

GUARDIANS OF THE RIFT
A LIMITS @ INFINITY NOVELLA

BY
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THE LIMITS

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

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

J.C. Bell

Intro

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Don't let this be the end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So far they had seen none.

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

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

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

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

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

But they could be killed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

LeCynic.

His name alone filled her with venom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Solo Ki approached Dertois and whispered into his ear.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's magnificent."

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

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

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

'Get back, you fool.'

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

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

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

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

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

'I won't let you die!'

His eyes melted from his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

. . . *It's over.*

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

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

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

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

. . . or the devil himself.

The Destroyer and the Dead God

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

Journey's end . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nathalia . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was the Dead Tree.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alec had his answer.



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

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

“You were a fool to return . . .”

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

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

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

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

LeCynic and Coba

–The Age of Death,

The Seventh World

Second War of Lock Core, Post Exodus 586–

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LeCynic arose.

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

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

LeCynic vowed to give them nothing.

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

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

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

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

But it was just the beginning . . .

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

Had it not been for the Destroyer . . .

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

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

They were his children – his wraiths . . .

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