

Insanium was mad with a hatred spawned by the divine powers that kept him in check. He had been wounded, but he was on the mend. He needed more power and the only way to do that at his status was to gather followers and ascend like other gods. His enemies had not fallen like they did in his dream. He was not concerned. Kronos awoken alone on the alternate dimension. An insidious idea formed in the vile mind of Insanium. *I wonder if now that I am here—if I can open a gateway to my realm.* He just had a limited amount of divine power. Before the lesser avatar of Insanium felt comfortable enough to attempt to open a gateway, he needed to establish his foothold. *I need worshippers! Will the true form of myself still accept me as his avatar or will I be counted as a 'pet' and thrown away like everyone else?* Insanium wondered what his purpose was now that the tie between him and the true form had been severed. He was his own being now. Would that tie be reformed if he opened a gateway? He decided to chance it. He needed worshippers and the idea was distasteful to him know that he did not normally need to waste his time on such matters. Here, with the laws and powers of the relic that bound the gods he did. *Humans have short life-spans. I need something I do not need to babysit as often.* The mad god set foot back on the world he had just retreated from, knowing that his enemies would be busy cleansing the lands he had already tainted as well as the two demigods he also tainted. Rather than make his presence known with his divine aura and aura of corruption, the vile god attempted to do the opposite and keep himself as hidden as possible while he searched the lands. There wasn't a lot of intelligent life dwelling in the desert. At least not in his immediate range, and he could sense out to a range of five miles, currently. Normally his senses weren't as limited, but his current range would have to suffice. Insanium moved across the desert as he sensed outward for something he could easily sway into worshipping him. He sensed a band of goblins nearby. *It's a start.* Insanium decided and teleported right to the group hidden within the rocky caves of the desert. The goblins fell to their knees in an instant when he appeared. His mere presence was overwhelmingly powerful and none of them could resist his call to kneel. He was frightful to look at. The goblins that would normally have run away, instead feel to their knees while relieving their bowels and bladders. *HEAR ME! Hear my call!* Insanium invaded the minds of every goblin within his auras of power. *Serve me. Serve my purpose and rise above those who put you underfoot.*

"Yes, master!" The goblins shouted in unison. One voice stood out and Insanium realized that one of the beings kneeling before him was not a goblin. It was yet another short-lived being, a human. *You!* Insanium singled out the human in the crowd and released her from his aura enough so that she could stand up and respond.

"Yes, my lord..." The woman gasped as she slowly stood up. The goblins only heard the woman speaking. Insanium was speaking solely to the woman at the moment. *You are a slaver. You alone enslaved these goblins?* Insanium peered into her soul.

"I freed them from a band of orcs and they serve me willingly for my deed," the woman replied. *You will be mine willingly?* Insanium asked incredulously.

"I have not served any god since I was a child and abandoned after serving loyally. Will you abandon me as well?" The woman asked. Insanium admired the woman's bravery. *I abandon all of my servants, but in the same sense I am always there.* Insanium replied honestly.

"If you can tell me one thing, I will serve you until my death." The woman said. Insanium did not normally care for such conversations or lame servants, especially ones that asked questions of him. *You intrigue me! Ask, but do not grow accustomed to this.* Insanium warned.

"What are the stars in the night sky? Some claim they are other worlds. Others claim they are the gods in the heavens. What are they really?" The woman asked. Insanium knew what the stars were. He flew passed them regularly. He saw into the woman's soul however and knew that she was not seeking a literal answer. *The stars are the flickering remnants of the dreams of gods, and I am the darkness that surrounds them!* Insanium replied almost philosophically. The group wasn't what Insanium was hoping for but they would suffice to get him started. The woman knelt back down, this time on her own accord. Insanium chanted a spell and a magical gate opened to his realm, letting a dark energy radiate through and begin infecting his new worshippers. The fifth-dimension spewed out the taint of madness. Insanium felt the call of a familiar voice in his head. The tie was still severed even though he had managed to bridge a temporary gateway from the Athyxian Realm to the Fifth-Dimension, the Plane of Madness. The Forgotten One sensed the gateway and the presence of his former avatar. He never tried to reestablish the tie between them. *Make a permanent gateway that I can pass through.* The Forgotten One instructed his former avatar. Insanium was compelled to obey, even

without the established tie. The power of madness was pleasant to Insanium as it radiated into the world and infected his new worshippers. Insanium turned his attention from the Forgotten One, back to his worshippers. *You are all mine now! I will make you stronger than you were before. Those of this world will be frightened of your new forms but fear not, you will be their nightmares and not the other way around.* Insanium spoke telepathically to his crowd as they began transforming from the energy known as the taint of madness. The goblins and human woman grew tiny plates under their skin, an almost insect-like armor. They embraced the power of the taint and became tainted servants of Insanium. *I am Insanium, the lord of madness and nightmares. Even those who do not willingly serve me, still serve me because I am always a part of every living thing that has a mind of their own and an imagination. Dreams are for fools. Nightmares are the only reality of life! This will be my first church. In so being, I bequeath the relics of madness to aid you in growing my church and empowering it. I am the secret god. I am the undying madness in the shadows of everyone's dreams and nightmares. I speak to you in your dreams.* Insanium roared his sermon into the minds of his servants. Several of his beasts of madness came through his gate and then he vanished. The gate closed. Those who had pledged themselves to the service of the god of madness had been forever changed, inside and out. In the place where Insanium once hovered before the crowd now rested the five relics of madness, a book, a rod, a whip, a dagger, and a sword. Each relic had similar markings upon it, yet also a few different. The woman stood up and approached the relics. The goblins did not raise their heads. As she approached the relics, she felt the power within them speak to her.

"My goblins," she called out. They looked to her, but still did not dare to raise their heads fully. "My goblins, we have been chosen to serve a powerful god who does not lie to us. He has been honest in his teachings. He said he will abandon us. That shows integrity. He left us these relics to aid us in our service to his teachings, which must remain secret. Only those we initiate into our church can know the truth of whom we serve and our lord's dogma."

"Lana, who will be honored to be the chosen of the relics," One goblin who was apparently close to the woman asked. Lana looked to the goblin.

"My dear Fleck, of course you will be one of my chosen. The rest I will choose at random." Lana announced. "Let us go now and dream the horrific dreams of Insanium!" The once living band of goblins and female human no longer required sleep as undead versions of their former selves. However, undead could choose to rest in order to heal their wounds or in this case, to commune with their new god. They were unsure as to what kind of undead they would be categorized as by their enemies, but according to the Book of Madness they were Minions of Madness. Lana and her goblin allies did not retreat to their personal caves. They all lay upon the ground where they stood and closed their eyes. Together, they all dreamed of madness. Lana saw what she thought she needed to do. She needed to finish setting up the First Church in the Scarred Deserts before leaving to begin the next part of her calling. She would spread the taint of corrupting madness wherever she traveled and during her travels she would seek those who would serve her master well and initiate them. She saw the future where gates to the Plane of Madness opened and only a single massive tendril of Insanium could fit through. She knew that meant a much larger and more powerful gate would have to be created for her god to come through. She needed to find a powerful wizard or sorcerer that could create such a gateway. She knew of none in the desert wastes of the Scarred Deserts. Her nightmarish dreams of pure insanity sent a sensation of euphoria over her as she slumbered. She was now a creature of the night, but her first night as a Minion of Madness required a deep and long sleep.

Lana awoke abruptly as did her goblin allies. She had heard something. Her goblin allies were still in their deep slumber.

"Wake up! Someone is coming." Lana warned as she lightly kicked Fleck to help revive him. Fleck rolled to his feet. A third goblin awoke and stepped before Lana and Fleck before kneeling.

"I dreamed of madness and the coming of corruption. The Lord of Madness has renamed me The First. I am to become the first priest of his doctrines." The tainted goblin stated.

"Now is not the time," Lana warned. She handed over the Book of Madness before she and Fleck moved to see if they could discern who or what was approaching. The four beasts of horrors sent through the gates were also awake and guarding the cave entrance. The goblins quickly roused and took a defensive position on the front lines with the beasts of horrors behind them. Lana, Fleck, and the First were the unholy chosen and were instinctively protected by other minions of madness. The light from a torch began to

illuminate the cavern. The three men holding the torch froze in their tracks as soon as they saw the small band of mutated goblins and their beasts.

"Lay down your arms and surrender and I promise not to torture you too long," Lana cackled playfully. The darkness had hidden the terrors that were now before the three men. Wreckgar knew that they had bit off more than they could chew after seeing the beasts below continuously altering their nightmarish forms. Sprouting tentacles and tendrils, but never quite solidifying into a solid mass. He knew that his friends were done for if he did not do something to keep them safe.

"Run!" He shouted. A flurry of javelins came streaking in at the three men. Thankfully the goblins did not have good aim. The barrage hit all around them clanging loudly against the stone wall, splintering and chipping away small chunks of stone. Randal and Bear did not plan on running away from their first adventure no matter what Wreckgar demanded. The brave shaman leaped from his high perch and came down hard at the frontline of mutated goblins. They had an otherworldly presence that would have struck fear into a commoner's heart. The shaman was no commoner. Randal's heavy naginata blade crashed down hitting nothing but the stone floor. Knowing their deaths would be swift in battle, Wreckgar unleashed a stream of Eldritch fire from his hand at one of the beasts. The beast rolled to the side letting the ground where it once stood get scorched. Bear was excited and rushed in with his shaman friend, crushing not one but two goblins under the head of his heavy maul. Lana watched as the invaders came in. They were out of reach of her new whip but she knew that if she took any of them alive that they would soon learn of its bite.

"Flee," The First commanded after chanting a spell at Bear. The brave man turned to flee, leaving his friends behind. Fleck wondered how this was going to play out. Were they about to capture their first victims to torture and transform into minions of Insanium? The beasts snarled through the bubbling transformations that were their bodies. If ever a nightmare came to life, this was by far the closest comparison as far as Wreckgar was concerned. Goblins were wielding magic and nightmarish beasts stood between them and their prize. The mutated goblins swarmed in and surrounded Randal and Bear. One goblin clawed a deep wound on Randal's arm. The wound was no ordinary wound, for like their god, it began corrupting Randal from within. Randal swung his naginata wildly, hoping he would hit something. The mutated goblins were much more agile than a common goblin. Wreckgar could see the battle from his vantage point. He saw Bear attempting to flee. He saw the mutated goblins surrounding his two friends. He saw the four beasts of horror and their three masters. He figured if his friends were not going to listen to him calling for a retreat, then he had to do as much damage before he personally retreated. He sent another eldritch blast streaking at one of the beasts. The foul things were also agile and slipped out of the way of the raw magical energy. Bear pushed his way past the goblins and up past Wreckgar fleeing the battle as fast as he could like a coward. Wreckgar knew better though. There was magic afoot. Then he saw who was responsible. A priest of some sort was chanting a spell below. The First was targeting the shaman who stood against his fellow goblins alone. Randal became so confused from the effects of the priest's spell that he stood blankly and babbled. Fleck and Lana laughed insidiously. Wreckgar knew who he had to kill before the night was over. It just wasn't going to be easy. At least he knew Bear would be safe. The mutated goblins continued to surround the confused shaman and some came up to confront the warlock. Randal was being stripped of his own flesh by the savage mutated goblins and their claws of corruption. If he left he could return later with Bear and avenge their comrade, but could he save him now? Wreckgar saw that Randal was not done yet. He finally managed to hack one of the mutated goblins in two spilling its entrails across the cave. Wreckgar knew he had to keep the beasts back and hope his friend could either escape or cut his way through the mutated goblins. He couldn't though now. He had mutated goblins of his own to fight off now. Randal could not run even if he wanted to now. He had to fight his way out or die in battle. Wreckgar glanced behind him, hoping to see Bear returning but there was no sign of his other friend. He was long gone. Wreckgar sent a blast of energy into a goblin that was trying to claw at him and turned it into dust. Randal was at last tackled to the floor where he was ripped into shreds. Wreckgar turned and ran in hopes to find Bear. The mutated goblins did not follow outside of the cavern.

"Damn it!" Wreckgar roared as he ran as fast as his feet would carry him. Where did Bear go? Was he being followed? Wreckgar was not sure of anything anymore. These beings were not normal, he knew. There was something otherworldly about them which would explain the distasteful auras in the area and his strange

nightmare. Wreckgar never looked back, only forward. He saw the deep footprints made by Bear and not much farther ahead a collapsed muscular man.

"Bear," Wreckgar called out. "Keep running you fool!" Bear turned to see his fast approaching friend alone. He knew without asking.

"Randal!" He cried.

"Another day my friend. We need to put some more distance between us and them for now." Wreckgar warned as he came to his friend. The two remaining friends ran away from the caves in search of a safe place to hold up for a night.