

∞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."

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*-- 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?

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