­A­lzahad, last of the Great Ones, paladin of the final circle and knower of the forgotten arts climbed the marble steps with impunity. He did not notice as his mud caked boot squelched brown leavings across the pristine staircase, nor did he notice how out of place he looked in his soot black armor, which menaced with spikes against the white sculptures and pale columns.

His foot steps were certain, as they always were. His eyes were focused forward up the great stairway, whose cyclopean size others would have gazed at slack jawed in awe.

However, if the mighty warrior had bothered to turn his head, he would have seen massive steps stretching up unimaginably high, trailing off into the fog that surrounded the mountain, and on the sides were gardens of wild but beautiful flowers, fountains of granite and marble, polished to a sheen, spewing cold and glittering waters.

Truly it was a paradise. But Alzahad's steps did not slow, nor did he regard the exquisite art for any reason other than seeing cursorily if there were figures lurking behind the pieces. He did not tire, he did not stop, for at the summit of the mountain, after so long, was a challenge awaiting him, a true challenge.

He could see the outline of the monumental guardian now, just like the man had told him. He had heaped endless gold coins upon the man, coins which of course were now worthless, but the man thanked him anyways and puzzled about what he would do with them all.

The memory left a dissatisfying afterthought in Alzahad's mind. Once, the gold of the Great Ones bought mercenaries and kings alike, and played them like puppets. Or so he had been told. He had been born long after the great peace had been made and the world had destroyed itself.

He drew his weapon from his back. In a shout he spoke its name, such that the spirits of his ancestors eons old and entombed within the mighty scythe might look upon his feat of courage and valor with praise.

He was not a moment too soon. The statues nearest to him, sensing his intent cracked and shook to life, stone scaly wings and fearsome visages forming from the Ur Stone with which they were made.

But Alzahad, whose father had been Alzahad, and whose father's father had been Alzahad, all the way back to the earliest beginnings of the great ones, stretched out his hand, and his scythe sliced through the mythical stone as if it didn't exist. The statues crumbled before his eyes. A smile was starting to run across his face.

Next, vines and wild foliage sprung from an idealic spring towards him. Thick fibrous roots attempted to ensnare his limbs, and a sudden criss-crossed barrier appeared before him, replete with thorns.

This time a laughed escaped him as he opened his mind to the powerful ensocellment available to those in his lineage. The thin but powerful lines of the magic ran themselves across his body, an irresistible warmness trickling into him as he utilized the forgotten arts.

The fines burst into blue flames and whipped back and forth as they were consumed, their death throws beating uselessly on his black armor.

He turned his attention to the barricade and the tongues of flame leapt out across the air separating him and it, engulfing the vegetation.

It burned quickly before his onslaught.

Walking calmly over the charred husks of the obstacle, he scanned slowly for possible other hazards. Finding none he advanced slowly towards the summit.

The guardian's head was now visible, and as Alzahad saw its fearsome face and monstrous shoulders, he thought how lucky he was, of all his forefathers, to be the one to encounter such a being.

But before he could get to the massive and undoubtably powerful foe, a wall of stone appeared before him, blocking the stairs and his path upwards.

In the wall was a fountain with words etched across its top. This time he did look at the fountain, but with only a cursory glance. Even from here he could feel the enchantment on its waters, which would no doubt send him into a deep sleep or some such nonsense.

He reached out with the art and felt its underpinnings, where the original builders had secured the magic, and took hold of it with both hands. Before his eyes the goldn threads appeared, caught in his skilled grasp.

He tightened his grip and strained against the bindings. There. In the corners of the fountain lay several laystones, insigiled and hidden from view. The smile crossed his face again as he drew his scythe.

He passed through the remains of the fountain and its wall with pleasure.

There could be no words to describe the elation he felt. He was centuries in the making, the gift of father upon fathers who had labored to perfect their art, despite the world crumbling around them. He paid them respect as he passed, his words harsh against the silence of the place.

Then there were more statues which came to life, more vegetation, more traps, magic, and tricks. All of which were left in ruin, his ascent inexorable.

And at last he stod upon the platform, the proverbial Step of the Gods, and looked upon his true foe.

The gargantuan stone construction was nearly three stories tall and armored heavily. In its hands it held a sword, a missive two handed creation of piercingly bright metal.

He came to a stop before the guardian, triumphantly, and checked himself. This would be an opponent like none other that he had ever faced. He mentally prepared himself, reciting ancient litanies, and deeds of his forefathers to still air. Then he once again drew his scythe and wrapped himself in his deepest and most methodical protection spells.

With the air heavy from the art he turned to the guardian and spoke aloud his challenge.

The guardian stirred, pale blue lights sppearing in each of its massive eyes. It rose slowly to its feet, years of slumber running from its body as plants and mineral deposits slid from its impenetrable armor.

It rose to its full height and stared at the man in front of it but took no other actions.

“Do you hear great guardian? It is I, Alzahad, last of the Great Ones, paladin of the final circle and knower of the forgotten arts! I challenge you to one on one combat… to the death!” He tried to still himself, knowing the battle ahead would be worth of legends, regardless of the outcome.

But if he was expecting a hostile response, he was dissapointed.

A deep rumble eminated from far inside the gaurdian, and it took a moment for even Alzahad's keen ears to understand that they were words.

“Young and inexperienced king at play, go back to the fair plains of your birth. Your destiny is not to be destroyed. Live long and forget about this place.” It rested its hands upon its mighty sword and glowered down at him.

A thin laugh ran from his lips and he gathered his power.

“What is this? A guardian afraid of a challenge? I mean to fight you one way or another! Come, we shall meet in glorious combat!” He lifted his scythe tot he ready, careful not to allow the guardian a quick attack after his words, but the guardian did not move.

“Alzahad? A name few now name except in ridicule...” The guardian said dryly.

Alzahad bristled. “It matters none to me how others speak my name, what matters are my deeds and the challenges I have overcome!” He cried out.

“Oh?” The guardian rumbled, moving forward until it was looming over the man. Alzahad found himself in shadow.

“Would that have been the response of your father, or your grandfather?”

Alzahad bit his lip. “There are none greater than my forefathers” he said puffing his chest even throng his heavy armor.

“Then I take it you disapproval with what has happened to the world?” The guardian asked, leaning back until it was vertical once again.

Alzahad hesitated. Of all the possible outcomes he had trained and prepared for, this was the one he had expected the least. He had practiced drawing his scythe until not even his own eyes could track his hand; he had dug deeper and more successfully into the arts than either his father or his forefather, discovering lost techniques and ways of shaping the world; he had even been awaiting subterfuge and illusion, but not in his wildest dreams did he think that the Supreme Guardian of the Step of the Gods would rather talk than fight.

“W-What kind of guardian are you?” He choked, surprised and dismayed by the turn the encounter had taken. “… that you would rather cross words over blades?”

The guardian rumbled in laughter. “Perhaps I am one that has had the time to see the world as it is now, as it has changed since the great peace. If everyone else can put aside their weapons, do you not think you can as well? You are the last warrior Alzahad.”

Alzahad gritted his teeth. “If I be so, then what? I am the last of the true believers. I refuse this engagement! I came for a fight for the ages. I shall have my fight!” He yelled, leaping forward with his scythe.

The guardian drew back as he attacked and the scythe landed in empty stone, which split into pieces before Alzahad's strength.

The guardian let out a sigh. “So be it. You shall have your fight, impetuous one, last of the forgotten, knower of the useless violence.”

The guardian's sword erupted into massive tounges of white hot flames which coursed up its sides. With an effort which shattered the stones beneath its feet and shook the whole platform, the guardian took up its massive sword and swung it at Alzahad.

This he had expected. Nimbly, he met the massive sword with his own weapon, stopping it. It hovered before him, and through its flames he could see the twinkling eyes of the guardian.

“But, I will also have my talk.” The guardian warned.

Thus began the hardest and no doubt strangest fight of Alzahad's life.

Ten breathless minutes later, Alzahad was sure that he was outmatched in the conversation aspect of the duel. He could neither elucidate his side of the argument nor explain his own beliefs to his own satisfaction, nor to the satisfaction of the guardian.

Fortunately, Alzahad found himself nearly equal to the guardian interms of martial prowess, provided that his mind didn't get caught up thinking of replies to the points the guardian had raised.

In a fit of anger he had become silent about six minutes in, whereupon the guardian had, with a disappointed expression, stooped low for Alzahad to attack his head. Obviously there was no honor in that, and Alzahad had enjoyed the fight more than he had any previously, thus he was stuck having to engage in conversation as he fought, although he would honestly have rather done anything but that.

Yet, now he was at a loss. The guardian had maneuvered himself, conversationally into a debate about the benefits of parlimentary democracy and Alzahad found himself completely unfooted.

“The distribution of power amongst the people with the appropriate judicial checks is by far the most stable and beneficial of the political systems devised.” The guardian said, carving a deep scored in the solid rock as his flaming sword split the ground just inches from where Alzahad had been just a second previously.

“I-I disagree!” Alzahad breathlessly shouted as he flung himself out of the way.

“Fine, fine. You disagree. We've been over this. If you disagree, you have to say why, and give a real answer. I don't care what the ancient and mysterious codex of your family says.”

“But the scroll of Al-”

“Blast your scroll!” The guardian roared, bracing itself and unleashing a torrent of white flame at Alzahad, who with a yelp, covered himself with black shields and arcane symbols of guard. The conflaguration tore through his defenses but left him enough time to dive backwards beyond the effects of the flame as it melted into the ground.

“I want you to speak your side!” The guardian said, slamming his foot down to the ground where Alzahad lay, forcing him to roll down the steps away from the massive stone boot.

“I want an elucidating counter argument!” The guardian continued, picking up a massive stone slab which had come free and with little to no effort hurled it as the scrambling paladin.

“I want true debate!” The guardian roared, bolts of lightening springing from his outstretched fingers.

Alzahad cut the slab in two, unable to dodge its trajectory in time. The pieces smashed into the ground beyond him with a thunderous crack. Hard pressed, he allowed several of the bolts of lightening to simply hit him, taking the magic on his armor, staggering him backwards. For the rest he signed the appropriate counter spell in time and met them with his hands, the electricity disappearing into his palms.

“I can't fight and argue at the same time!” Alzahad admitted to the guardian as it prepared another swing at him.

The guardian's shoulders slumped.

“Fine, fine.” It said, “I'll give you some help. Dumb it down some. It used to be that you Alzahads were warrior scholars. What happened to the scholar part?” The guardian rumbled in complaint.

“I-I've studied all my life!” Alzahad said, recuperating from the furious onslaught.

“Really That fact was not at all clear from your display earlier. Perhaps you were only studying the blade when you should have been studying the book?” The guardian said with a waggle of its finger.

Alzahad didn't really get what the guardain was going for, bu he knew a opportunity when he saw it. He dashed forward and pretty soon it was the guardian on the defensive.

Alzahad's scythe flashed, scoring hits on the guardian's arms and chest as it deflected the attacks. Alzahad was displeased to see that the infinitely sharp blade of his weapon barely sunk and inch into the stone armor that the guardain wore. Still, the marks were there. That meant that it could be damaged. What could be damaged could be killed.

“I said you'd have to argue!” The guardian roared suddenly, as he deflected another slice. Almost faster thanAlzahad could track, the guardian's arm shot out at a fantastic speed and caught the blade by its pole.

Alzahad hesitated in shock. The guardian could track the weapon?

Another hand curled around the flat of the blade and twisted.

Alzahad's eyes shot open and he found himself lifted into the air as the scythe spun. But he refused to let go.

With one hand, in midair, he conjured a symbol which hovered for a moment, etching its power into the space in front of him. Then he braced mentally and felt himself slip sideways.

He stood panting, scythe still in hand a good thirty feet away from the guardian, who unfortunately looked unsurprised at Alzahad's third circle technique.

“Are you really a paladin?” The guardian asked, touching the floor, not even looking at Alzahad.

The man's blood boiled in his veins. Was his opponent even taking him seriously? He wasn't even locking eyes with him! Another opportunity while he played in the dirt? Fine!

Alzahad's feet flew as he covered the distance in a fraction of a second. Too late he saw the cascade of living symbols twisting under the guardian’s palms.

Massive marble pillars shot form the ground in front of him catching him in mid leap. Alzahad's mouth opened as the wind was knocked clean out of him. Poleaxed, Alzahad slid to the ground and just barely managed to stay on his feet.

“You don't seem like a paladin.” The guardian said, eyes suddenly burning as it looked up at the man.

And some restraint broke in Alzahad's mind, which ever one of the many mantras and lessons which had taught him to fight in silence to honor the duel.

“You dare question my knighthood?” Alzahad cried, fury on his lips. He gripped both hands on his scythe and drove it into the ground. “You shall see you are not the only one who is capable of calling on the power of the rubicon! For behold, I am indeed paladin! One