­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. “Alone I remember the circles. Alone I have studied the forgotten arts! Alone I have kept the faith and completed the rituals from the very beginning of time! Unlike the other weaklings I alone deserve to bear the title!”

The guardian stopped. “Then you resent your kin? There is peace in the land, the first in centuries.” He said, regarding Alzahad closer.

“It is a curse upon all of them. They have forgotten how to wield the arts they once knew. They destroy weapons that have been passed down uncountable generations and make… mere toys of them!” He said clenching his fist.

“Can there not be more to life than battle?” The guardian probed.

“Of course there can. But the only way a person can grow, experience life in its fullest is to be evenly matched; a dance between you and your opponent. The rest is preparation.” Alzahad said simply crossing his arms.

The sun behind them blazed red as it set, setting the world on fire. Orange and flickering light slid around white marble columns and glittered yellow in fountains.

“I think you are mistaken. I too thought once that my purpose was to simply study and train for that inevitable conflict. Then I was shown the folly of my ways. There is beauty that you have never seen, so called paladin. Life hold more than just war. It holds more than the strongest spell, and more than the most solid armor or the sharpest blade.”

“You talk as if you agree with those sniveling simpletons who sit in their circles wasting their time producing so called art.” Alzahad said, his finger itching for his scythe.

The guardian shrugged his massive stone armored shoulders and paced before Alzahad.

“I do.” The stone figure said finally.

“Disgusting!” Alzahad said, unable to keep the battle rage from his mind any longer. His fingers, with a mind of their own, wrapped around the well known grip of the mighty war scythe. He pointed it at the stone figure.

“I am shamed then, to be so evenly matched with one whose thoughts are so misguided and impure. I do not see how one such as you could posses such strength.”

The guardian's faceless mask changed in a way Alzahad didn't like. Something about the expression seemed like the guardian was laughing at him.

“Then perhaps you should challenge your assumptions. Is my mind impure? Or perhaps it is you who is wrong?” The guardian taunted him.

“So be it!” Alzahad yelled, splitting the air before him as he released the silent incantation.

An orb of pure vacuum sliced through the air from the scythe with incredible speed impacting on the guardian's armor. The blast from the resulting explosion was incredible, and Alzahad leapt back to avoid the shockwave.

When the smoke cleared his hopes fell when he saw the guardian standing exactly where he had been.

“You want to know what I think?” The guardian said, his voice low and powerful.

“No!” Alzahad shouted before looking around and thinking about what he could hit the guardian with next. His mind ran though the long list of magical and arcane artifacts he kept on his person searching for one he thought would actually be effective against such impossible armor.

“I think you're afraid.” The guardian said, straightening his head and staring at Alzahad.

“Afraid? Ha!” Alzahad said, realizing his opening was gone. He grabed his scythe and brought it up just as the guardian dissapeared from his view.

Alzahad managed a startled sound as the guadian's arm was just barely caught on the pole of the weapon. Such speed! The guardian was strong too; with a yell, Alzahad found himself being forced backward. Never had he met someone this strong!

“Afraid.” The guardian repeated, punctuating his word with a forceful display of strength. Alzahad shifted his stance in an effort to retain balance.

“Afraid that you're the last, dying gasps of a way of life that no longer exists. The world has progressed past your skills and arts. There is no eed for any of them, not because the climactic final battle, that your whole family had been waiting for finally happened, but because the whole thing was simply transient. You walk, yet you are forgotten by the world!” The guardian roared.

Alzahad's mouth twisted into a smile just as he was finally pushed backwards, but his mouth opened involuntarily as the other stone armored fist caught him in the stomach.

In spite of his efforts, he was soon in mid air, struggling for breath. His shoulder smashed against a marble fountain and shattered into a hundred pieces, flipping him in mid air as the momentum of the attack shot him past the ruined display piece.

He slammed into a stone garden wall and slumped to the ground. The marble behind him shattering in a depression all around his body.

He blinked as the impact scrambled his thoughts. He could feel his life ebbing from him.

The guardian advanced slowly on him.

Alzahad's hand formed a fist and the runes carved into it flared to life. He weakly reached out and grabbed the spirit already leaking from his body. It was a slippery, wet feeling thing, but his nails gripped into its flesh. He dragged it towards his head. Its movement increased, but he brought it close and sunk his teeth into it.

A cool feeling spread through his body and he slowly got to his feet, the tail of the spirit still wriggling in his mouth. He slerped in inwards loudly and soon it was consumed. A hideous grin formed on his face and his hand found its way back to his scythe.

“Now that was a hit.” Alzahad said, spitting out the used rune in his mouth which had allowed him to consume the spirit. “It has been years, decades since another has forced me to resort to spirit eating” He said, wiping his mouth.

“Soon there will be no reason for such barbaric things. None will raise a hand against another. There will be peace and harmony among all life. You will fade from this world and there will be none who will remember you.” The guardian taunted, wiping its hand against one another, then bracing himself for the inevitable counter attack.

“Never!” Alzahad screamed. The life sigils on his palms shone like a sun, illuminating the world in a brilliant and sudden greed light before a beam of pure emerald fire erupted from them, breifly connecting the guardian and his opponent.

Alzahad leaned into the attack, bracing his feet as the strength of the sorcery ripped through him.

“I will never die! I will never be forgotten! In years people will shout my name in pride and exultation! I… I will achieve feats even my forefathers would be proud of!” He added, and spell wavering as his concentration faltered.

He staggered, the incredibly deadly magic having drained him palpably.

This time, the guardian did not escape unscathed. The whole center part of the armor was missing the surface of its material, simply evaporated by the strength of the attack.

The guardian shook his head, recovering.

Alarmed, Alzahad grabbed his scythe and smashed it into the unmoving guardian. For once, he was rewarded with a tiny chip from the nearly invincible stone.

“That’s all you're going to get.” The guardian said pulling intself up to its full height. “You damn fool. I thought you would have noticed earlier. Don't my arts seem familiar?” The stone figure rumbled.

Alzahad sprang back before the guardian could try anything. Reaching into his pocket he raised a small grey stone to his face and spoke to it the words of opening before throwing it at the guardian.

The guardian didn't seem to be moving, but for some reason it was harder to tell his presence in the smoke than it should have been.

Alzahad signed a shape in the air, head wracked with concentration as he struggled to remember the incredibly complicated ritual. His feet moved in a clock wise circle, the thin metal tips of his shoes etching out a circle. He moved his hands perpendicular to the circle. He envisioned in his mind the sharpest point he could think of, then split it in two, and again, and again.

“Come!” He shouted finally, “Alcerbes the dread bow of fate! I name you as the rightful heir of the lineage Amerdies, son of son of son. May your arrows piece the heavens!”

He wrenched his hand back as if drawing a massive bow, and suddenly there was one there, swirling in black fog, with a bow string of pure silver. He drew back the bow with a great deal of effort, unconcerned that there was no arrow.

He let loose at where he was sure the guardian was located. There was a pause as time paused for one infinitesmila second, a line of subtle pure silver running from the tip of his draw hand past the bow and breaching the fog with a beam of terrible power.

Alzahad did not wait to see if the attack was effective. He dissapeared, changing firing positions.

This time, it was the guardian at a disadvantage. It grasped at the spot the bow had shattered its armor and felt at the hole with a slight surprise. Then its resolve solidified as it readied itself for the next shots.

Alzahad swept around the globe of fog, peiceing it again and again with beams of silver until he could draw back the bow no longer. The black shape of the bow oozed from his hands, running down his forearms, burning as it went until it dripped to the ground and dissapeared.

“I-- wasn't sure it was you...” The guardian said, dispelling the fog bit by bit with a slight wave of its hand.

“So you managed to get the bow to cooperate after all. I won't say I'm not impressed. Even I had trouble with it. I would have expected by great grandson to fail completely.”

The fog cleared showing the guardain. Its armor was peirced several times by terrible rents, cracks ran from each one, and beneath each one, Alzahad could see the body of an actual person, not inside the armor as he expected but literally enveloped by it. No wonder the armor was so strong; it was solid!

Alzahad staggered as the toll of the summon slammed into him.

“What do you mean… grandson...” he said, holding on to the scythe as a crutch as he waited for the weakness to pass.

But the guardian was rolling its neck and cracking its hands, small flakes of armor raining down to the ground as it did so.

“You never met me, but I expect you will have studied my breach of the seventh circle?” The figure asked, gripping the air around him. Alzahad was having trouble thinking from the great mental exertion of his art, but a part of him realized danger as he saw the preparation.

“I-Ibarus the elder?” Alzahad stuttered in horror, backing away slowly from the massive storm clouds forming around the guardian. “But… you vanished centuries ago!” The light of the infinite blue sparks running across the battered guardian reflected in Alzahad's eye and for one brief moment, the paladin knew fear.

The lightening slammed into him, surrounding him, connecting in brief fits and arcs to pieces of stone, turning them to dust. Alzahad barely had time to scream before a more intense surge of lightening went straight through him.

“I found something here...” Ibarus said, pulling down another bolt from the roiling mass of black and flashing blue cloud above him, before hurling it at Alzahad. The bolt incinerated a full section of Alzahad's ritual cloak, the contents vanishing in a brief but intense multicolored fire which exploaded around Alzahad.

“Something more important and deadly than any art…” Ibarus continued, casting a brief glance at the half ruined fountain Alzahad had clipped earlier. The crystal liquid ran blue as it reflected the flashing light right above the Ibarus's shoulder. A stone armored fist grabbed it and wrenched it from place, feeling its weight with satisfaction before lifting it high and smashing it into Alzahad's prone body.

Alzahad's vision swam, as the object broke around him, slamming him down into the marble ground. he life force streaming from him palpably now. He could not move either his left arm nor his right leg. Many of his items had been crushed. He felt like there were parts of him… missing. A brief and painful look downward confirmed that two holes had been ripped through his middle. Black ruined marks rimmed the ruptures where the lightening had left its mark. He managed a groan.

“Its right behind me actually.” Ibarus said, turning slowly and regarding whatever it was he was talking about before turning back to Alzahad. The sun started to slip down below the horizon.

“And it revealed a lot to me. A great deal really. Enough to shake the foundation of what I thought I knew, of all I thought I understood about the world. A lot for a door you might say...”

He turned back to Alzahad who was desperately trying not to die on the ground.

“And I thought to myself, with that new knowledge how ruinous the world was that we had made for ourselves. How hateful and spiteful and cruel. I remembered friends and family I had seen obliterated by war and lost to conflict. And in those thoughts, and after a great deal of meditation, I thought of a new way. A new system.”

Alzahad, despite his condition, let out a gasp, and wrenched forward with his still working limbs.

“I-It...I-It was you?” He rasped, arm burning with exhaustion, vision swimming, yet he held on for the moment.

“Who made this world the way it is now? Yes. You can thank me lat...”

Alzahad's fist smashed into the stone armor, instantly breaking against it.

Ibarus looked down at the fist pathetically broken.

“Oh, still alive? I must say, your spirit was forged at the wrong time Alzahad, you would have been a fierce warrior… about a century ago. It is too late, the techniques have been lost...” Ibarus folded his arms, taunting tone of voice now gone.

“I do pity you. Alive at the wrong time, when all your skills are meaningless. It would have been better to just slip into oblivion. Or you could have simply renounced your training...” Ibarus said, testing the youngling, “I suppose you still can!”

“No...” Alzahad managed, stooping dangerously as he tried to pick up his scythe.

“I am impressed.” Ibarus admitted. “But your efforts are meaningless. My new ideology was infective. Soon the strong were devoured by the weak, and the halls of weapons became halls of art. And they were relieved.”

The scythe refused to cooperate and slipped from his grasp. Alzahad, had to grimace a whimper quiet as the weapon clattered to the ground. He crawled towards it, Ibarus looming over him, looking down at the broken warrior with a mixture of disgust and pity.

“You're a traitor to the Great Ones...” Alzahad said through gritted teeth, fumbling again with the scythe.

“Yes. I am. They were horrified by my actions, which is of course why I had to kill most of them.” Ibarus said frowning. “But the lives I saved were innumerably greater than those I killed. And most were all to happy to engage in a fight to the death. I simply had to wait here for them.”

“You're a traitor to the very meaning of life. There is no change! There is no growth!” Alzahad said, finally grasping the scythe, pulling himself upwards.

“And that is how it was meant to be.” Ibarus said, still frowning. “Don't you understand? Only you would think this way, you and the last of the Great Ones. I have created what this world was always meant to be: a paradise.” Ibus said, taking a mencaing step forward, eyes not leaving Alzahad's form.

“No. You have ruined it. You have created a hell. There is no longer any growth, there are no new souls now that there are none lost. The world is a st-stagnant ruined place, festering in its own leavings… The art they make has no creativity. The blandness of it and their lives is a suffering I would not inflict upon my worst enemies.” Alzahad spat.

“Well. That is how you see it. You among millions. You among millions of millions. Should things go back to the way they were simply because you cannot fathom a world without violence? Because you can't wrap your mind around the fact that you are...” Ibarus drew in a deep breath “...A relic!” he shouted.

The force of his voice blasted into Alzahad, and suddenly he was airborne, flying and flailing. He landed in a tumble, half impaled by a broke tree branch and amid a tangle of bushes. But he still held the scythe.

Ibarus approached slowly, knowing there was nothing left that the other man could do.

Unfortunately for him, that was only partly true. It was true that Alzahad's body was shattered and broken, but one has was still free and functional, the one holding the scythe. He braced the weapon in the crook of his broken other arm and ran his thigh over the edge of the blade. It was a thoroughly displeasing sensation, purposefully harming himself, but as he felt the spirit leaving his leg, he suddenly crushed it against the pole of the weapon.

The spirit wriggled and squirmed, but Alzahad held on through the pain until he had successfully crushed it. The rune on the side of the blade awoke slowly. It was a very powerful spell, and Alzahad had measured it such that it was meant to activate to a much stronger catalyst and had taken him the better part of a week to inscribe it into the legendary scythe. The loss of his leg would have to do.

“Have you finally given up? What a broken, pathetic figure you are right now!” Ibarus crowed.

Alzahad focused his whole being on the rune; he would have to if it had any hope of working. It shimmered. He devoted his whole attention to the small but incredibly detailed symbol. The whole quieted around him. Ibarus was forgotten. He was forgotten. There was only the rune. He could feel the metal of the pole, feel every bump and scratch. He could taste the inscription. Every aspect of the symbol resonated in his mind until that was all that existed in his world.

And with a beautiful, exhilarating feeling, it came to life. He felt like he was drifting, lifting upwards; his vision interrupted with sharp holes of violent color. The price of the spell was tremendous, but the effect were worth it.

Ibarus was no fool, he felt the power coalescing, but the rune was one of Alzahad's own design. Alzahad watched with a detached glee as the ground burst open at Ibarus's feet.

The armored guardian took one step back, as if unsure. Black spectral hands burst from the ground with a shudder, impaling Ibarus. He let out a choked sound of surprise as more started to appear.

The stone armor fell off in chunks as the otherworldly force shredded it like a hatchet to wood.

Perhaps it was possible now, while the attack still continued…

Alzahad charmed his own legs and then grabbed the branch impaling him. With every last ounce of energy he ripped the top of it into pieces. Exhausted, he waited a moment before pushing it through his chest, falling to the ground.

The black hands were coalescing faster now, splitting the ground with terrible force, the open area they had chosen for their match was almost completely destroyed by the power of the attack.

Alzahad grabbed his fallen scythe and wrenched himself upwards, in a jerky and rough manner with the power of the charm he had placed on his feet. They themselves were broken, but they could still be controlled indirectly through the art of the third circle.

He staggered closer to Ibarus, hunched with pain, still holding the scythe. It was now or never.

He looked up at the man and froze.

Ibarus was staring straight at him. His gaze was neither one of shock nor of fury, nor pain or even mad glee. It was completely emotionless.

“Did you think...” Ibarus said quietly, yet still audible over the sound of the hands bursting through him, “… that you could simply defeat me with a rune? You fool. I have suffered much worse.”

Alzahad backed away in shock and horror. The man was unkillable!

“But you have proved tenacious. Few have managed to even mark this armor let alone...” He looked down at the hands still prying at and through his shattered chest, “… destroy it. So I shall reward you with the sight of the final circle; the art I used to kill my son, and my son's son: your forefathers. Not the pathetic excuse that your father must have taught you, but the real thing. The last circle. The circle of everything and nothing. The circle I myself discovered and opened.”

Ibarus's hands traced a simple curve in the air around him, and a brilliant arc of piecing light appeared, following his hands. “You see, your father focused too much on the circle itself. But its real power is the realization that the circle is the not the true circle so to speak. Its the inverse. The world is the circle; the circle is what is left over.”

Alzahad's mind screamed with terror and wonder as the shape shimmered before him impossible and indescribable.

The spectral hands froze before its power, like a stream in winter, then shattered into black chunks which fell in a collapsing pile through which Ibarus waded.

The circle faded at Ibarus's command.

“Do you see how useless it is? The final circle is everything. There is nothing more than it. It is all things that exist here and everywere. No art can stand before it… And none have.” Ibarus added darkly, looking at something off to his left.

“Yet you have injured me, something that even those misguided fanatics didn't manage. Therefore, I must return the favor.”

Ibarus turned and lifted something massive and white.

“I really hope this hurts.” Ibarus said quietly as he smashed the shape down on Alzahad.

Alzahad came to in excruciating pain. He tried to look at the cause but he was crushed by some unseen and incredible force. He tried to move his limbs and found he could barely move his arm. That was good.

“...So you are finally awake.” It was Ibarus's voice.

Alzahad's spirit plummeted. It was all over. He was trapped. His runes were gone, his spirit was almost gone. His relics and scythe were destroyed or missing.

“How does it feel under there?” Ibarus asked from above him. “I hope it gives you a taste of the pain you inflicted…” Ibarus lifted the weight holding down Azahad. It was a massive piece of masonry.

Ibarus's eyes blazed piercing blue. Alzahad tilted his head weakly to the towering figure just in time to see the masonry come crashing down on him. Alzahad, although smashed into unconsciousness again, had the distinct and unpleasant feeling that Ibarus repeated the gesture many, many times.

An unknown time later, Ibarus seemed to have finished his torture. His now very familiar and hated voice brought Alzahad back to life.

“I am surprised you are still alive. You really do cling to your outdated oaths. My son would have admired you.” Ibarus said.

Alzahad groaned.

“Well. I really shouldn't draw it out really. I have a wonderful retribution in mind. But first I want you to look at something. I think you've earned it.”

Alzahad groaned again as he tried to curse the other man.

He felt himself lifted from the ground by his skull. He could feel the massive finger's wrapping around his head and had the sudden and nauseating sensation that at any moment they could simply contract and crush it in one solid motion.

It was dark now and the full moon overhead illuminated the shattered marble around them in an interesting and disorienting manner.

Ahead of them was some bronze doorway underneath a partial building, flanked with columns and lifted from the ground on a massive slab of pure white marble.

“Here it is.” Ibarus said, letting Alzahad fall to his shattered and broken knees. Alzahad didn't have the strength to look up and collapsed fully to the ground.

Ibarus grabbed him by what was left of his cloak and held him up.

“Look.” Ibarus said.

In front of Alzahad was a massive bronze door. It must have been almost three stories.

Emblazoned on it, and taking up its entire height was a massive eye, but it had many layers to it and the detail was beyond anything Alzahad had ever seen. More than that though, on either side of the eye were two… angels?

He stuggled to look closer at the forms. They were the most beautiful things he had ever seen. There was a fullness and grace to them which went beyond any person he had ever seen or imagined. Their perfectness was so astonishing he did nothing beyond stare, even as Ibarus let him go.

“W-what are these?” Alzahad asked, voice trembling.

“They are true people.” Ibarus said.

Alzahad had regained control of his head at least and he turned to Ibarus. The grand master, stood motionless behind him, his gaze inscrutable.

“True people?” Alzahad echoed, his voice weak.

“Indeed. I cam across this door and discovered the truth. We are wretched facilities of true life. I don't think we have ever truly look at one another...” Ibarus puzzled, “or perhaps the door imparts some greater truth when observed… Either way, this door is what allowed me the presence of mind to right a life of senseless violence, a civilization of senseless violence.”

“Once I had gazed on these creatures I knew what true beauty could be. I saw that it was in and of itself a worth goal to try to achieve.”

Alzahad looked down at his cracked and broke form. His chest was open to the air, and he now saw how unnaturally gaunt he was. His slender arms and legs which once had seemed sleek and purposeful now looked bony and frail. The forms on the door looked like actual creatures, like life. His own body looked strange and immaterial. So shocking was this discovery that he reached his hand before his eyes and moved his fingers. The bony protrusions wavered. How unlike the graceful form of the beings on the door!

“Do you see now? How destructive our art has been? Perhaps we looked like these at one time. A lifetime, no… many lifetimes, generations, stretching back as far as anyone can remember… We have destroyed ourselves.”

Alzahad shook his head in disbelief and looked down again at his own body. He could feel power starting to come back slowly to his limbs as his spirit worked its way down from his skull.

He looked at Ibarus, with his partially destroyed armor. Ibarus stared back at him with glowing blue orbs, sunken into the bare bone of his skull. Alzahad looked back at the beings.

“Your armor was an attempt to look like these things then...” Alzahad wondered, still partially captivated by the forms.

Ibarus sighed. “It was. It proved to be clumsy and crude. I am somewhat glad you destroyed it. Now I can endevour to make another, closer to the original form.” Ibarus let out a sigh of yearning and walked up to the door, his feet clacking off the marble as he advanced. The master ran his hand over the embossed figures.

“To be such things. Can't you feel it? There is more life than we could ever imagine in such beings.” He tapped his head. “What we have left, our spirit, they must have in their whole bodies.” Ibarus said shaking his head, and then turned back to Alzahad.

“So you see now? Are my actions sensible? I want to… I want us to be like these things: to be perfect and full of life. It seems that for years we have focused too long on only death and oblivion.”

Alzahad regarded the other man in a new light. But part of him still ached to find his scythe and cleave his head from his shoulders.

“Will you join me in this? You are right, I have done something wrong. My message was convincing but somewhere along the way I lost the spark. You are yet young and full of vigor. You could add whatever it is to the effort.”

Alzahad was silent for a moment.

“At least now I understand your rationale.” Alzahad said, looking at his great grandfather.

Ibarus smiled at him.

“But your actions have been too subversive. I-I...” He stared at Ibarus's pale orb eyes, realizing that his own green eyes must look similar to the other man. “You could have brought anyone here. You could have shown the whole world this place and achieved the results you wanted. If Great Ones like ourselves are so moved, I can imagine it would be easy to show the others...”

“So there must be a reason you have not…” Alzahad paused. Ibarus sat facing Alzahd's still prone from and held his hands together, fingers resting on one another.

“Have you opened the door?” Alzahad wondered out loud.

Ibarus shook his head. “I do not know how you are distrustful even after all this. I could have destroyed you after all as I did the other masters. I let you live because I feel like you have the spark the others lacked. But no. I have not opened the door. Even with the final circle, everything of the world I could not. In fury, and years ago, I destroyed this place many times, but each time the door was left standing and the structure came back.”

Alzahad stared at him, and back at the door. “You were here before I came.”

“I was.” Ibarus said. “I have been here for years, pondering the secrets of this world and this door.”

“Ah. I see now.” Alzahad said with a slight grin. “You want to go through the door, to understand it, yourself.”

Ibarus stared at him, eyes wide and did not respond for a moment, and Alzahad knew that he was correct.

“The others wanted to use this understanding for yet more violence. They argued that the mere presence of the door, and its strange form and invulnerability to even the final circle implied some higher power or circle that we have yet to discover. I could not let such madmen discover what lay behind it.”

“So you destroyed them.” Alzahad said, the hatred clear in his voice.

“I did. And the world was a better place for it.” Ibarus responded.

“Your own son!” Alzahad cried.

“Yes, and his as well! I would have done the same to your father had he been there.” Ibarus admitted.

“I cannot help you in your task. I cannot forgive your crimes. Your efforts are selfish at their core. They lack honor. You have destroyed everything, even when mere changed was possible. More so than the masters, who sought only to follow the path they knew to the best of their abilities, you who knew better, took a dark path, by your own hand!” He shouted, his body shaking.

“It seems that you are still young.” Ibarus said, getting to his feet and dusting off his hands.

“You need the perspective of time. Fortunately I know how to provide that for you.” Ibarus said, looming closer.

“No!” Alzahad cried out, the terror of oblivion burning at him. His hand reached out and tried to summon the scythe, but Ibarus caught it in one action and broke it cleanly in his massive hands. Then turning away from the defenseless Alzahad, he signed the final circle again.

However, this time, the center of the circle was quite different.

“I believe you know this place? The mount of sages? They say the first Great One pondered here before he was Great. I shall provide you the same opportunity.” Ibarus said, but something in his voice chilled Ibarus to his core.

The cold windswept rockface sat just beyond the silver lined circle.

“What are you going to do?” Alzahad asked, knowing that he would dread the answer.

“You are young. If I merely set you here, you will simply come back and bother me again, as you did this time… and that was already quite effective. I can't risk compromising what I am try to do, saving our kind. I will truly give you time to understand what you have seen here.” Ibarus took another step closer.

“I will give you no choice.” Ibarus grinned, massive arms reaching out.

Alzahad cried out in terror as the master ribbed the broken hand from Alzahad's shoulder. There wasn't even enough time to register the loss of spirit before Ibarus flung the separated limb through the portal. Then he advanced and grabbed each remaining limb of Alzahad's body and broke and ripped it in turn, throwing it through as well.

Then he took Alzahad's head and tore it from his chest. He held Alzahad's head, the core of his spirit, in his hand and threw him through the circle.

Alzahad then cried out in pure hate as the world spun. He could not stop himself, he could not reattach his limbs. Rain pelted his skull and he could feel the chilling cold of the mountain. He rolled to a stop in a heap of limbs.

“Ah I forgot.” Ibarus stepped through the circle after Alzahad, who flung every curse he could think of at the master.

But Ibarus merely brushed them away with another circle. Then he reached forward and broke off Alzahad's jaw.

“There we go. You will thank me for this one day.” He said, the circle closing behind him.

And, inside his own head, for he could not voice it, Alzahad screamed.