis bowed his slicked head low.

"Yes?"

“You should have stopped her . . .”

Melina’s face was still in his hand. It was partially crushed and disfigured from being ripped from her head. Nevertheless, he guided it to his own wounded face.

“Oh?” Imorbis questioned, raising his eyes and daring to give the other Dead God a grin. “Should I have been worried about her safety or yours, Sevron?”

Melina’s face bonded to his head, an eyeless bloodied mask. Whatever beauty Melina may have possessed was long gone. Her face looked as if it were smashed by a hammer, her features twisted and hanging awkwardly on their new owner. Her lush, gray lips smiled back at Imorbis.

“Neither, you should have been concerned about your own . . .”

Sevron made his way to Imorbis. Both of the Dead Gods stared each other down.

Before their confrontation could unfold, another Dead God interrupted the exchange, asking, “What about the Mageaous, Dona’Cora? Should we pursue her into the Darkbridge?”

Sevron’s eyeless face lingered on Imorbis a moment longer, then turned to scan the rest of the Makii.

“Pursue?” Sevron said, Melina’s bloodied face contorting awkwardly in mock confusion. “Oh yes, we will pursue. We will flood the universe with our blood until there is nowhere left for her to hide. And then, when she believes we have taken everything from her, I will take more . . . before I am done with Dona’Cora, her flesh will be mine. As I tear her apart, limb by limb, the last face she will see shall be her own.”

## BRONTES

The Idrillian spires shone in the distance, twelve white towers that nearly touched the clouds. The towers were not only Idrillian's heart, but its brain as well. The circle of towers held the combined knowledge of a galaxy; a million years of research, discovery and invention. All of the knowledge of the Makii were stored within the towers, the tale of their history dating back long before the Age of War. The planet was a knowledge hub; a center of learning for the entire universe.

The planet was utterly defenseless.

Brontes watched the spires burn, bonfires glowing in the murky light of dusk. Similar fires arose throughout the city. Everywhere Brontes looked, Idrillian was aflame.

All that he had ever known was soon to be ash.

He had to obey the stranger, or he would burn with it. Following the odd (but powerful) savior was Brontes' only hope to leave the planet Idrillian alive.

"We have to make it to the Gate, child," the stranger said, pulling on Brontes' little hand. Not only was the stranger's manner of dress peculiar, having silver bells sewn into his green cape, but he was an odd looking fellow as well. His brown eyes seemed too large for his head, which was completely bald on top but had curly tufts of hair sprouting from the sides. His lips were nearly non-existent, making his mouth look like little more than a horizontal slit in his face. At his waist, his belly bulged outward, but otherwise his body seemed relatively physically fit.

The shape of the man's midsection kindled memories of Brontes' mother, how he placed his hand on her own stretched belly and felt the kick of his unborn brother, Feniman. Feniman would have come any day now . . . instead, he will forever remain unborn.

Instinctively, Brontes wiped his eyes with his free hand – though his tears had long since run dry. He then raised his gaze to his savior . . . his final hope. He couldn't help but note that even this strange and seemingly invincible being seemed worried.

All the while they ran, the man kept repeating the same thing over and over, "This isn't right . . . this isn't right . . ."

Miraculously, the stranger managed to keep the many silver bells hanging from his clothes silent as they ran through the streets.

Truthfully, Brontes knew nothing of the man, other than that he had saved his life. When the invasion began, Brontes and his family took shelter. But once the killing started, there was no hiding from the Lifeless, no walls thick or tall enough to keep them safe. The Lifeless found, and slaughtered his family. His father stood against them as best he could, but he was unarmed, and a scholar. The love he had for his family and his desire to protect them were no match for the Lifeless. They tore him apart and then ate the pieces – so it went for the rest of his family.

To Brontes' horror, they left him for last. He crushed his fists into his eyes to avoid the sight, but the screams of his dying family were unavoidable. When the sound ended, he realized he was the only one left. It was obvious they had other plans for him – perhaps he was to be their dessert. Fortunately, he would never find out, the stranger came and took him away.

The man may have seemed harmless, weak and out-of-shape, but when he faced the Lifeless, he changed – he became a living fire and burned them all to dust. At that moment, it

was clear, even to Brontes' young intellect, that the stranger was more than a man, more than even a Gatekeeper.

Brontes knew he had been born with *the vision*. His father told him it was so. Years ago they had journeyed to the World Door to await the arrival of some distant relatives. While they waited, Brontes witnessed the blue flames of the Gatekeepers as they guided the World Door. His father explained to him what that meant – what he was, and that one day his powers would grow and lead him to a grand destiny, perhaps even became a Gatekeeper himself.

Often, Brontes went back to watch the Gatekeepers work – to study them. Mighty were their powers, virtually every world was theirs to explore, but the powers of the stranger were far greater. The ease with which he destroyed the Lifeless proved it to be true. But even lacking that display, one look at the man and Brontes knew he was special . . . he was pure. That's what made his power different from the Gatekeepers', its purity. The Oneness could control and alter matter, but the stranger's power was unfiltered, the essence of matter and existence itself.

Brontes believed the stranger was blessed by God.

They were about to round the corner of a blackened shell of a building when suddenly the stranger's grip tightened and he thrust Brontes inside the skeletal structure.

"Wait . . . keep quiet," the man said, scouting the streets.

Brontes did his best to obey, but the room was filled with smoke and he was dangerously close to coughing, it was only a matter of time before he couldn't hold it in any longer.

*'You have a gift, use it, child. I've watched you do it before. Just imagine there is a bubble around you, and inside the bubble the air is crisp, clean.'*

The man's voice was somehow sounding in Brontes' head. The stranger's body began to glow, and just as he had described it, the stranger was covered in a golden, glowing bubble. Brontes pictured himself within a similar shield.

His breathing came easier, the air seemed fresher. A faint, shimmering haze of blue obstructed his vision no matter where he looked.

He had done it. He was inside a bubble.

*'Good. Now, if you make the bubble strong enough, nothing can harm you. Remember that. If ever we're separated, remember that.'*

The man visibly tensed. His bulging, brown eyes scanned the smoke-filled landscape.

*'Wait here,'* the stranger telepathically commanded.

Before Brontes could argue or question his intentions, the man was gone, almost as if he had simply disappeared.

Brontes tucked himself into a darkened corner and prayed for the man's quick return. He tried not to let himself be consumed by fear, choosing instead to focus on strengthening his shield and adhering to the stranger's advice.

*If I make the bubble strong enough, nothing can harm me . . .*

He put all his efforts into making his blue bubble as strong as possible.

Moments passed. There was no sign of the stranger, the only thing moving down the ruined streets were gusts of black smoke. He was about to brave the streets, in hopes of catching sight of where the stranger may have went, when out of nowhere, the alleyway to his left began blazing with white light. His retinas burning under the sudden illumination, Brontes was forced to cover his eyes. He gave them a moment to recover and adjust then risked squinting toward the light's source. The first thing he realized was that his shadowed hiding spot was exposed, and that he would have to find cover elsewhere. The second thing he realized was that there was a

massive circular hole in a nearby building where, but a moment ago, there had been only a solid steelcrete wall.

His hiding spot returned as the light faded. Nevertheless, he left the spot and ran deep into the building to avoid facing the being that had created such damage.

He didn't make it very far before something took hold of his hand . . .

"Keep moving, we're close now," the stranger said, his body surrounded in an aura of white. He had appeared out of nowhere to once more guide Brontes to safety.

He took him through the main level of the building, which was a maze of cracked pillars and charred walls. Brontes was lost and disorientated in moments, but the stranger continued on, choosing his pathway as though he had been born in the building.

"I see you've remembered what I said," the man remarked, acknowledging the enhanced glow of Brontes' blue bubble. "Good. Keep your halo as strong as you can possibly make it, and stay behind me . . . Hold my cape if you must, but never leave me. I won't lie to you, child. The Dark Army guards the Gate, and the only way to leave this world will be to make a pathway through them."

Brontes looked up to those wide brown eyes and nodded.

"No matter what happens, you have to trust me. It will be okay. A higher power guides our path. It led me here, and it led me to you. What happens next is merely another step on that path."

He knew nothing of the stranger (other than that he saved his life) but he whole-heartedly trusted the man. Even if he hadn't rescued him, Brontes felt as if he would have followed the man without question.

"I trust you," Brontes whispered.

The stranger nodded back at Brontes and smiled . . . then he became fire. Covered in white flames, his body stretched to twice its size. His smile was gone -- his face was an inferno.

He yet held Brontes' hand, but the flames didn't burn the child, they merely danced and crackled upon his skin.

*"Get ready . . . it's time we take the next step."*

Brontes couldn't tell if the stranger's voice was originating within his mind, from the world outside, or both. Regardless, he obeyed and he prepared himself for the worst.

With his hand still clinging to the stranger's, Brontes took a step . . .



. . . What they encountered was something no child could prepare for, something no young mind could comprehend or should ever behold. No living being could prepare for what they found on the Altar of Worlds – including the stranger. The vision would haunt Brontes till the end of his days.

Much later, when asked to describe it, he could use only one word, "Chaos".

## ANON

Anon had been to a thousand worlds, had seen the Age of War at its worst. He had fought alongside countless armies to stop the spread of the Plague. He had watched as all his companions died or joined his enemy's ranks.

He killed his friends, purified their corrupt souls with the flames of the Maker.

How many worlds had he watched die? In how many ways was their manner of death?

All those previous horrors paled in comparison to what he found at the Idrillian Altar.

Anon had always faced his previous trials with confidence, knowing that the Maker was with him, guiding his path.

But this was different . . . the Maker was most assuredly with him, but what Anon saw on the altar couldn't possibly be part of the Maker's path.

Anon was afraid.

He caught himself before his grip on the young boy's hand turned to bone-crushing force. Mistakenly, he thought to find comfort in the child's tender grip. The boy was pure and good – Anon wanted to hold onto the child's innocence as long as he could. But the scene before them took away all that – both Anon the boy would never know innocence again.

*“SEVRON! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”* Anon raged.

He let the child go. There was no place for innocence here, only death.

Bodies covered the tiers of the altar -- thousands upon thousands of them. Not all of them were dead, but not a one of them had flesh. Crying in pain and anguish, those unfortunate enough to be alive crawled up the blood-slicked steps. A dozen tiers higher, the World Door pulsed, a final vision of hope and freedom. They dragged themselves over the bodies of their companions to reach that goal. But the sanctuary of the World Door was an illusion . . . none of them even made it close.

Every second, the pile of dead, fleshless bodies surrounding the altar grew.

And then . . . there was the undead. A swarm of them. A world's worth of infected humans. Their tongues had been torn from their throats, their jaws ripped off, their hands crushed to useless pulp. In a Hunger infused frenzy, they stumbled through the pile of bodies, terrorizing the living as they sought to fill their empty souls with warm blood. They never succeeded, though the blood was all around them they drank not a drop.

They were driven mad by it.

The undead gnawed and pounded on the living who fought to pull themselves up the altar toward the World Door.

Lastly, there was Sevron -- his frame a patchwork of body parts stolen from the many worlds he had conquered.

His feet were black hooves, his legs the powerful hindquarters of some wild beast. His left hand ended in a massive pincer while seven snake-like tentacles sprouted from his right hand. His body looked like it was carved from rock – humanoid in shape, but composed of some sort of black mineral exoskeleton. The same skeletal material covered his head like a helmet, from the top of which a pair of red horns sprouted. One was cracked in half prior to where it began to form a spiral. The other was fully formed, nearly four feet long and ending in glistening black tip. One eye was a red oval surrounded in black. The other was merely an empty black pit.

Sevron stood next to the throbbing Gate. . . . next to him was a pile of human skins. He rummaged through them as though searching for a clean shirt in a pile of dirty garments. When dissatisfied with what he found, he flung the desecrated flesh into the Gate.

He didn't stop his search, even when Anon's roar momentarily silenced the screams of the living and the howls of the dead.

Anon took a step up the altar – his light flared out, setting all those he neared free. Still Sevron ignored him. He took another step – the throng of undead surged toward him, diving at his halo only to collapse as a pile of ash. Anon took another step and another . . .

At last he stood before Sevron, his flames went out to the Dead God, demanding his attention.

He got it . . .

In a roar of flames, Anon bathed the Dead God in fire. He wanted nothing more than to send him to the Void and put a quick end to the waking nightmare. But it wouldn't be that easy.

As the flames began burning away Sevron's 'borrowed' flesh, he uttered not a sound. He slowly arose from the pile of skins and faced Anon.

"You wish to leave this world, false one?" the Dead God said, his body growing covered in a charred black crust.

Anon continued to pour fire at Sevron, his stone-like skin flaked, black blood bubbled from the cracks, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

"Then you must pay the price . . . your soul, or your flesh. One of them will be mine."

*"I have another offer!"* Anon replied, his flaming fist barreling toward the Dead God.

Sevron was fast . . . damned fast! He easily dodged the blow, and in an instant he was at Anon's side. His pincer latched onto Anon's blazing arm and clamped down. Anon didn't think it was possible to be hurt in his current form, but the pain nearly caused him to lose touch with the Maker entirely. The claw nearly severed his fiery arm. With the snake-like limbs of his right hand, Sevron took hold of Anon's body and pulled him down to his knees. Fortunately, Sevron wasn't entirely immune to Anon's flames, the shell of his pincer began to crumble. But even so, Sevron was determined to sever Anon's arm and refused to relinquish his grip. Even as his claw turned to dust, he continued the attempt, and very nearly succeeded . . .

Then the boy came forward, covered in a solid blue bubble.

*"No, child . . ."*

In his disgust, rage, and haste to put an end to Sevron, Anon had forgotten the child, and the final commands he had put forth to the boy. He had done as he was told – he had followed Anon, no matter what. Now he would die because of Anon's command.

Perhaps both of them would . . .

Anon felt the power of the Maker leaving him as Sevron's pincer continued to clamp down. The fire, and power, of the Maker poured like blood from the wound.

"Leave him alone," the boy said, somehow summoning the courage to face the Dead God. There wasn't a hint of fear in his brown eyes.

*"No, leave here!"*

Anon's voice roared through the area like a thunderclap. He knew the best thing he could do at this point was keep the Dead God from tearing the child apart, so with his free hand he grabbed Sevron's arm of tentacles. He didn't try to burn them, just keep them from striking out at the child.

*"This is wrong . . . I was wrong. He will kill you,"* Anon screamed, focusing his remaining power on holding the Dead God's right arm.

He no longer burned the pincer – nor was it necessary to do so, predictably, Sevron let Anon go.

“Oh . . . what have we here?” Sevron asked, his bony exoskeleton glowing red like an ember. “Another traveler who wishes to enter my Gate?”

The boy ignored the question, he spoke to Anon instead, “I trust you,” he said.

The tentacle heads of Sevron’s arm began burrowing into Anon. Even though his body was pure flame, he couldn’t burn them fast enough before they entered his body. Sevron swung his pincer arm back in Anon’s direction, but it ignored him, clamping down instead on his own tentacle arm. There was a spurt of black blood and a loud snap as he cut his own arm off. With little left of it other than strands of tendon and skin, Sevron pulled the arm from his body.

Anon fell to the Altar, the tentacles continuing to burrow inside him even though the arm was severed. He continued to burn them. . . but not fast enough.

Blood seeped from his amputated shoulder as Sevron approached the boy.

“You wish to leave, then you must pay the price . . .”

The dark haired child seemed as sure of himself as ever -- even when Sevron’s claw came at his face . . .

“From you I desire flesh,” Sevron said, his pincer sinking into the child’s eye.

The air erupted with the child’s scream . . . but within his mind, Anon sensed only calm. And he heard his young voice . . .

*If I make it strong enough, nothing can harm me . . .*

The child’s halo flared – strong as any Elder God’s. Sevron’s arm was caught within. Anon’s power had weakened it, burnt it to a crisp, but the child’s shield of blue finished the job. The pincer’s shelled exterior sloughed away, turning to ash as it fell. Even the black, fluid like substance beneath bubbled and blistered.

Now it was Sevron’s screams that surrounded them – a high-pitched, maniacal howl. He pulled his arm back, but only a managed to escape from the shield with a slimy black stump.

“*The Maker’s path,*” Anon said, slow to rise to his feet. Sevron had injured him, perhaps even severely. But in the end, the Maker’s power proved the stronger. The tentacles were no more, and Anon’s wounds were already on the mend.

Now Sevron was all but defenseless. Anon had underestimated him to start the confrontation, but he wasn’t about to repeat that error. He was in motion before the thought even entered Sevron’s mind . . . Sevron dipped his bony head low and charged the boy, the blackened tip of his good horn guiding the way.

He was too fast to see, but Anon anticipated his intentions, and had already teleported in front of the boy.

*“This is the Maker’s path . . .”*

Had he hit the child, the horn would have impaled the boy in his forehead, but for Anon’s giant body of flames, the horn only reached his hip. Though the pain was intense, Anon knew he would survive the attack, and this encounter as well. His flaming hands grabbed the horn; one hand grabbed it at the base, just below his waist, the other reached behind and took hold of the spiraled tip protruding from his back. He focused every ounce of the Maker’s power on his strength and twisted the horn. With a sickening crunch, the horn broke free from Sevron’s head.

Flames spurted from his hip as he pulled the horn from his body. Without a moment of hesitation, he promptly returned the red horn from where it came – the glistening black tip led the way, back into Sevron’s head. He thrust it in, and didn’t stop pushing it downward, not until



the entire length of the red horn was buried deep in Sevron's skull and the twisted tip sprouted from his bowels.

Anon stepped back, watching as a geyser of black blood erupted from Sevron's head. The Dead God toppled over, his body wracked with violent spasms. Anon patiently waited as Sevron continued to spew blood and thrash about the altar. When his corrupt form finally grew still, Anon grabbed the child's hand and gently guided him into the Rift. He made sure the boy was safely on his way before turning back to the Dead God and the scene of carnage he had created.

The air filled with waves of white hot flames, cleansing the altar and freeing all those Sevron had corrupted.

Once the Idrillian Altar was fully engulfed in fire, Anon limped into the Rift . . .

## IMORBIS

Hidden in the charred ruins of Idrillian, the Makii watched as the battle between the Holy One and Sevron unfolded. Initially, they believed Sevron would meet a quick end (as did all who stood against the Holy One).

They should have known better.

When the battle turned to Sevron's favor, they nearly stepped in to aid their sworn enemy, Anon, so certain were they that Sevron would destroy even him. But, as ever, Anon proved himself to be blessed.

In the end, it was the power of a child that finally took down the mighty Lord Sevron.

At last, the Dead God's rampage of madness was no more.

They waited until the Holy One left, and his deadly white fire had burned its course, then they crept from their darkened shelters to see what was left of Sevron, the Servant of Death.

Anon succeeded in clearing the altar of bodies and blood, in their stead rested a thin layer of black soot. As for Sevron, the Dead God remained, but his body had been baked into a fragile black lump of charcoal, vaguely humanoid in shape. The butt of the horn still protruded from his skull, glowing like a red-hot coal.

A boot of black leather landed on the fallen Dead God's neck.

"This time, I will not squander the opportunity to put an end to you, Sevron," the Makii said, applying enough pressure to crack Sevron's crusted flesh.

The speaker's face had smooth, soft features that one could easily have mistaken for kind – had his eyes not been glassy black orbs, or his flesh ashen and lifeless. Through the ages, many had made such an error, thought his easy charm and tender face equated with weakness. Imorbis had sent all such fools to their deaths.

"I know you yet live, but can you hear me, Sevron?"

As if in response, blood started oozing from his cracked neck.

"If so, know that your reckless disregard for the welfare of your brethren cannot go unpunished."

"With my own eyes I have seen what becomes of the Makii arbitrarily chosen to satisfy his wicked desires," another one of the Makii interjected. Known among his brethren as Mastecus, Death's Creator, the being had a long, grey beard and lean, withered features. Typically, his familiar, the imp Galimoto, would be fluttering around him, spouting gibberish in his musical voice. But the magical being had a nose for evil, and couldn't stand to be anywhere near Sevron.

"They were flayed alive, their muscles, flesh and organs taken and posed in grotesque mockery which he had the nerve to call 'art'. And through it all they live. He keeps them from death, dousing them in the blood of the living the moment they weaken," Mastecus continued.

"I too had the misfortune to have witnessed this 'art' of which you speak," Imorbis replied. "A more clear representation of insanity I have never beheld. For that transgression alone we should end him. But as vile and senseless as those actions may be, I believe Sevron's greatest injustice against us is that he wishes to let the universe burn in chaos, and the Makii along with it," Imorbis continued. "But I for one rather enjoy my existence, and would prefer to maintain it. And to do so we need the Treaty. We cannot allow him to run rampant, despoiling the worlds

on a whim. As much as we hate to admit it, there are rules now to what we can destroy. No longer can we indulge the Hunger – nor should we – for as of late, feasts were few and far between. We feed to sustain our lives -- that is all. As much as we would love to feast upon the Elder Gods, the truth of it is that we need them . . . need their power. Once, we too had the power of creation. But with it, we chose to create the Plague. Now, we forever must be stuck with that decision . . . and the many consequences that accompany it.”

Imorbis stood silently over Sevron, his cape of black silk flowing wildly around his body.

“Enough, I grow weary of this. Destroy Sevron, and let us be free of him once and for all,” a lanky and exceptionally tall Dead God said. Even his eyes seemed stretched, more oval than round.

“If only it could be that simple,” Imorbis replied, his hand wavered, rippling like water. It transformed into a shiny obsidian blade. “There is a new power among the Elders. One that none of us can stand against . . . none except Sevron.”

“Anon . . .” the lanky Makii said.

“Yes, the Holy One. For now, he allows us to live. But make no mistake; one day he will desire our deaths. And when that day comes, who among us can stop him?”

“Are you suggesting we let Sevron live? That we endure his twisted lust so that he may battle your so-called ‘Holy One’? Please, Imorbis, tell me you do not actually believe that ‘Anon the Illusionist’ has somehow tapped into the power of the Maker? And to think, after all these years I thought of you as intelligent,” Mastecus fumed.

Imorbis replied by chopping through Sevron’s neck with his black blade.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Mastecus. But yes, with my limited intellect I do entertain the possibility that there is a *true* Maker. One who has the wisdom and power to create greater forms of life than even you, Death’s Creator, have achieved with your imp,” Imorbis replied, grinning as he reshaped his hand and grabbed Sevron’s head.

“If there exists even a chance it is so, then we need him . . . just not all of him. His body we dump into the Darkbridge – may it forever drift in the Void. But the head we keep.”

Imorbis studied the burnt skull, rotating it around in his hands.

“This . . . I bury. I promise you all, I will find the deepest hole in the most desolate planet and there it shall stay . . .

. . . until the day comes that we need Sevron once more.”

Imorbis wasn’t entirely sure the Maker existed, but even so, he prayed to him that such a day would never come.



Time passed, the Dark Army moved on. Imorbis kept his promise, burying the head of Sevron in the cold, barren edge of the universe – the place where all matter goes to die. There Sevron stayed, in the center of a dead planet’s frozen iron core . . .

Meanwhile, the living worlds died. Life itself neared extinction. Only the Treaty between the Dead Gods and the Elders kept it from fading entirely away. Because of the Treaty, the Dead Gods could feed, and the Elders could propagate and create. For a time, one might have even called the situation peaceful.

Then, on the elven home-world Ki'minsyllessil the Treaty came to an end. The young goddess, Alana, refused to abandon the elves to the hunger of the Dark Army, choosing instead to stay and fight alongside her love, Prince Adros. She fell in love with his people and his world as well, and would do anything in her power to save it.

Together, they stood valiantly against the Plague, and very nearly succeeded in saving Ki'minsyllessil. But the Dark Army would not be denied their world. Led by Imorbis, the Dead Gods also forfeited the Treaty. No matter what the cost, Imorbis was determined to possess Ki'minsyllessil and the god-like entity that dwelt there . . . the Graelic, a giant tree that towered to the sky, filling the horizon with its vast canopy. In all of the worlds he had conquered he had never seen such a thing – a living world. The powers such a life-force could bestow were infinite.

Imorbis hoped to feed off of the Graelic, and by doing so, end the Hunger for all time. But the elves wouldn't give up so easily . . . Imorbis faced the Elf Prince in combat, and for the first time since his conquest began, he knew defeat.

Broken, drained and near death, Imorbis wouldn't give up so easily either. As he dragged his damaged body to the Darkbridge, Imorbis decided the day had finally come . . . he entered the Rift, returning to the edge of the universe to resurrect The Servant of Death . . .



Imorbis looked up – high up. He couldn't take his gaze away. The Great Tree towered high above him, its canopy swallowed by a mass of rapid moving dark clouds. The Plague moved quickly up the massive trunk; the infection blackening the bark as if it had been scorched by fire.

He was still up there, the Elf Prince. The being had fought bravely but his world had fallen. His Great Tree, the Graelic was dying. Imorbis watched as the leaves withered and fell, raining down from the sky.

He was unable to shake the feeling that he was the one who had lost.

“So, are you satisfied, Imorbis? Was the victory worth the price?” came a voice at his back.

Imorbis changed his focus, looking at the remnants of his body -- he had no hands. He could manipulate the *demon wind* to recreate them, but to do so was taxing and drained energy from other, now vital, resources. To simply maintain his shape was nearly impossible. He could mold himself into a humanoid form, but only by covering himself in a constant cloak of *demon wind*. If he failed to do so, his body would simply dissipate; drift off with the planet's wind.

*This victory has no meaning . . .*

The price to defeat the Elfin was indeed high, and Imorbis had gained nothing. Even though he was victorious, he had fed little. The victory feast of his dreams was non-existent. The Elfin blood proved vile and somewhat toxic to the Dark Army. Likewise, what he thought was a highly coveted prize, their God Tree, was utterly inedible – at least for Imorbis. He had learned that somehow Sevron found a way to consume its life-force.

It appeared Sevron would be the only true victor. And with the power he claimed he would fulfill his darkest desires – he would turn the universe into hell.

“If we failed to take this world . . . If we fail to take any world, the Elders win. I admit I was beaten. I had failed. With all my powers and resources set to the task, I yet failed,” Imorbis said, turning to the grey-bearded Mastecus and the yellow-eyed imp squatting on his shoulder.

Usually, Imorbis couldn't keep the little red devil quiet, but the creature said not a word; he eyes were half-closed, his head downcast.

"Still . . . to bring him here, Imorbis. Have you even seen what he has become?"

Imorbis turned back to the God Tree, watching as the Dark Army swarmed up the trunk. Anything with warm blood in its veins became prey, species were extinct in minutes. The multicolored canopy blackened. Everything died. Never once slowing, the black infection continued to creep upwards.

"No."

He couldn't bear to see him. Sevron's capacity for evil was limitless. He believed in only one thing – chaos. The man was a horror before Imorbis had resurrected him . . . he couldn't imagine what he had now become.

*This is all my fault.*

He couldn't bear to see him – but he would have to face him, kill him if possible.

"To be free . . . that is all I really wanted. An end to the Hunger."

"There is only one end to the Hunger."

"Yes, death. I know it well. Over the years I've grown all too accustomed to the concept. But for the chance to truly live again . . . our losses would have been worth it."

"Humph, just as I thought, you still don't have a clue what you have done . . . what we have truly lost. Sevron controls the Army now. He's as mad as ever – perhaps more so – and is determined to plunge the entire universe into his madness. He cares nothing for life, nor for this 'immortality' we possess. He will put an end to it all, starting with the Elfin. We're leaving this place, I suggest you do the same . . . while you can."

"I'm not leaving. Not until he is truly dead."

"You already had your chance to rid us of Sevron. You're no match for him now . . . especially now. He will be the death of you. Maybe it's for the best, finally you get the freedom you so longed for. Farewell, Imorbis, I doubt we shall meet again."

"We shall see . . ." Imorbis whispered as the Dead God turned to leave.

The imp, Galimoto, remained perched on his shoulder, tucking himself away in his leathery black wings.

Why had he brought him here? He knew what he was, what he was capable of. Was any victory worth the price for Sevron's aid?

*With the power of the Graelic I could have ended Sevron for all time.*

In the beginning they had been companions. Along with a handful of other 'talented' Makii, they had been selected to embark on a mission to find the origin of life. They found their answer deep in the violent heart of the universe. But what they discovered became a bigger mystery than the question they started with. They tracked the origin to one planet, and there they found a myth, a giant black pillar whose presence defied logic. 'The Pillar of Life', 'Heaven's Door', 'Alpha'; they gave the mysterious black monolith many names, and put forth many theories to its own origins and purpose.

Where did it come from? Why was it there? How did it create life, and why? Why . . . ?

*Always why . . .*

The Makii had so many questions and only one answer. The one thing they knew for certain was that they had found the planet where life began.

But the Makii demanded more . . . they demanded an end to all of life's mysteries. For so long they thought of themselves as gods (convinced those they conquered of it as well) but they longed to be gods in truth. Death was the one enemy they could not defeat, and it was coming

for them. As it claimed them, the illusion they created would crumble, and the order they had brought to the universe would return to the discord found in the Age of War.

Imorbis, Sevron, and their companions were charged with solving it all; an end to death, and learning the mysteries of creation. The obelisk held the answer to every secret.

Among the race of gods known as the Makii, Imorbis and the others were the best and brightest, their gifts of the Oneness were unique and powerful. In their mission, each one of them was in their own way remarkably successful – but there was one who surpassed them all . . . Sevron.

He actually communicated with the pillar.

At first, Imorbis thought he was slipping into madness . . . but madness was what the pillar required – madness and pain. Sevron sacrificed both to have his answers. But what he found was nothingness. According to Sevron, the exchange revealed to him that there was no life, no reality, no answers (nor even questions to be asked). It was all an illusion. There was but one reality, one truth . . . the Void.

Sevron nearly died communicating with the pillar. Only one thing kept him alive, it was Imorbis' gift, his special talent. To create a high-functioning, multi-cellular life-form with the Oneness had proven impossible to even the Makii, but something small . . . Imorbis knew it could be done. He set about creating a virus, one that would slow cellular growth and death. He fought the battle for immortality on a small, but sophisticated scale.

Unfortunately, his 'gift' had yet to be perfected when he gave it to his dying friend. Sevron survived, but he had changed physically and mentally. Yet . . . he was immortal. Imorbis had succeeded in cheating death. But oh how the universe would suffer the cost . . .

As Imorbis made his way to the dying tree, he tried to remember Sevron as he was before their mission to the obelisk, as a friend. He realized so much time had passed, that he could no longer remember the man's true face, nor his expression as he smiled. To commune with the pillar, Sevron had sacrificed his flesh – part of his offering of pain.

His friend died that day . . . no . . . he should have died that day, Imorbis should have simply let him go.

It was but one of his many failures.

How many times had he let the man live? Had he been withholding death, hoping that he would one day see his friend again? No longer, this time he would make certain Sevron was truly dead.

He paused, once more looking over his broken and frail form.

But what could he possibly do, so weak and weary was he.

*Another virus perhaps?*

The chaos around him dissipated as he went into a daydream, the foundations of his new 'perfect' virus coming together in his mind.

*Maybe I have been looking at it all wrong. To keep life from death is one thing . . . but to create life where there is only death . . . that would be something to behold . . .*

He was lost in the notion, fantasizing about the possibilities when suddenly the ground below him became alive. The roots of the Graelic had been stoic arches rising like hills (and often mountains) throughout the land. But now they were moving, writhing, ripping out of the earth. Imorbis was transfixed at the sight of a massive root swaying in front of him when out of nowhere, a vine wrapped around his foot. It pulled his leg out from under him, landing him flat on his back. He laid there for a moment, stunned. Far above him, he saw a battle raging in the branches. Similar vines swarmed the Dark Army, bounding them as they did Imorbis. But that

wasn't all, the vines pierced their bodies, then began throbbing, pumping forth a viscous black fluid into their victims.

*Sevron no!*

He felt the vine tighten, creeping higher up his leg. Then, he felt pain as it pierced his thigh. The vine swelled, filling with the black fluid . . .

Imorbis' arm became a sword. He swung downward, severing the vine in a spray of thick blood. The remnant of the vine withered away . . . ten more took its place. He hacked and slashed as they came on, but there were too many, and he didn't have the strength to fight back. Perhaps in his former state he could have resisted, but Imorbis had nothing left. Eventually one took hold, and then another, and another . . .

They wrapped up his limbs and dug into his body. The vines filled with the black blood, and began pumping it into him.

His entire body was wracked with pain. Surely, even his soul was on fire. Along with the pain, there was a thought, pounding his mind – “kill everything”.

The vines finished secreting their liquid then left him, moving on to seek other prey.

Somehow, Imorbis found the strength to stand, and the will to resist the urgings of his new – even more – tainted blood. He wrapped himself as completely as possible in his cloak of black energy, all the while fighting the desire to burn the universe to a cinder.

Within his mind a power was growing, threatening to overcome him entirely. It was an all too familiar presence, one he knew well.

*Sevron . . .*

Deep inside him the fledgling entity grew, overwriting all that formed the core of who and what Imorbis was with one thing – chaos.

THE END



If you are interested in reading my prior or further works, please look my up @ <http://infinitemitstheboo.wix.com/jcbell>

Thanks,  
J.C. Bell