

The Revenge Soldiers

Chapter 1- Johannas

Johannas is their brother, but now they are going to have to kill him. Looking back it is difficult to say exactly when it was he went so wrong. When was it that their brother turned his path toward darkness? Was it a struggle for him? Was it even his fault?

Muse of the Revenge Soldiers makes her way toward the thick vine barrier, creeping along as she moves. She is one of the Revenge Soldiers because it is she and her siblings who take revenge on those who would threaten the natural life of this planet and her people. And the training they receive here in the Cloister is second to none. For nothing and no one can stand against a Revenge Soldier, whose strength cannot even be measured!

She has known Johannas longer than all of her siblings except a few. Which is to say they grew up together, for they are the same age. All Revenge Soldiers are preborn, meaning born into consciousness. So suffice to say that Muse's memories of Johannas go back a long way. It is this fact, the truth of their closeness, to all the children of The Cloister, that makes his betrayal that much more painful and almost surreal!

So as Muse moves forward, her progress ploddingly slow through the dense tangle of Johannas's thorns, her heart is heavy within her chest. Can she kill him, really kill him? At this late hour there may be no other choice. For if there is to be a future, a free future for mankind then Johannas must die!

About a month ago Muse was investigating a Reaper called Necros regarding his connection to the Puppets who have been appearing in increasing numbers in the cities. What these things are is artificial humans, and these doppelgangers were created with a purpose! And the deeper she dug the more she found bread crumbs leading her to this Reaper.

Now Reapers are just as the stories say they are, immortal beings who gather souls on behalf of Death. And Death has under him a complex network, a hierarchy of lieutenants going all the way down to the Reapers.

But the more Muse dug the more it became apparent that every connection she found led to Necros. He is behind the mysterious Thorns, which recently sprang up at the fringes of the cities. Now as she nears the Holy City and the Citadel, where her wayward brother awaits, Muse is forced to hack through thick thorny vines which completely encompass the world's capitol.

This Necros is behind it all and at this moment it is blatantly clear to young Muse- Necros and Johannas, the God King, are one and the same!

The Thorns are spreading disease, which sweeps across the seaboard like fire. Those unfortunate souls who venture too close to the towering plants are disintegrated by acid spray, leaving only a bubbling pile of flesh and bones behind! So Muse must take care, keeping her shield out in front

of her to hold the carnivorous plants at bay. And with each step she draws closer to her final destiny, the confrontation with her brother Johannas. This isn't going to be easy!

Life in the Cloister was never easy. Revenge Soldiers are bred to fight, their traits altered and enhanced by gene therapy and manipulation. Their masters The Elders say that this is their link to the Elder Race, and to the Patriarchs and Ancestors from whom all of mankind is descended.

Each one of the Revenge Soldiers is born with singular and unique gifts. Muse's own include the power of healing and of protection. This might make her sound weak or soft, but she is a Revenge Soldier. The weakest of them is not soft, for they have been hardened through ruthless and unspeakable torments. A Revenge Soldier is as hard as iron and just as inflexible at times!

And from the moment they can walk Revenge Soldiers train mercilessly hard! Johannas was once forced to balance a massive boulder atop his head while he was only 3! Muse thinks she didn't see it then, though she recognizes it now: these things took their toll on him, on them all! But for him it was different. He was always so rebellious, so difficult and at times so sullen! Muse thinks inside his head hatred had taken root and like a poison over time it ate away at him slowly from the inside out.

The Elders are so strict with their charges, accepting no excuses, tolerating not even a hint of weakness. They treat children like machines, or children made of stone, without feelings or limits. Sometimes they would insist on a group of children going for several days without food, even water. But these trials made them hard, they made them all the soldiers they are. And for better or worse Muse and her siblings are stronger because of the Elders' ascetic regimens.

Their master or teacher is called Syd Vanish and he is a man of few words. Once he and Johannas stared at one another for five days without so much as a blink! In the end Johannas lost, a thing he never took well. He was only 7 at the time but he swore he would beat their teacher. Johannas was always like that, even when he was little. Whenever he made up his mind about something he could not and would not be moved, not even by their teacher. Many was the time when he was forced into isolation or some other austerity due to his careless tongue and his angry temper!

The Cloister itself is laid out at the base of a towering stupa, which is a needlelike tower used as a temple in buddhist countries. Only the Elders are permitted inside, for it is a sacred space. The Elders share a barracks, as do the children. But the children share a separate one. Sometimes there would be as many as 100 kids crammed in there at once!

And yet as she struggles with her memories Muse is coming to terms with the inescapable fact: she is going to have to confront her brother Johannas! This has been coming for quite some time and some fights cannot be avoided, however hard you try.

Johannas paces back and forth across the breadth of the sanctuary of the Citadel. He is becoming increasingly anxious as his siblings draw nearer. It is not that he fears them, for he fears no one living or dead. But there is a sense of inevitability which lingers over him, dangling like the

proverbial Sword of Damocles over his head. But Johannas is proud and strong, so very strong! He is so strong and so clever that he knows no one can get the better of him. Yet he is over anxious to resolve this, to kill the last of his siblings, for he knows in his heart that they alone can pose any threat to him.

Johannas is tall and slender, about six foot two, with long fine blonde hair which hangs down to the middle of his back. His eyes are a dazzling blue, the color of ocean water, pure and clear. He learned when he was quite young that he could use his eyes to manipulate the other children, to get them to do whatever he wanted. And this is his nature: to get his way by any means available to him. Maybe this is why he craves power and even now, as sole master of the Earth, of all he surveys, Johannas still craves and yearns for more.

He means to become God, that is his aim. For God is an idea rather than a thing or an actual entity, according to Johannas. And even though now his will is uncontested and absolute he still yearns for one thing: more power. He has used his science to build his army and to open gates to other worlds. For he is an explorer, a trailblazer. He is destined to go beyond all others who went before him, indeed to transcend his humanity. Johannas is meant to walk in the footsteps of gods and of legends, to become larger than life. And this sense of destiny, of self importance, defines everything he does.

The Citadel is heavily guarded, virtually impregnable, but as Captain Talghese and Johannas's brother Mordecai watch him pace nervously it makes them anxious. The battle has raged now for nearly a week, leaving piles of dead and rivers of blood coursing their way through the valley. And both lieutenants share the same sense of a coming reckoning. Some of Johannas's siblings have survived, against all odds, and now they are coming for him. The Revenge Soldiers have come for their revenge.

Talghese is unfailingly loyal, a zealot if you will, a man driven by a deep sense of honor. He believes in Johannas fervently, or at least he once did. When everything began Johannas was still a great leader of men, a hero of the Destroyer War. He was like a god, a man for whom everything and anything was possible, a superman, an ubermensch. For him everything seemed to come easily and he could wrap men around his finger as effortlessly as breathing. It is this same irresistible strength which drew Talghese to him, though now cracks are beginning to show.

The first seed of doubt was sown in his mind the moment of the Holy Sermons. Talghese remembers how Johannas spoke glowingly of a new world, and of the inherent weakness of mankind. He spoke of purging the human race of weakness, of a transcendent state of existence and of rule by an elite superrace. This appealed to Talghese, who as a man of action despises weakness in other men even as he despises it in the world. This perfect world was an idea, but this one idea drew Talghese, almost hypnotically, holding him captive in its thrall.

But the past few months have shown the true nature of the beast. First Johannas addressed the world in a live broadcast, declaring himself as the Holy Prophet, the Second Coming whose word is Divine Law. Then, about a month later, he found the Tablets of the Law, which he interpreted as God's

blueprint, his sacred commandments for the future course of humanity. He began calling these Tablets the New Word, treating them as divine writings, prophetic revelations. This made Talghese intensely uncomfortable, for though he is not a religious man any such posturing chills his blood, filling him with indescribable fear and apprehension.

Johannas grew increasingly paranoid after that and he started cooking up reasons to make mass arrests on the grounds of weeding out insurrectionists. His goons started executing children in the streets! For Talghese, who has devoted his life to the defense of the innocent, to honoring a sacred code, these actions are unforgivable!

Then the slaughters began, the Culling Johannas called it! He claimed that the organism of society was diseased and had to be forcibly purged of weakness, of impure and imperfect elements. So his men started storming through neighborhoods in the cities at first, burning houses and gunning down innocents in a hail of bullets! This was the final straw, the throwing down of the gauntlet for his opponents, including the Revenge Soldiers. Within hours of the first culling representatives of the Patriarchs, the Reapers, the Muses, the Elders and The People's Army presented a united front and declared open war on the self-proclaimed God King. That day the rebellion truly began.

Now, as he stands and watches his divine ruler and sovereign, Talghese finds himself torn. On the one hand this man, whatever he is, has become a monster, a thing he despises at the core of his being! But on the other hand there is duty. He has sworn himself to this man, to defend and to serve him till his death. And while most men hold their oaths as liquid, as easily broken and rearranged, to a man like Talghese his word is his bond. So he will serve Johannas to the death, to the last drop of his own blood, right or wrong.

Captain Talghese has long snow white hair which hangs down his back, pulled into a well-kept braid. He is tall and thin, sinewy, the kind of man with a permanently serious face. He wears the army of an officer of the state: a long black uniform shirt buttoned up the front adorned with medals of honor and epaulettes at the shoulders. The black is offset in places by crimson red, like the epaulettes and the high collar.

The other man in the room is Mordecai, the brother of the God King. He has an older and weary look to him, though he is not that old. His is a careworn, wrinkled face, the look of a man older than his years and wiser perhaps.

Mordecai is loyal. He has been at his brother's side since the start, and that is where he is going to stay to whatever end. It has not always been easy to be the brother of a living god, and though he does not possess Johannas's magnificent skills or his impossible charisma Mordecai has a quiet wisdom about him, an awareness of things. Ever he has his ear to the ground, listening for signs of trouble, reading the skies.

Lately he has grown edgy, and when the Culling began he got the sinking feeling it wouldn't be long before the others retaliated against his brother. Johannas is out of control, as men with too much power often get to be. And there he was, every step of the way, warning him against his folly and

arrogance, though his warnings fell always on deaf ears. Mordecai has tried in vain to bring Johannes to his senses, to speak reasonably with him, but Johannes is no longer a reasonable man.

It wasn't always like this. When they were kids in the Cloister Mordecai would look out for Johannes, try to keep him out of trouble, covering for him whatever mischief he was up to at the time. But his brother was willful, stubborn and trouble always found him, or he found it. Like the time Johannes set fire to the food pantry after he was punished by their teacher for being disrespectful. Mordecai tried to cover it up, to make it look like an accident. In his mind he thought the teacher knew the truth but he couldn't bear to punish Johannes because of Mordecai. Things were like that a lot.

And every step of the way, especially after his brother's rapid ascent to power, Johannes would act contrary to his sage advice. His brother has become arrogant, or maybe he always was. At any rate Johannes no longer confides in his brother, though he is about to do so.

Johannes stops pacing and stares out a long, oval window. He is perfectly silent and still and his older brother senses he is anticipating the coming battle. But it is Captain Talghese who breaks the perfect silence, approaching his lord to kneel before him, though his back is still turned.

"My Lord your forces are ready and the field is set for battle. Even now the rebels have breached the outer wall made up of your thorns. What are your orders, my liege?"

Johannes doesn't reply at first. His mind is still distant as he gazes out in the direction of his rebel brethren. "My orders?" he replies, a little puzzled. Then he turns toward them, his terrible stare freezing them both where they stand. "Let them come. I will kill them all!"

Chapter 2- The eve of war

Jakob Isaacson watches as the others make their final preparations. Now is the eve of war and everyone's blood is up. Jakob has known these men since the beginning, in fact before this all began he considered Johannes to be his closest friend. Not that Johannes ever had any friends, not really. He was never the type to let anyone get close, even as a child. But he remembers how back then Johannes was so alone, so vulnerable and sad. So Jakob befriended him. It seemed like the right thing to do and there was something about the boy which drew Jakob to him. His was the kind of beautiful sadness, and young Johannes had a kind of nobility to him. But none of that matters now, Jakob tells himself. Johannes is the enemy, the enemy of freedom everywhere. Now he and the other Revenge Soldiers have come here to reckon with their brother. They have come to bring justice to the God King, to pass judgment on him. And the hour of their revenge is at hand!

Jakob has been given command of some 100 men, the relative size of the Revenge Soldier force. It is a task he was both born and bred for. He was infused prenatally with something known as the Alpha Gene, a gene treatment enhancing leadership abilities, making him a born and bred leader of soldiers. He is a specialist with firearms as well, and his handcrafted guns possess deadly abilities

which no other gun on Earth possess.

It is sundown, the night before the biggest battle in his life, in all their lives. And Jakob has checked and rechecked all his guns, 16 of them at last count. His lieutenants are gathered with him in his commander's tent as he goes over the plans for the coming battle. He turns to Seji, his chief intelligence officer, who is standing to his left as he puts away the last of his weapons. Jakob is seated, though he rises from his seat to speak with Seji as he begins to take his report. "So Seji, tell me what you have seen. What does our brother have waiting for us tomorrow?"

Jakob is of average height with soft brown hair. He wears a loose fitting military uniform, a relic of the American Civil War. The coat is Union blue, complete with an officer's epauletts and revolver. But he wears a Confederate cap pulled over his eyes, forcing him to tilt his head back slightly to look at his intelligence officer. His flesh beneath his uniform is tight and muscular and covered with tattoos. His code name is Death Dragon, a handle only his closest comrades use.

"The People's Army has arrived, some 500 men or better" Seji replies. "Their commander is a man called Bell Patriarchus. He is a brave man, a leader of men, but like so many others he is in over his head and he doesn't know it.

"Additionally a small contingent of Patriarchs have arrived and are encamped at the edge of the thorn barrier which surrounds the Holy City. I have felt their minds, but they are dark and their thoughts are bent on evil and the thirst for blood.

"The Muses too have arrived and are positioned at the edge of the Kidron Valley. Grand Muse Alexei has yet to emerge from his golden carriage as he is preparing his mind and spirit for warfare. Even the Elders are gathering, making their preparations for war, commander. The Reapers too have come and before long they will join in the carnage. But they are mysterious beings whose actions cannot be divined or predicted, even by me."

Seji is about 5'9 with short dark brown hair and a permanently serious expression. He wears a clean white t shirt underneath a black suede jacket which he leaves hung open. A single buddhist medallion hangs from his neck bearing the symbol of the lotus, the flower of enlightenment.

Seji is unspeakably powerful, a psychic of such preeminence that many whisper he is in fact a god. He is capable of impossible feats, including but not limited to: multipresence, temporal manipulation, and superspeed. Many call him Ghost, for he is neither here nor there, but also everywhere. Due to his psychic powers he is Jakob's head of intelligence, or in other words he is the intelligence operative of the Revenge Soldiers.

He and Jakob are the same age, whatever age that is exactly. For in the Cloister there are no birthdays and no references were made to either their birth or their origin, an omission which a handful of the now grown children have grown curious about.

"So then all the players have come. The stage is set. And tomorrow we reckon with our fallen brother. Though I wish we knew more of Johannes's plans." Jakob takes a moment to ponder,

trying as hard as he can not to appear flustered or overly apprehensive. He expects this of Johannas, who is as he always has been an opponent of the most deadly kind.

"What else would you expect, fearless leader?" Fleen chimes in. He has just entered the tent and by torchlight Jakob turns to see his familiar outline as darkness falls outside. "You know Johannas...this is sure to be a bumpy ride!"

Fleen has thick, broad shoulders and golden hair which is massed atop his head like a dense, wild flame. Next to Johannas he was the great hero of the Destroyer War and his reputation among special service circles is impeccable. Even the public knows his name as he became quite famous for his daring deeds with the future of the world in the balance.

It was New Year's Eve of 2024 when the first of them came. Prodigy was the first, a great hulking brute who crashed through New York City like a giant wrecking ball! As the military scrambled to find a solution people began to flee the city in droves as the world watched in horror and wonder. Droves of tanks and soldiers flooded the city to oppose the rampaging behemoth but nothing could bring him down or even wound him for that matter!

As scientists searched in vain for an answer, any answer, the Revenge Soldiers appeared on the scene like beacons of light. They were miraculous and they could fight this monster on even ground, with staggering feats of strength and speed which far exceeded human limits!

The brotherhood of the Revenge Soldiers drew Prodigy out onto a sparsely populated part of Long Island where the battle reached its climax. In the aftermath their brothers Amphitriton and Peisistratus were left dead, keeping the outside world safe for the moment. The battle escalated into a full blown war as Stain, Bravo and Outbreak appeared on opposite ends of multiple continents. By this time the Revenge Soldiers were spread thin and within months 12 more Destroyers appeared across the face of the world and the Destroyer War had begun!

The Alphas, who included: Johannas, Jakob, Seji and the peculiar Kwan Chin, led the respective units that confronted the Destroyers. The war would rage for the next two years, at which time Johannas discovered a serum he called Jacob's Ladder. In addition to being a potent psychic, a charismatic leader and a deadly soldier Johannas was and is a brilliant scientist. (There are truly no limits to what he can do!)

In essence this serum provided a psychic boost to the Alphas, greatly enhancing their powers to godlike levels! With this edge the Alphas gained the ability to kill the Destroyers, ending a long and bloody war.

In the aftermath huge sections of the Earth were left utterly decimated and the death toll numbered in the thousands. The Revenge Soldiers, who before the war had been unknown, gained worldwide notoriety, a fact Johannas was quick to seize on.

Johannas's rise to power was virtually unimpeded, and the turning point came on New Year's Eve of 2027 when he commanded a worldwide television audience, captivating the old and the young

with his now famous Holy Sermons.

Johannas has a skillful mastery of any situation, and he has always been at his best in times of trial. In the preceding months since the end of the war he had used his influence, his organization and his vast charisma to begin to rebuild the shattered planet and had become a regular guest speaker at the United Nations. Even people on the street started to trust him, for while the other Revenge Soldiers were content to fade into the shadows Johannas was a visible figure, a strong and comforting presence.

So when he prepared to speak on New Year's Eve in a worldwide telecast it drew a great deal of attention. He chose Jerusalem as his site for its cultural and religious significance, calling it the Holy City. And as he strode out onto the balcony of the State House to make his speech the streets were overrun with masses of people. People slammed and jostled with one another in a desperate attempt to get a view of their savior. Johannas was like the Second Coming and the world held its collective breath in anticipation.

As he began his speech Johannas spoke glowingly of a new world, a world free of imperfection and inequality. He made grandiose promises of remaking the world, of a rule by the wise, the elect. This appealed to the best in people, and every man thought The Promised Land had been born! Johannas was the apple of everyone's eye, the Incarnate Word, the Holy One, the Messiah! Even religious and world leaders bowed the knee and in the aftermath his ascent to power was complete. Johannas was infallible, divine, perfect.

The other Revenge Soldiers, heroes of the Destroyer War, faded into obscurity. They were content to remain unknown, to bury their dead and go about their business behind closed doors. Revenge Soldiers keep to their own, minding their own business. The Old Code is their gospel, their one unbreakable law.

This so-called Old Code is a strict system of honorable conduct and fearlessness in the face of battle. A Revenge Soldier honors his word, defends the weak and the innocent, shows honor and fearless courage without flaw. And this Code governs everything a Revenge Soldier does, how he thinks, acts and even speaks. To the Revenge Soldier the Code is all.

Fleen enters the tent slowly, for he loves a dramatic entrance. His gold chain clanks as he walks, rather saunters proudly over to Jakob, who is smiling. Every eye turns toward him, for Fleen loves a grand entrance.

"I suppose not" Jakob admits. "Is everyone here? I want to go over the assignments for tomorrow."

"I only just arrived from our reconnaissance sweep" comes the reply. It is Hira Yuri, the last of the Alpha commanders to arrive. He is a serious young man with a permanently intense expression on his face. He is pensive, gloomy, even sullen, but there is no one more focused or dedicated when it comes to a mission.

During the Destroyer War he was Johannas's second in command, his mighty right hand and when the serum was discovered he was the first one to try it. He is a born follower, a capable organizer and a flawless soldier of highest honor and distinction. "So what are our orders and what have we learned about the enemy placements?"

Jakob's smile fades. He is all business now and he knows that with an enemy like Johannas he can ill afford to make any missteps. "We don't know much" he begins, walking over to his map table to lean over the outspread map of the battlefield. "Johannas is playing this pretty close to the vest. But that is no less than any of us expected.

"According to Seji the Reapers, Muses and even the Elders themselves are encamped on the periphery of the field, beyond the edge of the thorny perimeter."

"What about the thorns?" Rize asks. "Have they spread any farther? Do we think they possibly might? We've already established they are capable of emitting a lethal acid spray in addition to being both strangling and carnivorous. We want to know what we're up against here, to weigh the risks before jumping in with both feet!"

Rize's real name is Arise, but none of his siblings call him by it. He is another of the Alphas, one of the original Seven who were sent to a top secret facility in Area 51 to develop their psychic potential. His is the power of flame, or pyrokinesis as they call it. In battle he is able to generate heat to rival that of the Sun, wrapping his body in searing fire! Rize is fierce and as fearless as they come, but even he wants to be aware of all the risks, especially with an enemy as capable and devious as Johannas.

Rize has a scar over his left eye where he was sliced with a sword in training. His hair is fire red and his eyes a deep, penetrating green. He makes his way over to the map table, standing with the others at Jakob's side, all except Kwan Chin, who sits motionless in the corner staring at nothing.

"I want to divide our force into five units, each having 20 members, including a unit commander. The commander will be all of you of course, the Alphas, the remnant of the 7. I will serve in Unit 2 under the command of you, Kwan Chin." Kwan Chin merely glances at his commander indifferently, not even blinking his eyes. Of all the Revenge Soldiers he is the most sullen and withdrawn.

Kwan Chin has long white hair and a black mask which he keeps permanently pulled up over half his face. He is clairvoyant, psychic and highly telepathic like all the Alphas and the Sevens. Sometimes he can speak without words and there is an understanding among all of them that Kwan Chin has evolved beyond words. He is a higher creature, a god in human skin and yet there appears to be precious little of his humanity left. He was one of the 7 and some of his brothers think the experiments and trials they all underwent left him severely scarred, even damaged.

Kwan Chin does not join in their discussion, and yet he listens intently, absorbing every detail as Jakob doles out the assignments.

"Seji will lead Unit 1, which will spearhead our offensive against the enemy's left flank. I will of course allow each of you to pick your own men. You can work it out between you, and no fighting

please!

"In this fashion we will spread Johannas thin, not allowing him to concentrate his forces. Our objective is to push through his defenses inside the Holy City, fighting our way up the hill to the Citadel. Units 2 and 3 will push the middle, led by Kwan Chin and Hira respectively. This will keep Unit 1 from sustaining heavy losses to allow them to sweep across the enemy flank and infiltrate The Citadel. Mobius, you and Rize will head the final two units. Delay your approaches until the enemy collapses on the central units. This will allow you to collapse his flank. Are there any questions?"

Jakob looks over their faces and there is an uncomfortable silence. There is the unspoken sense between them that the time has come to confront their brother. Each of them knows it must be done, and they are hard men all. And yet there are the memories of shared pain, of common experience and unbreakable bonds which endure still. Still they know what must be done, for the future of mankind and the survival of the human race. Their fallen brother has gone mad, and mad dogs must be put down!

Each of them leaves for his own tent, all but Kwan Chin, who stays behind, still sitting silently in the corner. He looks up at Jakob, who tells him it is time to go. "This has been a long time coming, ever since Area 51" Kwan Chin says in his whisper of a voice. Such is his power and his command that it is difficult to discern whether he is speaking or simply using telepathy. Kwan Chin gets up to leave, moving with impossible deliberation. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his long black robe as he ducks through the tent flap, flipping out one hand to brush it aside. Then he stalks off alone into the night, going God knows where. He is an enigma and to an extent that when he does speak it is difficult to divine his true meaning.

Jakob sits alone by candlelight at his desk. He is going over and over his plans, trying to run every possible contingency in his head. It will be a long, restless night.

Chapter 3- Day One

Muse joins up with Unit One, having plunged deep into the maw of the thorny wall during the night. As dawn breaks over the eastern sky she scans in every direction for some sign of enemy soldiers. 'All right brother' she thinks. 'Make your move, show us your hand!'

Seji is in command here and he follows Jakob's orders to the letter. They approach the city from the far side, weaving their way through the legendary Garden of Gethsemane atop the Mount of Olives. In a flash men appear some 50 yards in front of them then disappear, vanishing like smoke. Johannas is toying with them, using his powers of illusion to mess with their minds. He is trying to gain the psychological foothold, to claim the upper hand. But it won't work. 'It is too late to hide behind your tricks now, brother!'

Banshees shriek in the dim morning light. She had heard rumors that they were working for Johannas, serving his iron hand. According to legend they come to guide the souls of the dead to their

rest but Johanna is using them to harvest souls. 'What are you up to, Johanna? What do you hope to gain by harvesting these souls?'

A division of Johanna's men emerge from the mist, raining shells and rocket powered grenades upon them in the twinkling of an eye! Someone, not us, returns their fire from farther up the mountain. Muse strains her mind to tune in, to extend her sight beyond sight, allowing her mind to glimpse what her eyes cannot.

It is the rebels, The People's Army under the command of Bell Patriarchus. From all that she has heard he is a giant of a man, a great leader who first threw down the gauntlet before Johanna. (It is no easy thing for a mere man to challenge a god! This Bell must be some kind of guy!)

The People's Army retaliates, opening fire with a barrage of rockets and machine guns. Bell himself stands erect atop a tank, his binoculars up to his eyes as he takes in the enemy positions. He and his men barely acknowledge the presence of the Revenge Soldiers here, but Muse suppose this is because he knows their capabilities and is leaving them to their own devices. This is their fight anyway.

Despite the heavy fire no Revenge Soldiers are hit or wounded. They are, simply put, too fast and too advanced for such crude weapons. Seji, for his part, moves faster than Muse can even sense. He is the fastest of them, if it were put to a test. And his psychic senses are so highly attuned that she has heard rumors that he can't be hit. Even psychic attacks fail to find their mark when he is the target, but then this is no ordinary foe.

Seji unlooses his mind, now sensing in all directions, taking in thoughts and information from the front where the other commanders are already engaged. Unit 3 under Hira Yuri is taking heavy fire. They have run into a division of Johanna's crack troops, his very best. Zeus and Juno are among them, former Revenge Soldiers who defected, traitors who trusted in brother Johanna above their own teachers.

Fray the Furies is among the Revenge Soldiers in Unit 3 and even as they are pinned down by intense enemy fire he stands upright, using his big thick black wings to shield his body from bullets. Of all the Revenge Soldiers he might be the strangest.

Fray the Furies resembles a gargoyle, with leathery black wings that stretch from the top of his head all the way down to his ankles. He stands over seven feet in height and his skin is more like scale, tough and highly resistant to damage. He is able to summon storms, mini tornadoes, with his wings, a fact which seems impossible until witnessed! Of all of them the Elders say he has the purest blood, being the most like the Great Race in appearance.

The Elders themselves are of this Great Race, the ancestors of mankind who came here long before the dawn of civilization. It is for this purpose that they came here, to guide and to protect mankind, their wayward little brothers and sisters.

Fray the Furies has blood red eyes and they flash with anger as he catches sight of Juno across

the field, some 30 yards away. She and Zeus, as well as a handful of others, left the Cloister after the Holy Sermons, choosing to follow Johannas and to trust in his infallible wicked word. He spreads his wings and flies toward her like the wind, like Nemesis herself, hellbent on exacting his revenge! It has been nearly two years since the Sermons, since the others left and Fray the Furies will never forgive them for it! He is a creature of devilish revenge and wrath, a being born of fire and of blood!

He is nearly on Juno, screaming down on her like a vengeful pterosaur when suddenly he is tackled by an irresistible force! Zeus, his skin as black as midnight, lunges through the air at him, throwing him to the ground in an effort to protect his sister. They are inseparable those two, and it has been that way ever since they were both little. (Was Zeus ever little? Fray the Furies doesn't remember.)

Fray the Furies bounds back up to his feet, his long thick tail lashing angrily behind him. Zeus is big and thick and he comes for him, slamming a hammering fist into the side of his head. Fray the Furies counters him, breathing out fire which swallows his treacherous brother. But Zeus is not destroyed, for he is supertough and he emerges from the conflagration, coming out fighting. They battle back and forth, these unbreakable giants, childhood friends who took different paths.

Juno stands back and watches them, her long blue hair dancing in the breeze. She knows how Zeus loves to fight and to protect her, and since she wants to stay out of this fight she keeps her distance. She is a pretty little thing, petite though impossibly strong. For her part she remains Johannas's follower for fear of him. He is beyond any limits now, any checks or balances and she knows it. And she has no doubt that should she attempt to leave or escape that the consequences would be dire. He would kill her for such a perceived betrayal, so she cannot risk it. And even worse since Zeus goes wherever she goes her leaving would cost her brother his life when he inevitably followed her. He is such a musclebound blockhead! Just look at him!

"Why did you leave us, Juno?" Fray the Furies demands, a little wounded by her disloyalty to her clan brothers. "We fought together, all of us! We trained together, grew up together outside of a world that rejected us! But Johannas has turned from the light! You must see that! I can't forgive you and when this is over we will all of us be dead! I have no illusions about anything! Just tell me why!"

Fray the Furies summons one of his violent whirlwinds, and it picks up the bulky Zeus, hurling him like a ragdoll, sending him flying into the thicket of thorns. Juno stands for a moment, taking in his words, still lost inside her torn heart.

"You want to know why here and now, in the middle of this battlefield? You could have come to me before, any one of you and asked me that! So why wait until now? Why do you even want to know?" She hesitates and on the inside she understands why he deserves an honest answer.

"Johannas was so perfect, so strong and so wise back then. Things were different at the end of the war and part of me feels like it was a lifetime ago, even though I know it has only been two years. But the more powerful he became, the more control he gained over people's lives, even ours, the more I

began to see what a monster he had become.

"I don't know if it's because our Master was so hard on him or it is just because Johannas has always been difficult, different. He was always kicking back, you know. Johannas never could accept the rules for what they were. He would make up his own rules, do things his own way. And in a way that's what he's still doing. Even though none of these explanations justifies what he has done, or what he is trying to do. He has to be stopped. I know that."

Fray the Furies sneers, baring his long sharp teeth. He is like an animal in many ways. "So you're suggesting he misled you? Is that what you're saying? But what about us? What about your siblings, the children you grew up with? We were a family and you turned your back on us, you and Zeus!"

Juno knows he is right and she blinks hard to fight back the tears. "I don't expect your forgiveness, Fray. I know you aren't capable of such an act any more than I am deserving of it. And I know Johannas has gone too far."

"Johannas has to die" Fray the Furies answers matter-of-factly. "And we are here to finish the job. He is like a cornered rat now, with nowhere to run or hide. Even now wherever he is Johannas can feel his betrayed brothers and sisters closing in on him. He knows his time has come."

In the middle of a battlefield, with shells exploding and death on every side, Juno laughs heartily. "Believe me when I tell you he isn't running and he isn't scared. Johannas is looking forward to this moment, and he has been for some time. Often he goes off alone, going over his plans and sometimes he even talks to himself, whispering his bloody promises to the darkness. He thinks he is God and he has planned for this battle, down to the smallest stroke. So wherever he is we are all just pawns in his game, you can be certain of that. He is the one pulling the strings, Fray! And you and all of them are playing right into his hands, walking into a carefully laid trap!"

Fray the Furies grins evilly now. He likes this. In the end it is easier to bottle his feelings up, to push them down. This is battle and battle is what he is, all he is. "And we won't disappoint him. We are going to bring this fight right to his door and knock it down! Let him weave his schemes! There is no outrunning the hand of fate for him!"

"I can't let you go after him" Juno resolves aloud. "Evil he may be but I have sworn an oath to serve and protect him to the last drop of my blood, the last breath in my body. And that is what I'm going to do. After all a Revenge Soldier upholds her oaths to the letter, no matter what."

"But you walked away from us. You are no longer subject to the Old Code, Juno."

"A Revenge Soldier is one for life. You should understand that better than anyone, Fray. Our Code is the glue that binds our beings together. To forsake it is to betray the essence of all that we are."

"What I don't understand is how you could turn your back on all of us, on your own family."

And now here you are, talking about our Code like it means something to you. But you gave all that up when you left, when you chose to follow him."

"I don't expect you to understand, brother. In fact I knew you wouldn't. I made my choice, that much is true. And now I have to live and die by that choice, for I am a woman of the Code. So do what you came here to do, Fray. Bring your fight to me. Release your revenge on me! Give me a way out of this broken road of mine!"

Fray the Furies screw up his face in confusion. "You want to die? But if you understand it was wrong to follow Johannas then join with us. Rejoin the brotherhood. Why throw your life away?"

She smiles, a sad, heartbroken smile. Then she makes her last stand, a brave woman facing her end, meeting fate on even terms at last. She takes a deep breath. She is ready. "Would you have me break my oath again, this time to Johannas? I already left like you said, turned my back on everyone. How then can I go against my word again? What kind of woman would that make me? I have paid for my sins and the ultimate cost of them is my life. So what are you waiting for? We both know I am no match for you, Fray. So bring down the hammer. End my life. If you love me, if you ever loved me you will do it."

"Love...you?" Fray the Furies struggles with these words, these feelings. Feelings are hard. Actions come easy. And yet some actions carry a grave weight with them, a fact he now is faced with. Kill or be killed. Live or die. She comes for him with a sword, her sword. He has never seen it from this angle, but he braces himself. Its edge is sharp and the blade breaks against his impenetrable skin. Juno stands in front of him, defenseless, the shattered weapon in her hands, broken like her. He feels for her, pities her. But what can he do? His hand is forced so he strikes, lashing out with his long nails like razors, which cut her. The gash they leave is deep and she falls, no topples to the ground like a flower cut from its stem. She is so gentle, so beautiful and as she lays at his feet her still warm blood pools around her. Fray the Furies kneels down beside her, his eyes filling with tears. But he holds them back. He will fight them off, not for the Code, but for her sake.

"Why did you fight me if you knew I would kill you?" Fray the Furies asks pitifully, his heart overflowing with sorrow.

"You know why. Only we understand one another and why we act as we do. We are nothing to a world that rejects us, that we have no part of. Only a Revenge Soldier could understand why I chose to die, because it was my last choice to make as well as the only one I had. Johannas's sin are my own, so I had to pay the price for them. You understand don't you, Fray?" She looks up at him without tears in her eyes, facing her approaching death bravely, fearlessly as she lived.

"You loved him didn't you?" Fray the Furies manages, the fog finally lifting from his eyes. "That's why you left and also why you stayed. And even though you saw what a monster he had become, or always was, you couldn't leave. And part of you blames yourself for loving him: your one unforgivable sin."

"You know Johannas. He was always like that, always drawing people to him, sometimes against their own wills or their better judgment. You know I don't even think that he knew, or noticed me for that matter. He has so many followers stepping and jumping on his every word. What's one more dead girl? And he has just been so caught up in himself lately, like he always was only more so. In a way I am glad it's all over. And I'm glad I could be here with you, Fray. You always had a beautiful soul."

Her words well up and overwhelm him like his tears. But as he plants a gentle kiss on her little forehead he stands upright and turns back toward the wall of thorns. Zeus is coming for him and it is time to kill another brother.

Hira Yuri makes his way deftly through the enemy lines. He is like a ghost or a gust of wind, undetectable and imperceptible. He is determined to make his way to the Citadel, to exact his pound of flesh when something catches his eye. It is the munitions plan from which Johannas manufactures his weapons, crafts and implements of war. 'If I do a little recon I can learn a little more about what he has planned. And on my way out I will light this place up like a Christmas Tree!' Seek and destroy, that is his way.

Hira Yuri was one of the 7, and as such he is a gifted telepath like the others. His particular gift is for telekinetics, which he uses to pick up and hurl any variety, weight or size of things. Every one of the 7, each of the kids, was given a handle or a nickname to represent his particular gift. His was The Reaper for Master Victor told him that his gift was death. And Hira has both a gift and an affinity for bladed weapons, in particular swords. He hand picks his blades and cares for them with a meticulous attention bordering on both love and obsession.

Hira finds the facility unguarded, no doubt due to the fact all of Johannas's men have been moved to the front. Meat for the grinder. Johannas has no love for his men, or for anyone. He has always been like that, a blank behind the mask of an angel. For all his charms and wit, even his powers, Johannas has no love for people, with whom he feels no affection or connection. He uses people, a manipulative psychopath. That's what he is, like a serial killer, a madman. Hira can almost taste his fallen brother's blood and now he thirsts for it. He counts the steps.

The entrance to the facility is like a huge sliding door, similar to the kind that were in the front of old warehouses, well before his time. He has some recollection of this, though he can't quite account for it. He chalks it up to Collective Unconscious or the like. It is shared experience opened to his mind through his second sight. He can glimpse both past and future, and even gain an extended vision on present events. He has tried to get any information on Johannas's plans, his troop formations, any secret weapons he might be hiding. But Johannas's own powers are blocking him, a frustrating fact, but no less than he expected. Johannas is the type to plan for everything, to anticipate every potential contingency.

Hira comes across an assembly line for robotics, bioweaponry and shells. The conveyor belts are now still, since Johannas has likely stockpiled weapons for this war, and he has been for quite some time. He never misses a trick! Hira thinks to himself what a formidable target Johannas is, the

toughest mark he ever tracked or game he has ever hunted. Hira Yuri is happiest here on the field of battle, with his nose to the ground, tracking an enemy.

He delves deeper in, casing the upper floors before finally making his way down to the basement. Here he finds a magnetically sealed vault, which he cracks using his ability to manipulate sonic waves. He pops the seal like a cork and dives down inside, where the lights automatically kick on as he enters a long cylindrical shaft. He reaches the bottom where he passes observation chambers situated behind tempered glass. There are eight in total down the length of this narrow hallway and all but the last are empty, showing no signs of any activity.

The last chamber lies concealed behind darkly tinted glass, no doubt a top secret experiment of Johannas's. This sends a chill down the length of Hira's spine, and he doesn't frighten easily. 'What are you up to, brother? What's behind the glass?' Hira carefully forces his way through the glass, using his powers to rearrange the molecules to create a hole.

The chamber is unlit on the inside, but Hira can see using his extra senses, so he uses such to carefully navigate the room, in case it is hardwired with explosives. It is a small, self-contained room and he broke into its perfect vacuum when he penetrated the glass. The central table has an object on it, a living thing and it is being fed into by wires and tubes carrying fluid and current respectively. The creature, or whatever it is, is covered by a sheet and for the moment Hira tries not to disturb it. 'What is this?' he thinks.

He closes his eyes, concentrating hard to catch a peek of the thing under the sheet. Through the darkness he can see it, a face with leathery skin, like that of a corpse! What is this! What has Johannas been up to? Is this some unspeakable abomination of his? The shoulders and chest of the creature are thick and chiseled, having an appearance like carved stone. The beast is completely unclothed, though it is without any distinguishing anatomy. But its structure is like that of a human male of gigantic size and proportion.

Hira suppresses his natural curiosity about the monster and turns to leave, content to make his report to his Commander when he returns to camp. But as he makes for the exit the eyes of the creature pop open and it tears through the sheet covering it as if it were made of paper! It sits up, its eyes red like two infrared sensors. The creature scans the room for the intruder and Hira freezes as motionless as a statue. It rises from the table, throwing one heavy leg down to the floor then the other.

Hira draws his long blade, ready for a fight. The beast lunges for him, moving with alarming alacrity! So he instinctively uses his training, sidestepping the prodigious blow, but it comes more quickly than he had anticipated, catching him off guard. The fist strikes him like a hammer, sending him crashing through the thick glass and into the hallway. For all his years of training with the others, even the Elders, Hira has never been hit so hard! The blow staggers him, but he is tough and he regains his feet, pulling six of his knives with the force of his mind alone. He sends them spinning and screaming at the beast, first slashing then penetrating its flesh. The monster merely grunts but to Hira's dismay there is absolutely no blood!

Resolved to fight and kill this beast, Hira summons his sonic powers, fusing them to the end of his blade. He swings it, sending a sonic boom of such power straight at the creature. The attack generates such utter force that it shatters every pane of glass in the hallway, even bending and buckling the walls themselves! But the beast is relatively unaffected, trudging inexorably forward toward him, its prey! It closes on him with fluid speed which belies its considerable bulk, smashing him with another blow, driving him upward and out of the deep vault with staggering force!

Hira gains his feet as he looks up to see the monster emerge from the deep hole. Its skin is pulsating, coursing with raw electrical energy, a charged cell. 'Somehow Johannas is using electrical impulses to motivate this dead flesh!' Hira gleans to himself. 'I have to find the means to bring it down or this beast will kill me!'

He musters his full strength, summoning all his grace and considerable training and skill. Hira Yuri explodes around the creature, bursting upon it from every side, slashing and stabbing, a wave of pain and lethal force. He lays the beast open, this irresistible force, immovable object. He cuts it from every side, every conceivable angle, leaving it flayed but still upright. Impossibly, as if compelled by some deep seated evil, it moves forward, still striking out at him, still bent on his destruction!

The battle continues, carrying Hira Yuri all the way back to the center of the attacking line, where Unit 3 is entrenched. His men have settled down into a depression at the edge of the city gates. Behind them the bodies of their enemies are strewn by the dozens. Some lie in heaps, in unrecognizable state, a twisted form of their stolen humanity. Johannas is feeding them into the grinder, for he knows full well what his brothers and sisters will do. They will do as they are told to do, trained to do. They will kill and take their pound of flesh. Then they will come for him but there is the sense among them every one that Johannas is playing them all, waiting for the opportune moment to unveil his master stroke.

Fray the Furies jumps to his feet as his commander slides across the ground toward him, propelled through the dust by the unthinkable power of the deathless beast. He has reckoned with his past already today, killing brother and sister both, killing that old part of himself, the weak part, the part that still cares, still has the capacity to love. He bounds toward Hira, who is beaten and bloodied, almost unrecognizable now. Fray stoops to speak to his commander when the hulking form of the beast catches his eye. It snorts and snarls, breathing out hot steamy breath like vaporous fire.

Fray the Furies whips up one of his storms with his wings, a real doozy! Lightning jumps from the thick funnel cloud and it sucks the monster up into itself, hurling it a mile with its raw and untamed power! Both soldiers can sense it moving off as the nameless abomination rights itself. Has it drained its considerable powers? Or did the storm perhaps cause a short in its internal power cell, which Hira sensed when he first encountered it?

The Revenge Soldiers pitch their tents on the bloody ground they have gained this day. It has been a hard day and back with the Second Unit High Commander Jakob mulls over the damage as the reports come in from the front. According to his intel he lost nearly half of his men today, with Unit 5 taking particularly heavy damage. Unit 5 Commander Rize had been holding him men back in their

position along the far ridge near the mythical Garden of Gethsemane beyond the city's edge. They were holding this position when a division of giants smashed into them, coming down on them from the heart of the wasteland!

Their attack took Rize off his guard but he quickly repositioned his men, who began to put the giants to rout, leaving disembodied heads and piles of entrails in their wake. But then he came! A musclebound blonde brute with butched hair broke on Unit 5 with all the fury of hell itself! He hit harder and moved faster than the Revenge Soldiers themselves, an impossible feat to be sure. He speaks little english but he calls himself Centurion, and from what Commander Rize gathers he appears to be some kind of supersoldier, (one of Johannas's experiments no doubt!)

At any rate his relentless attacks left half of Unit 5 dead and the other half badly damaged, forcing them to abandon their position and withdraw into the Kidron Valley. Here ironically they are encamped, using the dense thicket of Johannas's killer thorns as cover. Centurion hunts by night, sniffing for any sign of his prey. But he will not find them, for they are like the wind. Now they are here, now there, forever nowhere, no one.

Jakob turns to Kwan Chin, the Unit 2 commander with whom he is stationed. He looks for answers there, for some elusive comfort, though he knows he will find none. Kwan Chin is silent now, perpetually silent. He is a creature beyond words, one devoid of emotion, of any human weakness. He is the least human of them all, a casualty of Project 7 Jakob supposes. None of them who went there to Area 51 ever came back the same. But Kwan Chin is a hollowed out shell, a mock human.

Jakob struggles with his thoughts, fighting to keep his cool. The People's Army has lost half of its men this day too and yet Jakob secretly fears that Johannas has yet to unveil his master stroke. He feels like a lamb being led to slaughter and he begins to devise a means to get to Johannas before it is too late for all of them. 'What are you planning for us, brother? What schemes have you concocted in that twisted brain of yours?'

Johannas watches as the great Leviathan slinks off to lick his wounds. This progenitor of all the Patriarchs arrived about the same time, just after daybreak, that the Elder Victor did. Both of them made the crucial mistake of underestimating him. Immortals, they are all the same!

Victor took the hands on approach. (He is a hands on guy after all!) But Johannas was able to distract him with doppelgangers and false images of himself. Little did he know or anticipate that he would be able to possess the Elder's mind and break it, or nearly so! Even now Victor is sitting on the floor of the Citadel, motionless. Though in his mind the beaten Elder thinks he has withdrawn he is in fact entirely under Johannas's control, his unwitting puppet, a mindslave.

The great Leviathan, for his part, tried matching psychic powers with Johannas, preferring to fight at a distance despite his behemothian bulk. Still it was Leviathan's mistake, arrogance, to underestimate Johannas, who he found to be too much to handle in the end. Now the wounded Patriarch chooses to slough off toward the Dead Sea, where his lair has lain since the dawn of time. There he will regenerate himself while considering whether or not to attempt to fight Johannas again.

Now that he has felt God's hammer perhaps he will think twice!

Johannas stifles a chuckle as he watches proud Leviathan slinking off with his proverbial tail between his legs. Everything has proceeded on this day according to his design. Half of his brothers are now dead and tomorrow promises even more pain for them all! But he knows they will not stop, especially the others of the 7. They have come for his blood and he welcomes them for his part with open arms. 'Let them come!' he thinks arrogantly. 'My brothers and sister will find me more than ready!'

Johannas strolls leisurely out onto his balcony, which overlooks the city and the battlefield beyond. Tomorrow his power shall climb to new heights! He is the god man, the Ubermensch, a higher mind born to reign over lesser, weaker minds. He closes his eyes and he can sense his brothers and his sister, see them in his mind's eye. This day has left them shaken but their fortitude is yet unbroken. But he has foreseen this. Let them come for him. He will reckon with each of them in turn, that is whichever are strong enough to endure the surprises he has in store for them.

His mind is suddenly shocked when he senses the approach of another entity, another immortal! Johannas looks skyward as a black figure descends from the night sky. It is a Reaper! The figure lands a few feet away from Johannas, careful to keep up the appearance of superior strength while still keeping a safe distance. It is hard, if not impossible, to surprise Johannas.

The Reaper wears a long black coat and he folds his black feathery wings underneath it as he systematically cracks his knuckles. He is wearing his Death Mask, a trait characteristic of all Reapers. His own mask is black with thorny antlers comprised of branches. The mask has a long protuberance in the shape of a beak and the visible skin beneath is pallid white, chalky even.

"You know why I have come for you, Necros!" the Reaper snarls menacingly. Then as he raises his eyes to look at Johannas he becomes confused. "What is this? You are not Necros! But this is impossible! I was sent here by my Master to hunt down the rogue Reaper Necros. But all I find is a self-exalted human! What kind of game are you playing, mortal?"

The Reaper seems put out but Johannas is not in the least bit worried. He smiles creepily and stretches out his arms grandly. He is almost inviting the Reaper to attack him. This tactic catches the creature off his guard, especially when Johannas adds: "Take a closer look, Raven. See me as I truly am. Look deeper!"

"How do you...My God! What have you done? Is it even possible? Did you absorb Necros? Are you Necros? What are you devil?" Raven's frightened frown shows through his mask and he slowly begins to back away from Johannas out of sheer terror.

"Let me tell you a story" Johannas begins. "It begins when I was merely a boy of 7. I had just returned from an experimental stay at Area 51, to put it bluntly. My superiors had sent me and six of my brothers there to enhance our latent psychic abilities, an end they took extreme measures to reach to say the least. Well upon my return to the Cloister, our little hovel of a home, I was more withdrawn

than usual. In my mind I had seized upon the notion of revenge, for after all I was and am a Revenge Soldier.

"So I acquired this arcane text and in its pages I came across a spell for summoning the entity Death, your master. I undertook the complex rite, gathering the necessary materials, performing the sacrifices. I drew my dark pentacle in blood and called out to Lord Death, for I greatly desired to wield his power against my oppressors!"

"You dared to summon the Master! And yet you still live and breathe! What kind of a man are you?" Raven's mask is twisted into a permanent expression of horror and Johannas drinks in his fear, for he is ripe with it!

"But in Lord Death's stead he sent his servant Necros!" Johannas continues. "Immediately I sensed ambition in your fellow Reaper and like you he underestimated me. So I stretched out my potent mind and overthrew his. He was not aware of this at first, or at all. My power crept on him slowly over time, corrupting his mind like an infestation or plague. I projected my psyche into Necros's, and over time my will took control over his own. He found he was driven to seek power, to use his underlings to gather power for his consumption. But unwittingly he had become my slave, a tool for my own quest for power!

"I had amassed considerable power by the time war had erupted. It was the war which delayed my plans for vengeance! But my former masters cannot escape justice indefinitely! I will reckon with each of them in turn. And they will come to me as surely as a moth is drawn to the flame! They will come just as you came, as others will follow after you. But tell me, now that death is so close, are you afraid Reaper, agent of Death?"

Raven quivers, fighting to steel himself, to harden his will against the juggernaut standing before him. He is like a cornered animal, still fierce, his teeth bared, but sensing the inevitable pounce of the predator. The moment is so close now he can feel it, almost taste it. The cornered Reaper loosens his coat, sending forth his darkness, a blanket of tarlike substance, forth against his indomitable adversary. The thick blackness encompasses Johannas, swallowing him whole, and for a moment Raven thinks he has won, survived.

But Johannas swallows the darkness and Raven with it. And as he draws a deep, satisfied breath he casts Raven's used up husk aside like so much refuse. This battle ends in the only way it could, the way it always ends: Johannas wins. Nothing can stop him now, even his deadly siblings. He has become death. He is fate.

Chapter 4- Day Two

Muse makes her way out from the dense jungle of thorns, looking this way and that for any sign of enemy soldiers. It is about an hour before dawn and her unit, Unit 1, has been on the move most of the night. And now that she has found a path, or rather cleared one, through the thorns Muse is

returning to Unit Commander Seji to impart the information. It is a common military practice to send a single scout or a party ahead to gather intelligence on enemy movements and formations. In this case Muse has cleared a path to the Citadel and she is returning to her unit to show them the way forward.

She finds Seji and his men at the base of the temple mount. He has made full preparations for the assault on the Citadel, for he means to end this war decisively by taking the Citadel and killing Johannas himself. He knows full well how deadly an adversary Johannas is, for they were subjects together at Area 51 during Experiment 7.

As Seji stands alone Muse is approaching from the valley below. And though he senses her his thoughts are a mile away as his adept mind focuses on Johannas. He reaches out with his thoughts, attempting to divine even a glimmer of his enemy's intentions, all the while taking care not to get ensnared by Johannas's flytrap consciousness. Seji is perhaps the most advanced psychic on Earth, and yet he still fears Johannas's powers. He has the ability to bend minds to his own and to perceive perfectly, making him nearly impossible to surprise or to protect himself from.

"Commander Seji!" Muse calls out, shocking him from his hazy, dreamlike state. As his eyes focus on her she is struck by the flinty glare in them and she knows from experience that he is in killing mode.

"I have cleared a path through the thorns to the Citadel" she continues, composing herself. "If you are ready I can show you and the men the way."

"Then let us make haste" Seji replies, his voice sharp and focused. "I want to reach The Citadel before dawn and surprise Johannas on his own ground. We must make an end of this before losses continue to mount. You know Johannas, so the sooner this is over the sooner we all can go home."

"Home?" she queries. "We don't have a home to go back to, remember?" At this point Seji has signalled his men and they have begun to follow her toward the clearing. The unit has yet to see action, so all twenty men file in behind her and Seji as they reach the spot.

"Home is wherever we are, Muse. We are family, all of us and we will make a new home for ourselves."

'Home' she thinks, 'it's strange to hear Seji talk like that.' And though they are family Seji has never shown much emotional attachment to anyone, ever. Is it simply because they are, every one of them, staring death in the face? And though there has always been an unspoken sense among the children that they were in this together, them against their cruel and tiny world, they have never been particularly comfortable with emotions.

On the way up the narrow trail their unit encounters no enemy resistance, a fact which causes Muse some alarm and surprise. She is suspicious of a trap, but she saw the look in Seji's eyes earlier, so she knows he will let nothing stand between him and Johannas.

They reach the foot of the Citadel when overhead they hear the beating of wings. Looking up

the men see strange beings flying overhead on wings as black as night. They have grayish pallid skin and wear loose-fitting robes which appear as if they belong to the ancient world. The men look up with puzzled expressions, but Muse knows exactly what these creatures are. "Banshees!" she calls out. "And they're heading for the Holy City! What are you up to now, Johannas?"

Seji closes his eyes tightly, trying to hone in on what his former comrade is planning. "Fall back to the city!" he barks. "Johannas is using the Banshees to harvest the souls of his own people!"

"How can that be?" Fleen wonders. "How can even Johannas have that kind of power?"

As the unit turns around to head back into the city Muse answers his question. "I have been investigating both the thorns and the puppets for some time. I discovered the connection was actually a rogue Reaper called Necros. This being was behind everything: the thorns, the puppets, the spreading pandemic, everything. But the more digging I did the more I learned that this entity known as Necros did not exist, or if he did he was in fact a puppet himself of some kind. Which brings us to Johannas.

"Our brother has found the means to control a powerful entity like a Reaper, a harvester of the dead. I cannot explain how this is possible, or prove to you that what I know is the truth. But I know it nonetheless. Everything I have seen and learned since I first undertook my investigation, every trail leads back to Johannas. And worse he isn't even covering his tracks anymore, leading me to believe that he wants us to learn of his plan. He isn't afraid of us, Seji, not at all! And on some level that is all the more terrifying! As devilishly clever and deadly as Johannas is he intends to draw us all into some trap. He is planning something for us, though he has yet to show his hand!"

Jakob and Unit 2 are in the middle of the offensive behind enemy lines. They are going to reinforce Unit 3, which took heavy losses on Day 1. Their commander, Kwan Chin, has remained silent and yet he guides his men with his deep mind, motivating their movements according to his implied will. He walks at the rear of their formation, his stare blank as he looks off into the horizon, seemingly miles away.

"Look!" Cloudburst calls out, shattering the uneasy silence. At the crest of the valley he spots a small horde of enemy puppet soldiers, armed to the teeth. The Commander speaks no words, but there is the unspoken sense that he perceives the threat and so wills his men to deploy. The 20 members of the unit, except for her commander, fan out along a line nearly a mile long, spreading them perilously thin. This they do in a strategic attempt to flank their foes and spread out their superior numbers. And a Revenge Soldier needs his space to fight properly with gloves off.

Jakob glances over at Cloudburst the instant he calls out his warning. He had forgotten his brother's blinding speed, for he has not fought with him since they were both still very young. Cloudburst breaks on the enemy like the crashing of an ocean into the shore! He repeatedly vanishes and reappears, assailing the hapless clones with blows of machine-gun like speed and precision! He is like a deadly little blonde angel in battle and his face takes on a terrible look as he doles out his damage!

Jakob draws his guns, old flintlock pistols, a holdover from the Civil War, a period he is particularly fond of. 'Civil War!' he thinks, the thick irony striking him with hammerlike potency. 'This is a civil war after all! We were a family, a private army, and brothers of blood and bone.' It is a strange feeling now to be seeking his own brother's head, and for him Johannas is his closest friend, or so he thought. But that was before all this started.

To his left Jakob catches a glimpse of Stratus, who is Cloudburst's actual brother. (The birth records which the Elders possess are highly secretive and guarded zealously, but the children always believed them to be true. But then they believed a lot of things once, things which have now come to be called into question.)

Stratus is plodding in contrast to his brother, a broad shouldered powerhouse with hands of stone. He stalks toward the line of puppet soldiers slowly, a predatory look in his dark eyes. His own blonde hair is cropped closely against his head, his neck is thick and his jaw looks as hard as iron. Stratus summons air currents to his aid, riding them now then pushing them out with a wave of his hand. He scatters enemies like bowling pins, crushing bones into powder, snapping assault rifles like twigs! 'What fearsome creatures we are!' Jakob thinks to himself.

He dives onto his stomach, crawling forward through the Kidron Valley as he inches toward the enemy line under heavy fire. He takes his time, making every shot count. Jakob never misses, his own particular peculiar gift! Now he ducks his head down again, allowing the others to smash into the line, drawing enemy fire onto themselves. Stratus, Cloudburst and Delphin lead the charge, punching a substantial hole in the front. His timing perfect, honed over years of ruthless training, he jumps to his feet, firing as he nears the enemy line. His shots find their mark, each one felling another soldier, some shots felling two. Their adversaries are in disarray and Jakob barks into his headset to communicate with his brothers in arms. "We have them on the run now! And we can't be far from Unit 3's position! If I know Hira he has entrenched his men down at the base of the wall of thorns, attempting to use them as cover. With us reinforcing him our combined strength will be enough to punch through to the Citadel! Let's move!"

Unit 2 reaches the crest of the hill overlooking the Kidron Valley on one side and the Hinnom Valley on the other. Jakob surveys the valley and the rise of the Mount of Olives beyond carefully, taking in every possible detail, every potential enemy stronghold or ambush point. Training has taught him to consider every potential risk and to weigh every option before acting decisively. There is too much at stake here: lives, time and the reality of an imposing foe like Johannas! Jakob knows how he thinks, how carefully and patiently he plans and lays traps. He remembers.

Jakob's mind flashes back to strategy sessions he had with Johannas when both of them were still young, children in a sense. At the Cloister Alphas were encouraged to partipate in games of strategy, pitting and honing their skills of military deployment and subterfuge against one another. Jakob had a flair for one game in particular, *Stratego* it was called, and he concocted pages of plans to give him an advantage. He was compelled to test his skills against Johannas, who was an indomitable opponent. And no matter how many times he tried he never could beat him. It was like Johannas

could think several moves ahead and he would always taunt him, even laugh at him! Johannas always could get inside his head like that but now, with everything on the line, Jakob tells himself he cannot afford to be outfoxed, to be afraid.

Kwan Chin seems entirely unconcerned with either the action on the front or with enemy positions. He sits on a low branch of a small tree in the valley, near the edge of the forest of thorns. His eyes are closed and he appears peaceful despite the dangerous surroundings. But he sees more than he lets on, Jakob knows it. For he is one of the 7, and with respect to psychic gifts only Johannas has greater potential than he. But with Kwan Chin there is only mystery and silence. The Scarecrow he is called, an enigma even to those close to him, of whom there are none.

"Alright" Jakob tells the men. "We move along the line of the thorns slowly and when I am in contact with Commander Yuri we will better know how to proceed!" It feels strange and wrong for him to overstep in this way, to take command of the unit. It is after all Kwan Chin's unit but in the heat of battle men need guidance and leadership, something they can hang onto. Kwan Chin remains eccentric and distant for the moment, so Jakob tells himself he will do what he must. This is survival after all and there is no margin for error.

"Come in, Commander Yuri! What is your position?" Jakob tries not to sound as desperately as he feels. In extreme situations survival is determined by poise and the ability to think under pressure, and to adapt to changing circumstances. So he keeps his cool, his eyes darting to and fro from the jungle of thorns and up the side of the Mount of Olives. He has that feeling in the pit of his stomach that something is on its way, lurking just beyond the horizon.

Something makes him turn his head and look up toward the top of the hill where he sees a single being with ashen skin and armor made of bone standing as motionless as a statue. The sight of him makes Jakob's blood run cold and he gulps so hard he can hear it, feel it even. The stranger's eyes scan over the Revenge Soldiers as if sizing them up, like a beast savoring a meal to come. He stretches out a hand, tightening his grip as if around a victim or prey. A full mile away from him, at the base of the mount, one of Jakob's brothers dies, drowning in his own blood.

Jakob instinctively charges up the side of the hill, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He is a creature of pure will now, a beast of instinct and of pure revenge. And for the moment his thinking is dulled, less than sharp. He sees only blood, feels only intense pain. His steps are quick, purposeful but before he can reach the crest of the hill the mysterious stranger has vanished into thin air. Dumbfounded he turns to look back down the hill toward the others. "Everyone, stay alert! Something is hunting us!"

Black Jin hears these words and he rises from his feast, leaving a still twitching body at his feet. He is the darkest of all the Revenge Soldiers, a being born of chaos who the Elders would always say possessed the gifts of the Great Race, their own ancestors who walked the Earth it is said before the dawn of humanity. He has snowy pale skin that is covered with tattoos and two massive wings which sprout from his back. The wings are like a raven's but man-sized and he unfurls them violently, suddenly before flying up into the air in pursuit of his quarry. He is a hunter, a creature of blood and

now for him battle has truly begun.

Jakob wheels his head around rapidly, trying to spot the creature when it pops up next. 'Don't panic!' he reminds himself. But there is the sense that this beast, whatever it is, is all part of Johannas's plan. And he has them right where he wants them!

Suddenly a hand appears from out of thin air, wrapping itself around the throat of another soldier, strangling the life from him. Then, almost simultaneously another soldier is ripped open by claws, his flesh peeled away like a gaping wound! Jakob looks toward Kwan Chin, who still has not stirred, nor does he show any interest in what is happening around him!

One by one as Jakob looks on helplessly his comrades and brothers are cut down. Still Kwan Chin doesn't move, nor does he do so much as bat an eyelash. Jakob is incredulous with anger. "Kwan Chin! What are you doing? Why will you not help? Your men are being slaughtered, our brothers!" And with all his vast power Kwan Chin very well could help, could even kill this demon if he saw fit. And yet he does not. There is no penetrating the mystery of Kwan Chin, but just this once Jakob wishes he would show some small shred of his lost humanity.

Jakob scans the field desperately for any sign of the beast, the same thing his comrades are now doing. They are utterly without fear and the hour of revenge is now at hand. This creature will pay in blood for what it has done, and it cannot hide forever! Then as he turns Jakob hears a whoosh like the sound of a glider then a gasp to his left. To his indescribable horror he sees Delphin getting his still beating heart ripped from his chest. A fallen soldier stands for a moment, his face going as white as a sheet, then falls. Now he will sleep. Now he will know peace. But for the survivors of war there remains only pain and vengeance. These are Jakob's food now until his last breath, for he carries the weight with him of every last one of the fallen. They are brothers all and with each of them a piece of him dies, a piece he can never restore, never heal.

As Jakob screams in a mixture of grief and rage he finds that no sound escapes his lungs or his mouth. He is muffled now and all his emotions are being smothered, leaving him helpless, weightless. He is inside his own private hell as he runs and each step is labored and impossibly slow. He is in slow motion as he runs toward the creature, which disappears again.

After several minutes of silence and inactivity Jakob and the others are satisfied that their attacker is gone. In the aftermath 12 of the 20 members of Unit 2 are dead, each one killed in a uniquely gruesome way. Jakob, who is angry and grief stricken beyond words, storms over to where Kwan Chin is sitting on the branch. He glowers up at him accusingly and demands an answer. "What is it, damn you! You know what this is and how to stop it yet for some reason you do nothing! These are your brothers too, dammit! Or is there just no human part of you left? Are you just another monster? Is that what they made of you, of all of us?"

But Kwan Chin just sits, motionless as a statue, his eyes gently shut as if in blissful slumber or some trance. Giving up Jakob looks around at the faces of his brothers, seeing there the intense heartache and unspeakable sorrow he feels. The emotion comes pouring out of him and he weeps.

And though the battlefield is no place for tears he can feel the suppressed pain of some 25 years rushing to the surface, like lava exploding from a supposedly dormant volcano!

The silence is unbroken and the others choke hard to fight back tears of their own. Every one has lost someone precious today and for them, in their insular little world of The Cloister, they are all one another has. It is impossible to explain to an outsider, but the Revenge Soldiers are family.

Jakob sits alone, his head filled with memories of Delphin. He was always so small, even as a child, but so brave, so fearless. He remembers how he would be like an elder brother to the other children, always looking out for them, drying tears and dressing wounds. Delphin would look out for everyone in The Cloister, most of whom were younger than he. And though he was himself Fleen's twin he had a close bond with everyone of them. Delphin was a born leader.

Jakob remembers too how when Prodigy, the first of the Destroyers, landed it was Delphin who went in alone to confront the towering behemoth! This was before the Elders had convened and decided to send the others in to intervene on behalf of the planet. Delphin was like that: he saw a problem, a threat and he went in alone to face it. He would have fought God himself to protect the others! He was bright, positive and happy, always smiling and kind in a place where kindness had no place. He was a godsend and Jakob thinks how he will miss him. When someone is gone, is taken, only memories remain. And in the end it is the good that matters, just the good that stays.

But then the brightness passes, the memories fade and Jakob's haunted mind is thrust forcibly back into the bleak present. 'What fresh hell is this? What torments have you devised for your brothers, Johannas?'

Muse and Unit 1 enter the Holy City and they are met with a scene of pure horror. As the Banshees fly through the air harvesting souls the streets are filled with the bodies of the dead and dying. People cough up blood, retching and hacking to the point that they struggle for breath. The afflicted are covered with sores from head to toe and the air is filled both with screams and howls of utter misery and the thick, acrid smell of decaying flesh. "What is this?" Fleen exclaims. "What happened here?"

Commander Seji deliberates as he takes in the chaotic, heartrending scene. The men stand frozen around him, unsure of what to do. There is danger of infection at present and the exact nature of the contagion remains unknown so no one makes a move. "Johannas did this" Seji finally says. "He set up this virus to weed out the unworthy, part of his systematic purification of the human race. But to do this to his own people, his loyal followers...How could even he stoop this low?"

"What are your orders, sir?" Ryland inquires, standing behind his right shoulder. He is an angry young man, even for a Revenge Soldier. In fact his personality is stormy and volatile to say the least. Yet he is a man of few words, a sullen stoic like many of his comrades. Ryland never questions orders, but he is proud and stubborn nonetheless.

On one occasion, when Ryland was only eight, Master Syd was punishing him for fighting with

one of the other boys. The boy had made the mistake of taunting Ryland, who nearly beat him to death in his anger. They were made to stand outside after an hour of running without rest and when the punishment was done Ryland remained outside overnight, determined to prove his point. It snowed that night but Ryland just stood there, his arms folded, shivering and covered with snow. He never got sick amazingly, but then most of the children have superhuman constitutions.

Ryland is short, about 5'7, and he wears a permanent scowl on his face. His spiky hair is blonde, giving him a kind of punk look. But Ryland is the consummate soldier, fearless, dutiful and honor driven. The Code is his way of life, and it describes his mind and his will. Ryland would truly die before suffering dishonor.

No sooner does Ryland ask Seji for his orders when a cloaked figure flies toward them, lands a few feet away and approaches Seji. It is gaunt and tall, whatever or whoever it is, and the strange being walks stiffly over to speak with him. It speaks in a corpselike whisper, raising its shriveled head to reveal two piercing green eyes! Its skin is gray, leathery, giving it the appearance of an undead thing.

"I am called Kronos and I am given charge of the squadron of Reapers you see deployed in the city. Our Lord sent us here to prevent the rogue Banshees from gathering souls for our common enemy. No doubt you have already guessed that he is the one behind the outbreak in the city. Johannas has introduced this virus into the population in order to harvest them. And Our Master believes he is planning to gather the souls, to absorb them into his own being."

"Then there is truth to what I sensed" Seji replies grimly. "I was beginning to doubt my own mind, since Johannas has the ability to confuse one's thoughts. You need not worry about the people. My men and I will take care of them, allowing you and your squad to concentrate on the Banshees."

The Reaper nods and returns to his duty, vanishing in a puff of smoke. The men look on and they all begin to notice black forms streaking across the city, the formless shapes of the Reapers rescuing souls from the marauding Banshees. The Banshees are pale white with ashen gray wings so as they struggle with the Reapers there appear flashes of white and black swirling and clashing restlessly.

Seji turns to Muse, grasping her shoulders with his hands as he looks her squarely in the eyes. She immediately senses the gravity of the moment, for it is unusual for Seji to touch anyone, since it can overload his attuned psychic senses.

"Muse I am sending you to find an antidote for this affliction. Johannas would never devise such an epidemic without a failsafe of some kind. I leave it to you to procure the cure, as no doubt Johannas will be expecting you. I can only hope his arrogance will work in our favor. He likes to toy with his enemies, and I believe he is toying with us, playing us for fools.

"Take care Muse and godspeed." She is dumbfounded, not only by the monumental task but also by Seji's uncharacteristically familiar manner. He is always an impenetrable wall, calm and

emotionless, so it is very strange for Seji to show even this much concern or compassion. A Revenge Soldier is hard, fearless and he masters his emotions.

So Muse goes, making her way back out of the fallen Holy City the way she came, then weaving through the thicket of thorns as she tunnels toward the distant Citadel. She knows Johannas is expecting her and she can feel his eyes on her. For the eyes of Johannas are everywhere and he is God is this world of his construction. No matter: it is time to kill this false God!

Back in the city another figure appears, just as it did with Unit 2. And though Seji senses it, whatever it is, it is Ryland who confronts the creature first. It appears as an unusually tall and thin shadow, like a stretched image, a gangly and twisted shape. Ryland looks up at the shape and he sees a flash of teeth, wicked and white as the monster stands upright on the remains of the old temple. Ryland tenses, his muscles coiled like a spring, and he clenches his teeth, grinding them. Seji turns, the shape vanishes, shifting too quickly for sight. In a flash Ryland's head rolls, having been severed from his body by this mysterious shape!

Seji strides to the middle of the street, suddenly unaware of the death and suffering surrounding him. He sensed Ryland's death the instant after the shape appeared and now his eyes glass over, his second sight kicking in. He can see the creature, feel it and though it moves too quickly to be seen with the naked eye Seji is stalking it now, following it with his awakened mind. And as Fleen looks over at his commander Seji vanishes from sight in pursuit of their enigmatic attacker.

Seji moves now as a psychic projection of his own mind, for his mind and body are one. He uses his voice to project himself and he moves like a darting shadow, doing a dance of death with the reaper itself. The beast appears on his blindside, slashing at his throat with its long nails. But Seji has no blindside, for he has perfect awareness and he deflects the strike with his mind then catches it with his bare hand. Seji counters the strike with a kick but the demon vanishes, for it is like a shadow. Seji scans with his eyes but it is his deep sense he relies on, trusting his training and his second sight as he always has. And in his mind he knows that his counterattack did not miss. Seji never misses.

Seji was a gifted child, the most brilliant potential of all the children, even among the 7. His wits were always keen and he could see into alternate planes and dimensions from a young age. The Elders took his visions to be the imagination of a child at first but Elder Syd soon realized that Seji was in fact quite gifted. He is prescient, making him impossible to surprise, even for Master Syd. And whatever tests or trials Seji was subjected to he passed with both flying colors and alarming ease.

The Elders convened to discuss Seji, who they referred to as The Prodigy, and they agreed to subject him to closer scrutiny and more extensive testing. Elder Syd and the others would engage him in contests of the mind, including mazes, complex number puzzles and quantum formulae. And every time he bested even the Elders, who are said to be as old as the Earth itself, older even. Now the Elders are said to possess perfect, higher minds and they can affect their environment with their powers. But Seji transcended even them as a mere child, showing the capability to bend reality to his will, to reshape even solid matter with his thoughts. Seji was only 7 years old at the time.

It was as a result of Seji's potential, as well as Kwan Chin's and Johannas's, that Experiment 7 was undertaken. Elder Victor was the principal organizer of the experiment and it was he who took the 7 to Area 51 where he subjected them to intense testing and psychological torture. The goal of the experiment was to heighten the latent psychic abilities of these seven most gifted children by any means necessary. None of the 7 will speak of what they went through at Area 51 and it is possible that the scars of that week still remain with them to this day. Was it the experiment that pushed Johannas over the edge? Is that the moment he snapped?

Seji goes into a trancelike state, stretching out with his consciousness. He can sense this beast hunting him, but now the hunter has become the hunted. And if Seji occupies this creature with himself then for the moment his men will be safe. Now that Seji has this monster in his sights he will hunt it to the death. It will not escape whatever it is. He can make out its shape, its features now. The creature is impossibly thin with a narrow, long body shaped like a bending reed. It lacks color, but its shade is ashen and its face resembles stretched putty, though it lacks anything but the long teeth Seji saw earlier when it first appeared. Their minds collide, Seji's and the creature's, as they size one another up. Then Seji senses something, something he had not expected and his face goes as white as a sheet!

The demon, sensing Seji's hesitation, goes after the men again, this time setting his sights on Fleen. Fleen hears a whoosh of air like a gust of wind then a snap like a breaking twig. He can feel his heart as if it stops in his chest and he gulps, holding his breath. Fleen never sensed it, nor could he see it but at the last instant Seji deflected the demon's attack, saving his life.

Now Seji is hyper focused and angry. His eyes flash and time itself bends, allowing him to move beyond its reach. He sends a concentrated wave of psychic force as sharp as a knife's edge screaming at the beast and he cuts it, forcing it to withdraw. There on the ground Seji stoops to taste its spilled blood. 'I cut it! Then you can be killed my shadowy friend!'

That night Seji is going over the day's events, his mind seeking out his newfound enemy. For it is his nature to shield his men from this terror, to protect them with his own life. Still as a commander he must clear his mind and show no sign of weakness to his men, who look to him for leadership and guidance. Seji is unafraid still but his thoughts are troubled, and he is eager to bring this bloody battle to its conclusion.

He decides to camp inside the Dome of the Rock, a sacred site of Islam from before Johannas's takeover. These days the inside is ornate, with gold plates on the walls and a massive diamond chandelier overhead. Situated atop the holy rock is a massive statue of Johannas, his index finger pointed to the heavens.

Afflicted worshippers flock around the entrance of the temple wearing white robes. Their faces are painted blue and they chatter in some alien tongue. Despite the rampant infection his followers worship him as a savior, holding hands and swaying as they sing his praises. The scene is disturbing, even to the hardened soldiers and there is a sense that the world of his making has gone completely insane.

Night falls and a badly wounded Hira Yuri staggers into the great hall alone. His clothes are torn and he is limping, dragging his left leg behind him. With his right arm he cradles his broken ribs and his left eye is swollen shut. He is like a symbol for these weary warriors, who are losing faith in their cause. Still not one of them has even seen Johannas, who has prepared one ambush after another to bleed them slowly as their numbers start to dwindle. Hira falls on his face in front of the colossal statue and Seji looks up from his maps, which are spread across a long table pushed up against the far wall.

Seji walks over to him, concerned for his comrade. "Hira what happened to you? Where are your men?" He crouches by his side, placing his right hand on Hira's shoulder as he struggles to sit up. The war is changing Seji, making him somehow more human.

"My unit is gone, all of them gone. The creature came for us before dawn, creeping up on our position in the night. I fought back against it with all I had, but we got separated. Fray fought that thing with all he had, gave his all. But it wasn't enough. No matter what you hit it with it just keeps coming and coming! Cut it, gut it, chop off its head, it doesn't matter what you do!

"I came across it yesterday inside Johannas's main armory, near the outskirts of the city against the wall. I was casing out the joint just so see what he was up to, get some idea of what we were up against, do a little recon you know. But as I went downstairs I came across this magnetically sealed shaft so naturally I went in. At the bottom I encountered several observation rooms behind thick impenetrable glass and in the very last one I came across this inert beast, a reanimated creation of some kind, Johannas's brainchild no doubt. And while I was inside its chamber it awakened and attacked me!

"It is big, some seven feet high and nothing damages it or slows it down! From what I have gathered it appears to be powered by some sort of internal cell. It is made up of reanimated dead tissue, giving it a zombie like appearance. I had to run from it again, dammit! But I just need the night to heal up and I'm going back after it! I'm gonna finish this thing if it kills me!"

Seji grows deadly serious now. "We have lost too many already, brother. I am about to call the remaining units in. Spread out as we are it is easier for Johannas to divide our strength, pick us off one by one. If we are going to end this we have to do it together, combining our collective strength. We need you here, Hira. And starting tomorrow we are going to end this together, all of us."

"My unit is gone and today Unit 2 took on heavy casualties. Unit 5 came under heavy attack on day one and they spent most of today running and hiding from their tireless pursuer. We are spread more thin by the day and there is no time to waste now, Seji! We must take this fight to the enemy now before he hunts us down and wipes us out systematically!"

"I sensed it too. We have lost over half of our number already and it is my belief that Johannas has raised up these demons to slay us, to grind us down. And we are playing into his hands, going off fighting our individual battles while his monsters surprise us and wipe us out. But together we are strong, more than a match for anything that comes after us!

"Earlier today my unit came under attack by a shadowy creature. I believe it was a demon and it moved with unearthly speed, even beheaded Ryland before he knew what hit him! It nearly got Fleen too when I became distracted. It was the energy of the thing, the essence. It reminded me of one of the Elders somehow, but that isn't possible is it?"

"It's Johannas. He is playing with our minds, using his tricks to cloud our perception! This won't end until he is dead, Seji! It's the only way! You are right about that much. We have to end this and end it now!"

Johannas sits alone on the balcony of his great Citadel, brooding. He has spent his day battling immortals, having hunted down all the Muses except Grand Master Alexei, who alone has evaded him to this point. He eyes the darkness like a keen predator, fully expecting to be challenged, to be hunted in return. He is not disappointed, nor is he kept waiting long.

This time two shadows, two Reapers emerge from the darkness. The part of Necros that remains in Johannas recognizes them, his former clan brothers, colleagues. "Hello Thorn, Misery. What kept you? And why is it that you lackeys seek me out under the cover of night? Or was it because my Banshees kept you busy during the day? Yes that must be it!" Johannas's words and his tone are arrogant, for he thinks he is beyond their reach, beyond their justice. This is his world and here he is God.

"You knew we would come for you, especially after what you did to Raven" Thorn barks grimly, his words an open threat. He wears a barbed mask covered with the same spines and quills that cover his body, protruding through his long dark cloak. His long nails scratch at the hilt of his scythe, which he keeps sheathed and dangling behind his waist.

"Your threats do not frighten me, brother" Johannas taunts. "I am beyond your control now. Now I am Death and I decide who lives and who dies."

"Blasphemer!" Misery shouts, his rage boiling over. "You dare to profane the name of our Master, Lord Yama himself! We will kill you then in His name!" Misery wears a pale white mask with a ghostly glow to it. He is the younger and lower ranked Reaper, having been promoted to replace the fallen Raven. His clan brother Thorn replaced the rogue Necros, who was thought to have defected before Johannas's scheme was uncovered.

Johannas rises to his feet, lighting a cigarette and taking a deep puff of it then throwing it off the balcony. "Well then do you both intend to talk me to death or will you go quietly?" He sneers at them, his words derisive, demeaning. Now Johannas unfurls some of his true power, expanding his dark aura to envelop both Reapers. His energy assaults them, sparking on the surface of their cloaks, strangling them as it drains their essences.

Misery is the first to strike, unsheathing his scythe which he then manipulates telekinetically, controlling its movement with his hands. Johannas teleports rapidly through the air, dodging each successive strike as he vanishes and reappears. But as Misery pursues him he becomes distracted,

failing to spot the thorns growing up to surround and ensnare him. The carnivorous plants bite into his flesh, holding him up in a crucifixion pose as they bleed him slowly, savagely.

Johannas's vile laughter fills the air, echoing explosively as it pierces the still night. He grows as big as a mountain, towering over a now terrified Thorn, who can neither free his comrade nor stand against his indomitable foe. "Run dog!" Johannas bellows and Thorn does, turning his back to flee into the night. But the volume of Johannas's voice grows, the pitch bending in his ears, exploding as it burrows its way inside his mind. It is too late now. They call it The Voice, this power of his. And when he employs it Johannas can do what he wants, inflict his will on his opponent, dominating and destroying their mind from the inside. Even he doesn't know how it works. He only knows that he is God and this is his Black Heaven.

The thorns feed Misery's dwindling life force into him, slowly draining their captive. "Get ready, brothers. Tomorrow I am coming to get you!"

Chapter 5- Day Three

Hira Yuri rises before dawn as darkness still covers the land. His brothers are still sleeping, which is just what he is counting on. He has not slept a wink all night, for his mind is bent on his impending decisive showdown with the nameless monster that slaughtered his men. Hira has figured out the means to concentrate the sonic energies he manipulates, using them to amplify his physical power. This is all or nothing for him and he knows he isn't coming back. It is enough to end this, to take his revenge on behalf of his men and to go down fighting. But whatever it takes he will kill this thing, this he swears on his own blood.

Seji, who has spent the night in a deep trance, nevertheless senses Hira as he leaves. The taste, the signature of his revenge is so intense, so piercing that it strikes him like a wave, punching him like a fist. The crisis in the city threatens to sap his strength, so he must clear his mind. Another day of battle most intense is coming and he will be ready for it. For if Johannas can weaken his mind, his resolve even a little bit Seji knows he will use it to destroy him.

Using his comlink he reaches out to his unit commanders, except for Hira of course. He calls them one by one, ordering them to regroup and rejoin his unit to consolidate their strength. He cannot reach Unit 5 and he senses that they have come under heavy attack, which they were on day one. He senses that there may not be many of the men left, hunted down by another of Johannas's creatures!

Jakob answers on behalf of Unit 2 and he recounts the slaughter of the previous day at the hands of the demon who appeared. "And to make matters worse Kwan Chin has gone into one of his states! You know how he gets! He won't respond to anyone of anything, he just sits there on his branch with his eyes blissfully closed! I can't reach him and we are running out of time!"

"Hang in there!" Seji replies. "We will get to you when we can, but things are pretty desperate

here in the capital as well. Johannas has unleashed some supervirus on the population here. They are dying in the streets! So I sent a scout to recover an antidote. If I know Johannas he will make his move today."

Unit 4, under the command of Mobius, has had a very different first two days from the other units. "We ran up against some enemy pickets on the first day" Mobius begins. "We exchanged some fire with them and they withdrew, likely to return to their own battalion to report our position and movements. So I ordered my force to divide in half, sending ten one way and ten another. This way I could more quickly judge the enemy's position and his numbers before engaging him.

"I followed orders and delayed my attack until mid day yesterday, bringing my two halves together near the base of the Mount of Olives. I judged that I was not far from 5th Unit's position but we saw no sign of them, nor did we receive any communication.

"As we got closer to the Citadel we came under fire from large enemy unit, possibly two, under the command of a man called Talghese. He commanded and repositioned his men expertly, but though they numbered in the hundreds they were sorely outmatched. We hit them hard on both flanks, pushing them back to the base of the Citadel as night fell. Talghese and his tattered remnant made their last stand behind a wall in the courtyard where I led the final assault. That is where my men and I are currently encamped, waiting for orders from central command. Have you heard from Jakob?"

"Commander Isaacson has taken heavy losses, so he is not able to help us in any way. My own unit has come under attack from some mysterious being and the situation in the capital is catastrophic. Johannas has exposed his own followers to some deadly contagion and the dead and dying are piling up in the streets! It is like a scene out of hell and until we can procure the antidote there isn't much we can really do to help them. Johannas is toying with us, setting us up, picking us off one by one! So I have resolved to bring the remaining units in. Together we can take him down and I believe it is now or never! We won't survive this in our current deployment, so it is time to rethink our approach."

"I can have my unit to you within a couple of hours, but it will mean giving up all the ground we have gained. What do you want me to do, Seji? It's your call."

"Stay where you are and we will fight our way over to you. Hold that position and when we find you we will all assault The Citadel together and take Johannas down! As soon as things are resolved here we will be on our way over."

Seji breaks off his communication with Mobius, fully confident that he has made the right decision. He cannot turn his back on these people, leave them to die. That would make him no better than Johannas. And unless he misses his guess Johannas is about to make his move anyway. One way or another something is about to happen. He can feel it in his bones.

Cale the Tyrecian clutches his revolver to his side, eyeing the edges of the thorn forest. He is the sole survivor of Unit 5, having watched this enemy supersoldier hunt down the last of his comrades

through the night. Whatever or whoever it is it never rests, never stops. They split up to try to take him by surprise but he hunted them all down, even commander Rize. He was the last to go and Cale heard it, caught sight of the bogey moving through the trees, circling around above his head, moving as adroitly as a squirrel or a monkey. It is inhuman, this thing, and yet it has a devious sentience about it. Whatever they do, whatever they try it is one step ahead of them, stronger, unkillable. And after all of them survived the Destroyer War the Revenge Soldiers had a sense of invincibility about them. They believed they could not die, a belief which been proven all too wrong.

He steadies his trigger hand, mentally keeping himself from shaking. He is going to have to pull out all the stops on this one, he knows. Cale has some psychic abilities, which he manifests in the form of weapons comprised of psychic energy. He is also able to psychically charge his bullets with psychokinetic energy, making them explode like grenades. Still he knows his comrades and given that this thing, whatever it is, has taken all of them down, he understands the odds are not in his favor. But he will conquer his fear, he has to. The time has come for revenge.

Cale strains his senses, listening for anything, a movement, a breath, a twig snap as he crouches down behind a shrub. He is in the old Garden of Gethsemane, the place where Jesus wept his tears of blood. For the moment miracles are in short supply, so Cale decides to make some of his own. He waits it out, conscious of the pounding of his beating heart, his breathing. This dude is fast, whoever he is, and Cale has to stay alert!

At the last moment he senses the enemy guerilla coming for him and he rolls deftly out of the way. He cannot see his attacker, but the attack splits a tree right in half with its staggering power! Cale expertly fires two rounds as he comes to a stop, but he has no idea where his enemy is. He can't see him since he moves too fast for his eyes. This is unusual since all of them have been extensively trained to both move and react at superspeeds. It is like second nature to them, the result of years of intensive training. But this guy is like nothing he has ever encountered, even in the Destroyer War!

Cale backs up against a tree, his eyes scanning the treetops as he keeps his weapon raised. He listens but hears nothing but his beating heart. Then suddenly a fist comes from behind, punches through the tree trunk and into his chest, wounding his heart! Cale staggers, dropping his gun. He doesn't have long now, he knows. But he will be damned if he is going to die alone! He is going to take this monster down with him!

He doesn't bother to turn and look for it since he knows it is gone again, vanished into the treetops. Instead he concentrates, using what the Elders call Second Sight. They taught the children to focus their minds, to become more than human, sensing an enemy with what is called the Deep Mind. And as fast as this guy is he tells himself he isn't going to get more than one shot at him. He counts each breath; inhale, exhale. Cale leaves his weapon on the ground. He is the weapon. And concentrating his psychokinetic energy he forms it into a blade of pure energy: something he calls his Zero Dagger.

Cale senses a rush, a sudden gust of movement like a car hurtling above him. He closes his eyes, trusting his deep senses, and he lets fly. The Zero Dagger cuts through the air like a laser, finding

its mark, catching his target right in the chest. The creature topples to the forest floor, landing on its face. Cale watches it for a moment. It has not moved and to his surprise in appearance it is very much like a man!

The enemy guerilla is big, well over six feet tall, with thick shoulders and a massive physique. He is wearing camouflage, not that he needs it, and big black jackboots. Cautiously Cale creeps over toward him, pulling his rifle from his back and pointing it at his motionless body. He can see no sign of breathing so maybe his dagger worked. He takes aim, fixing his sights on the man's head. He blinks. Fatal mistake. In a fraction of a second Cale is twitching on the ground, his neck snapped!

Black Jin has always been a predatory, sometimes ritualistic creature, even as a child. In many ways he is more beast than human, a result of his genetic response to the Elder dna he was exposed to while still in the womb. His skin is chalky pale white and he has two giant feathered wings like those of a raven or crow. But this is not where his peculiarities end.

He is highly clairvoyant and telepathic and also able to see into spiritual planes in much the same way Seji can. At times Black Jin will converse with spiritual beings who no one else can see, a habit of his, also from childhood. He is drawn to more chaotic forces and powers, which he reveres in the form of ritual worship, entailing sacrifices and a black altar. He draws great power from the dark entities he worships, which include the loa and orishas. He takes meticulous care of his shrines and his altar, which he takes everywhere with him, even into the field.

Some of his rituals border on the bizarre, even savage. He is in the habit of painting his body with blood before battle and in the aftermath he has been known to cannibalize his fallen enemy, such as eating internal organs! Of all the Revenge Soldiers Black Jin is without a doubt the most bizarre and darkest.

Still he never backs down from a fight, for battle is his music, his symphony. On one of the first missions the Revenge Soldiers were on it was he who singlehandedly destroyed the Titan Enoch, who had killed many powerful fighters. He and his army were about to conquer the Earth until Black Jin stopped him.

It was the same in the Destroyer War, and the giant killer Black Jin drew first blood, taking down the indomitable colossus Prodigy, who had killed so many of his brothers in battle. But no one on Earth knows his name, which is fine with him. For Black Jin is born of the shadows and to the shadows he belongs.

In the dim morning light Black Jin pursues his prey through long, black inky shadows. He has tasted the blood of the creature called Astral Cult and now he wants more. After all battle is his language, his one true religion. He knows this creature's name for he has tasted its blood, so taking into himself its true essence, its nature. But Black Jin knows things just as he always has. There is little that is secret or hidden from him.

He sniffs the brisk breeze, which has an uncharacteristic chill on it. This is Israel, after all,

which has been an arid, desert climate for thousands of years, since time immemorial. But he knows that the cold is part of the creature's aura, its own handprint or signature. It is a demon summoned here from another dimension by their own former brother Johannas. He has gone to great lengths to destroy them, to break their happy family apart. Black Jin sees well through his schemes and by his own dark blood he swears he will be the one to rip Johannas's lying heart from his body!

He can feel, sense the demon as he moves. He has a sixth sense which remains as true as any of his other senses, even more so. The demon is moving around him in a tightening circle. For though it knows he is hunting it as well, and that he can see it, it thirsts for blood as he does. So on it goes, this danze macabre, each of them giving chase through the thickening shadows, chased by the rising sun. Black Jin makes the first move, hurling a fireball formed of his own fiery essence at the beast, but it vanishes into smoke.

The devil brushes past him, flying like the wind itself, cutting his throat. Black Jin can taste his own blood now but it takes far more to kill him. He is not so easily stopped. And now that the enemy has drawn his blood as well, battle is truly begun. At times like this, in the rare moments when an enemy can draw his blood, Black Jin will go into a kind of berserker mode, becoming more beast than man. He feels himself on the fringe of it now, his heart pounding in his chest as he feels fire coursing through his veins.

Black Jin and the demon clash on their way through the shadows. For there is a realm of shadow which borders our own, even sharing space with the physical world. He and the demon are creatures of this world, half in the physical world while truly belonging to the ethereal, the plane of shadow. Both of them extend long black nails, which burn like fire as they slash one another, shuttingling past, spilling blood. Grind the teeth, breathing deep, now flying through shadow again. Breathing harder, harder, going black. Losing control, everything red. Now strike, more blood, black blood. Everything is black now. Another rush, bared teeth and claws out. Strike, counterstrike.

They separate and Black Jin perceives Jakob below them, exposed, vulnerable. The devil is eyeing him, sensing an easy target. For though Jakob is as hard and tough as they come this beast is beyond him, a shadowwalker like Black Jin himself. He flies between the demon and Jakob to protect him and a clawed hand buries into his chest, pushing its way out his back. The wound is fatal but his brother is safe. Job well done.

Jakob breaks Black Jin's fall and he kneels with his head on his lap, watching helplessly as his comrade breathes his last rasping breaths. For an instant he looks the demon in the eyes before it vanishes like smoke again. Black Jin fades fast and there are no words for such a moment. He was always indestructible, they all were. But now are the days of the death of the old gods. Now are the days of sorrow. And as Jakob staggers to his feet he swears under his breath that Johannas will bleed for this! He will lay every death at his feet before he cuts him down!

But for the moment it is all Jakob can do just to stay alive. So he ducks into the thorns, the only cover he can find. The demon is gone but Jakob can feel him, feel his own fear hunting him! And though he is not psychic he can taste the fear, sense it building. There are only four of them left

now and as he bulls his way through the thorns he swears he can hear another one fall behind him. His pulse is quickened, his heart pounding so hard it feels like it will come clean out of his chest! He hears Cloudburst grunt to his right, then choke on his own blood, then fall. All the while Jakob keeps his feet moving. If he stays on the move then maybe the demon won't catch him, won't kill him! This fear is alien to him, it is new. But in this moment he feels like a helpless calf waiting for slaughter. It is only a matter of time.

He spots Stratus in a crouch near the base of the hill. Other than himself and the indifferent Kwan Chin he is the only one left. Stratus's eyes are wide with fear, another thing Jakob has never seen before. Together they faced down Killspree, the toughest of the Destroyers, who wiped out an army single handed. And that day when they killed him Jakob remembers how strong and fearless Stratus was! He was in awe of him that day; his power and his toughness. Now he just looks like a frightened child who is about to dive under the bed to hide from the monster that stalks him, waking him from his sleep. But then they are soldiers and every soldier dies. It is the way of things.

Jakob lays low against the ground and he can hear the demon boring out Stratus's eyes then crunching on them slowly, savoring them like peanuts. The beast is eating parts of him as Jakob listens in rapt horror, his mind screaming silently inside him! He considers crawling along the ground but he is frozen with fear, paralyzed! It is just he and Kwan Chin now, leaving him alone with this hunting horror! Around him everything is still and perfectly silent, so Jakob clambers out of the thorny jungle. He cannot take it anymore, he is burning with fear and his ears are ringing.

He emerges from the undergrowth at the foot of a tree- Kwan Chin's tree. As Jakob looks up desperately he screams out at his commander. "Wake up, will you! The demon's coming this way! If you just sit there you will die!" But he doesn't even stir, nor does he open his eyes. He just sits there, his arms folded, his head down. His face is completely relaxed, and in fact he looks like he is in a deep sleep. Jakob slinks behind the tree, pulling his gun from his holster at his side, standing at the ready. He hears a sound, a twig snap then the horror himself appears!

The beast is like a shadow with cracked skin and a black mask pulled taut over its mouth. It stalks toward him, crablike, taking its time to savor the moment, stalking down its prey. Jakob raises his quivering hand and fire, then again with the other hand, another gun. But the shots miss, for the freak is impossibly fast, moving faster than the naked eye can see. Just then something makes him look up at the tree. Kwan Chin opens his eyes, turning his gaze on the creature, and instantly the demon blinks out of existence! He is gone.

Of all the children of the Cloister Kwan Chin was by far the most shy. And when the others would gather in groups, playing their games, testing one another, he would sit alone and read, sometimes imagining far removed worlds and fantastical dreamscapes. And the Elders observed him closely, for he exhibited the signs of being a rare and prolific child known in modern times as a Crystal Child.

Crystal Children are beings of legend, at least as far as anyone knows. They are allegedly born with pure white hair, crystalline clear eyes and a rather unique set of skills and attributes. Kwan Chin

fit all of these to a tee as a child, for he had the trademark hair and the clear blue eyes. A crystal child is supposed to be sensitive and have heightened spiritual awareness. But Kwan Chin kept most of what he perceived to himself, for he had no friends, even in The Cloister. Withdrawn and pensive, he would sit alone, speaking to no one sometimes for a week or more.

And yet despite the emotions churning inside of him he never would show any sign of feeling, always keeping the same detached, indifferent expression which characterizes him today. Loud noise upsets and unsettles him, yet another trait of the legendary crystal child. His life everyday was withdrawn into his own little world, making him distant and almost unreachable, even for Master Syd.

Syd Vanish labeled Kwan Chin as the Genius, for he saw in him limitless potential. There was talk among the Elders that he was some kind of Holy One, a savior of sorts, destined to lead the world of tomorrow and to bring enlightenment with his distinct spiritual gifts. And when the collective decision was made to undertake Experiment 7, it was due to the potential of Kwan Chin and Seji almost exclusively. (For though Johannas almost certainly possessed the same degree of gifts he was uncooperative and unmanageable.)

Kwan Chin carries inside him all the pain and madness of those experiments, although he hides it well, burying it deep down inside himself. He has become a carrier for the fear he feels, the psychological terror which was instilled in him during Experiment 7.

The purpose of his inclusion in the experiment was both to awaken his suppressed powers and to reshape his mind, making him a willing slave of the agenda of his masters. Little as he speaks he will never tell another soul of what he endured there, unspeakable tortures of the soul and mind. For hours on end they would inundate him with scarring images of things no child, or adult for that matter, should ever see. This forced him to abandon his natural sensitivity, making of him a hollowed out shell of considerable thickness. Now he cannot feel, even if he wanted to. To feel is to hurt and he can take no more.

Jakob stares in wonder at what he has just witnessed. It is quite a thing to see a man blink something, or rather someone, out of existence before your eyes. His mind struggles with its own disbelief. He clammers to his feet as Kwan Chin hops down from his own perch. The Unit 2 commander turns his gaze on his still trembling superior. He speaks, his voice impossibly soft. "I unmade him" he says. "It is something I have been able to do since the end of Experiment 7, possibly even before. Among other things they called me the Creator, for whatever my eyes see comes into being. The inception of a thing begins in my mind with a single image and I am able to create whatever I visualize, redefining reality."

"In other words you are God" Jakob responds in half disbelief and half fear of blasphemy. "But if that is true then why not just change everything? You could end the war right now, couldn't you? If you simply erased Johannas and all the harm he has done, the deaths he has caused then everything can go back to normal, can't it?"

Now Kwan Chin's eyes seem to bore straight through him. "How normal has this world ever

been for any of us? And who are we to judge what is normal? Look at us: we were raised by monsters to become monsters and now one of our own has turned against us. Things are just not that simple: but then with Johannas nothing ever was simple, was it?"

"No" Jakob agrees, his mind flashing back to the day the 7 returned from Area 51. He found Johannas alone crying, his mind broken into fragments. That day Jakob became his best friend, or so he used to think. But Johannas grew more distant after that and in Jakob's mind that was the point when he cut himself off from everyone, when he placed himself above all others.

Seji sits on the floor of his tent, his mind still deep in a trance state. He has spent the last few hours seeking out this beast from the other side of the gate. For he intends to protect his men from this creature, to deal with it himself. But what is the thing and why does it remind Seji of their masters, the mysterious Elders? For as much as he tries to ignore this obvious truth the more it burdens his mind. And try as he might he can feel the cold reach of memory touching him and he is back in Area 51 again.

He was only 7 years old when the experiments began. He can see himself sitting in that chair, his hands shaking from fear. Elder Victor was speaking, his deep baritone voice hypnotic, lulling him, drawing him in. In that chair he would sit for hours at a time as the images bombarded his brain, images of pain of fear and of someone whose face he could not recall. And as much time that passes since those days he cannot seem to put distance inside his mind. Part of him feel trapped there, still strapped to that chair!

In his vision he sees the bodies of his men at his feet. Some of them are already dead, others are dying and inside he feels powerless to save them. "Damn you, Johannas!" he calls out aloud. "Your pride is the cause of all this misery!"

A solitary figure steps from the shadows, a familiar shape attached to a familiar voice. "Look deeper, brother!" Johannas whispers, his face half in light, half in shadow. "See things as they truly are!"

Now Seji knows he is dreaming, that Johannas is not really in front of him and his men are not really dead at his feet. But this is the power of Johannas, to make people see whatever he wants them to see, to twist their dreams and use them as weapons against them. So in a sense Seji knows this dream is very real. For there is nowhere Johannas cannot go, no place he cannot reach you.

"You were preborn like me and Kwan Chin" Johannas goes on. "You were born aware and awakened, but they tried to make you forget her, forget her face."

Her face? What or who was he talking about? "What are you talking about, Johannas? I know you, you are trying to plant a seed of doubt in my mind, nurturing it until it festers, corrupting my consciousness! But I will not hear your lies, Johannas. I know what you are trying to do."

"She was your mother and they tried to make you forget her, even her face, her name. They have lied to you from the beginning, just as they lied to all of us. They implanted their seed in each of

our mother and then stole us from our parents as babies. All in the name of some agenda, to make us these killing machines we have become. You have the sight, Seji, so you can divine whether or not what I am telling you is true. What do you have to lose?"

"My mother?" Seji's face is astonished as he fights to gain control of his spiralling emotions. "I don't remember my mother, none of us do. The Elders took us in when we were still very small. So how can you know anything of my mother, or even yours for that matter?"

"I know so much. I know everything now. I know what your masters are and what they have done. They are thieves and liars, all of them! First they deceived our mothers with dreams, keeping them blind as to their true intentions. Then they stole us away from them, indoctrinating us into their network of lies, entrapping the trusting minds of children!

"Have you never questioned their motives in all of this? You remember Experiment 7, all of us do who were there. But I would wager you can only recall bits and pieces of random flashbacks, as your mind has repressed the rest, or so you imagine. But it was our masters who used our dreams to control us, to blind us from the truth. For the truth is more terrible than imagination!"

"And what is truth, Johannas?" Seji questions with an impudent mind. Every part of him doubts Johannas's words, for he knows he is deceitful, duplicitous. And he has every reason to try to get at Seji's mind now, to weaken him from the inside to make him easier to manipulate and eventually kill. Yet there is a part of him which wonders if there isn't some kernel of truth in what Johannas is trying to tell him. There is a seed of doubt, for there is so much he still struggles to remember clearly.

"The Elders are monsters, for I have seen their true faces! And that moment when I knew the truth they could no longer control me. So I began to make my plans of revolt, of overthrow. These plans were nearing their completion when the Destroyers arrived and we were all forced to deal with the crisis."

"So is that your excuse for all of this, for all you have done?" Seji demands. "Is it the Elders' fault what you have become, all the lives swallowed by your mad crusade?"

Johannas chuckles darkly at this suggestion. "I am not attempting to explain or justify anything. I am simply telling you to look deeper to see the truth about your masters. Ask them yourself if you like, or will you choose to remain the loyal slave, their chump?"

This draws Seji's ire, but he has taught himself to master his emotions, so he bites back his anger. "You are trying to control me just as you say they did! And maybe what you are saying is true, maybe it isn't. None of that really matters now, does it? Here in this moment there is only this reality, the reality of a world that must be saved from your twisted vision for it! I am coming for you, Johannas. I am coming and nothing can stop it now."

"I am counting on it."

Seji awakens from his dream to find half his men dead, including the incomparable Fleen, the

great hero of the Destroyer War. In this moment he realizes that this was Johannas's true motive for his psychic attack. 'Of course! He needed to keep me out of the way while his beast cut down more of my men! And he knows me, knows how I would bleed for my men so he is trying to undermine my sense of self-worth and my worth as a commander! But I won't let you manipulate me, Johannas!'

And Seji, setting his sights on this monster, reaches out with his mind. He sends a version of himself, an extension of his mind out after this alien and he destroys it with a mere touch, scattering its molecules across the cosmos. There is a strange familiarity in that touch, that energy that the creature gave off which reminds Seji of the Elders. He considers this for a brief moment before returning to his body. Doesn't matter what the truth is anyway. All that is past. Only now matters, only this moment, this battle. And he has to keep his mind clear as the showdown with Johannas draws closer.

Seji steps out of his tent and onto the wartorn streets of the Holy City. The plague has gotten worse here and still no word from Muse. 'Hurry back with that antidote, sister!'

Muse cuts her way through the thick, thorny jungle. She is drawing very near to the Citadel now, she can feel it. But someone else has been this way, one of them. Cautiously she steps out from the overgrowth, her eyes scanning her surroundings. Something isn't right here, she can feel it. But Johannas is gone, though where is anyone's guess. So as she slips inside The Citadel in search of her cure she wonders what he has planned for all of them. Hurry! You have to hurry!

Discreetly she slips through the courtyard and through the atrium, making her way up the long staircase to the Lord's suite at the top. Johannas likes the view from his balcony, for he has always liked to look down on things, and to feel as if the whole world is in the palm of his hand, under his watchful control. These thoughts unsettle her and everywhere she goes Muse can feel his eyes watching her. Johannas is everywhere. She knows this. And to rise against him feels very much like trying to kill God.

Johannas's chamber is palatial in its luxury, complete with a bubbling fountain and a serene replica of himself in statue form overlooking the courtyard below. From beneath his spire, looking out his massive arched window, Muse catches sight of the encampment of the 4th Unit below. 'Mobius and his men are here then' she thinks. 'And they don't appear to have sustained any casualties.'

This realization gives her a sense of security which warms her heart, giving her a much needed sense of hope. Now for the matter of the antidote. 'If I were Johannas where would I hide you?'

"I can tell you that" comes a voice from behind her. Mordecai steps into the light, his pistol drawn and cocked in his hand. "He entrusted the antidote to me, a necessary formality in case of his own contamination with the toxin. My brother means to kill everyone, using his virus to weed out those he deems as weak. It is a pity that this will leave him alone in the world, with no subject to rule over, but it is truly no less than he deserves."

Mordecai is a lean and slender man of some height and at this moment he wears an expression as cold as death. It is funny, Muse thinks to herself, how with Johannas around no one ever noticed

Mordecai, his older and less talented brother. Mordecai was abandoned by the program, like her own brother Icarus, for he showed no potential. It was only because the Elders thought he could be used to control Johannas that Mordecai was kept around. And he was always assigned to menial tasks. And in this moment, with his finger on the trigger she thinks of how much power he has despite his former state.

"I am really, truly tired of cleaning up my brother's messes, but it is something I have become quite adept at" Mordecai observes as if to himself. "He really must be stopped, I know that but I have to protect him, even at the cost of my own life. As a twin I am sure you understand."

Muse nods her head, her pulse quickening as she stares down the barrel of her own imminent death. "I am sorry" he apologizes. "But we do what we have to." He pulls the trigger and she closes her eyes, scrunching up her face as she braces for the hammer's fall. But at the last possible second, no at the last split second someone dives in between her and the bullet- her brother Icarus!

Icarus and Muse are fraternal twins born of one womb but different interwoven fates. She showed ability from a young age and so was placed under the supervision of Grand Muse Alexei as a young disciple of the Order of Muses. It is for this reason she calls herself Muse, as she doesn't know her real name.

So in a sense she has had a separate experience from the other children as a Muse in training. And Muse was not subjected to the same level of monstrosities as the other children, particularly the Alphas and those among the Seven. But always her brother was nearby, from the very beginning.

Icarus showed no unique abilities, gifts and perceptions so at age 7 he was driven out from the Cloister, left to roam the unforgiving wilds and the streets alone, to fend for himself. And against all odds he survived this ordeal, all the while keeping a watchful eye on his twin, vigilantly protecting her from harm.

It has been said that twins feel one another's pain, that they are bound together by deep and unbreakable links. So in this moment Muse can feel her own death as she kneels by Icarus's side in a pool of his blood. She whispers to him from her heart, her words few as time is fleeting. She swears she can hear him answer as he chokes on his own blood, gasping his last.

Muse knew that he had been following her, staying just out of sight when she arrived here as a scout. She could feel his presence as she chopped her way through the dense thorns then again as she returned to make her report. Icarus has always been like that, a silent, watchful protector. And for some reason while she was the one born with special gifts he was always the one watching out for her, even after he was discarded like trash and driven out of the protective Cloister.

Finally Icarus stops breathing as his body collapses against the ground, his head falling back. Overcome with grief she leaps to her feet and, concentrating her anger into a single point, she mortally wounds her enemy with it. Her psychic energy focuses into a pin and flies through the air as precisely as a guided missile, burying deep into his heart. Mordecai falls, another brother lying at death's door,

another family torn apart by this utter madness!

Icarus is gone now, an empty shell, so Muse walks over to Mordecai, her anger now dying down as her heart pounds powerfully in her chest like a drum. She is struck dumb by what she sees: he is crying! Faithful Mordecai struggles for words and air, so she crouches by his side, surprisingly drawn to the side of her enemy.

"I...I always knew he would be the death of me. But in a way I didn't care. He was my brother, so it was my job to protect him. I can see that you understand, Muse so in a way we are not so different, you and I. In this life we were bound to brothers who put us in harm's way, but your brother would do anything for you, even at the cost of his own life as he did.

"But my brother was always misunderstood and he had no use for people, who he saw as beneath him. At first I was an idealist, so I followed him, believing in his dreams and visions of grandeur. But then the cullings began after the Sermons and I could see for myself that he had lost all perspective. Johannas has always been great, like a shining star or the sun, and I was content just to walk in his shadow, just to be close to something so brilliant. In the end that is what got me killed, but I apologize for nothing."

Mordecai motions for Muse to come close and he produces a vial which he had been concealing in his coat. "Here take this. Use it to stop this madness. Johannas has to be stopped. I know that. Part of me has always known it. Your brother...I'm sorry."

Mordecai breathes his last, his head falling back in the same way Icarus's did. It all seems such a waste to her, this war, this killing. She has never been much of one for wars and now she can see why. With the Destroyers they were monsters. It was easier then, simpler. But now as this battle drags on it takes more loved ones with it as it goes, spreading like a plague. 'I will get this cure to Seji and then I will find Johannas myself. This all must end!'

Even as Seji stands among the bodies he senses something, so he turns. And the terrible, impossible sight which meets his eyes is so fantastic it is unreal. Johannas is entering the city in grandest fashion, seated upon a golden throne born forward on a cloud, escorted by flights of his black angels, the rogue Banshees! Beneath him twisted vines push their way forward, tangled up with the writhing, hungry thorns. The air around him has an odor and a haze to it, an almost palpable texture.

The man himself, the God of gods smirks arrogantly as his diseased and suffering followers fall at the feet of his throne in abject demonstration of worship. He has transformed himself, no doubt the result of the massive quantities of souls he has consumed. His skin is a brilliant sky blue and on his back are six wings like those of a great angel. The power radiating from him is so intense it steals Seji's breath, but the sight of his enemy sickens him.

"Johannas! How can you posture so when your own people suffer under your rule?" Seji shouts angrily. "Demon! Come down off your throne and let's settle this!"

Johannas descends from his throne, stepping on empty air with his arms extended in a grand

gesture. The thorns consume people, pulling helpless citizens into their deadly clutches. Johannas strolls forward, drinking in their essences villainously. This infuriates Seji, who nevertheless protects the people out of instinct, moving now here now there to snatch as many as he can from the clutches of the carnivorous plants!

Just then The People's Army under the command of the fearless Bell Patriarchus enter the city. To their surprise they come under no fire but are met instead by a throng of rabid worshippers holding hands as they cluster together. The mass of humanity smashes up against the armed soldiers, who threaten the mindless followers with their weapons in vain. Shots ring out and a dozen or so of them fall, but more fill in to take their place in the throng. Suddenly thorns shoot up from the ground, forcing the soldiers to break rank and scatter out of self-preservation.

Banshees give chase to them, both reaping souls and slaying fleeing soldiers, gathering their energies for their dark master. Pushed to the brink, Bell Patriarchus makes his last stand, hunkering down behind a broken wall of brick, a handful of his loyal men at his side. They duck onrushing thorns as they open fire on both the plants and the Banshees, who effortlessly elude the bullets. Banshees and thorns encompass them together, as if synchronized by some higher hand.

The Reapers arrive on the scene, descending from the stormy skies above like falling shadows. The seven of them swarm Johannas like angry bees, slashing at him with their scythes. But Johannas simply covers himself with his wings then snaps his fingers. At the snap a hundred Johannases appear and they rip apart the Reapers with their bare hands! The shadows fall as Seji and his handful of men try in vain to manage the chaos!

At that precise moment the Elders appear, the Patriarchs and the Muses at their sides. Master Syd stands at the head of the Elders, calling out to his former pupil. "Johannas! You did not imagine you could escape justice, did you?"

Johannas turns to face his attackers, who encircle him as their energies hum and build. "Fools! I am God here! I am everywhere!" He moves quicker than thought striking each of the Elders, Muses and Patriarchs in turn. He merely touches them and they shatter like glass, then scatter into dust. He breathes their essences in, each time returning to his place at the center of the field to do so.

One by one immortals fall before Johannas's irresistible might and his thorns consume the city block by block, turning it swiftly into a wasteland. Seji feels the destruction and he turns to his remaining men, who stand with their weapons drawn, prepared to make their last stand at his side. "All of you, go! Leave him to me! Save yourselves, that is an order!"

But Kwan Tet, one of his best and bravest men, questions the order. "We cannot leave you, Seji! We won't! We have been through too much, all of us! And we claim revenge on Johannas as much as you do!"

Seji's eyes mist over, then clear, taking on a look of raw determination. He is ready now to lay down his life for his men, for the world. And if he must die he swears to take this false god down with

him! "Then let me destroy him for all of us. There is nothing you can do, any of you now. Leave Johannas to me."

They obey Seji, taking what survivors they can quickly from the city to withdraw into the valley below. Now Seji stands alone facing Johannas, the last of their former masters dead at his feet. "You still can't see her face I know, but I think you can hear her voice when all is quiet." Johannas's words haunt Seji. Why this obsession with his mother? Seji doesn't remember her face but he can feel her somehow. It's like she is calling him from somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, somewhere he can't see, can't reach.

Seji freezes to the spot, his mind relaxed and his body frozen. Johannas simply turns and leaves, satisfied for the moment to have gained the upper hand on his rival. What kind of game is he playing?

Just then Muse, Mobius and Unit 4 arrive, cutting their way through the thick jungle of thorns. The thorns bleed now, for they are drunk with the blood of the dead and dying. Muse runs up to Seji, the vial in her hands. But his eyes are glazed over, unreachable. The commander is a million miles away, lost in the tangled recesses of lost memory.

Muse hesitates a moment, turning to Mobius. "The others must have evacuated the survivors into the valley. I will come with you. I know what I must do now." Having said that Muse takes the vial and drinks it. "Now I am the cure."

Chapter 6- The Lord of Death

Jakob gets separated from Kwan Chin deep in the heart of the now spreading thorns. It doesn't much surprise him. Kwan Chin has always been a loner, and he prefers it that way. Jakob finds himself still shaken from his near death encounter with the demon. It is hard for him, a hardened soldier to feel so helpless. But then nothing is certain these days, where the shadow of death hangs on every step.

Despite Kwan Chin's unlikely rescue Jakob still feels as if something is stalking him, dogging his every step. He is not attuned like the others, so he can't sense Johannas's mind reaching out for him, watching him. Still he is unsettled and more than a little on edge. He draws his weapon as the sun climbs into the sky, hanging low on the eastern horizon. It is day 4 of the great battle now and there is the feeling that Johannas is simply sizing them up for the kill. He is the predator, they are the prey and Jakob gets the sense they are no closer to victory than before this all began. In fact he feels very much like a pawn in Johannas's hand.

He hears voices and he takes cover. Two men are walking through the middle of the thorns talking with one another. He crouches low at first then lies flat on the ground, crawling on his belly to get closer for a look. Deftly he pulls back the thorns, nudging them with the butt of his rifle. There in a clearing in the thorns he sees them.

Two men of considerable size are walking together, moving off in the direction of the Citadel. Their skin radiates light like two suns and the first man has ashen skin like that of a mendicant or an ascetic. He wears a garland of skulls around his head and a cobra as a necklace. His coat is made of tiger's pelt and his nails are as black as night. 'Lord Shiva? It can't be!' Jakob is in wonder at the sight of these two gods, but then maybe this really is the end of the world.

The second god has blue skin and he wears a red robe. His face is covered with a mask shaped like a human skull and in his right hand he carries a great gnarled staff. 'Could it be Lord Yama, the Lord of Death himself? Perhaps he has arisen to pass judgment on Johannas for abusing his powers and slaughtering his Reapers!' All of this is simply too much to accept, but Jakob lays low to the ground and listens to their conversation.

"Now is the hour, Lord Yama. Now is the end of the cycle. Is this the hour of our deaths? Who can say? For all things must end in their time, and whatever is born must also die."

"Mighty Shiva, it is so. For no longer can I overlook the offenses this mad human heaps upon the world, edging her closer to mankind's destruction. And though this too must come to pass we are invested in this world, you and I. We are inextricably linked. So we must go, enacting karma's righteous judgments against this man who would be God. And if we go to our death then it is a good death."

'What is this? Can it be that even the gods are facing their own deaths? I never believed in the gods. I always thought those were tales for small children, for the weak-minded. Does everyone fear Johannas? Is this a losing battle we are fighting?'

But it doesn't matter. Jakob knows. For win or lose there are some battles that simply must be fought. He will be the one to kill Johannas, for he was closer to Jakob than to anyone.

Just then he thinks he hears something, a rustling behind him so Jakob stays prone, rolling over onto his back, his head lifted, his hand cannon at the ready. There is a sudden rush of air, a gust and he knows instinctively he is being stalked. 'Is this the same thing that wiped out the 5th?' he wonders, swallowing hard to bite back his fear. He catches a side glimpse of a passing shadow out of the corner of his eye, but he cannot tell what it is. He swallows again, his mouth dry. He licks his lips in nervous anticipation. Something is stalking him. A twig snaps and he wheels around, discharging a whole clip at the ground and empty air. 'Keep your head, Jakob. It's time I did some hunting.'

He pulls his cap low over his eyes to keep the sun from blinding him and he expertly dives back into the thorny thicket from which he has just recently emerged. It will be harder for this guy to keep track of him in there. He feels on his side for his knives, for he will want to use them if he needs to, in a pinch. The wind kicks up as he crawls forward on his hands and knees, his gun at the ready, his steady finger on the trigger. He has already changed his clip, something he does without thinking. And he has a good supply of rounds, another habit, a lesson learned in childhood. If he can get a clear shot he will end this, but he has to get this sniper out into the open.

Another twig snap followed by another sudden gust of wind. This guy is baiting him, toying with him. This isn't Johannas. This isn't his style. Johannas would come at him in one of two ways. First he would simply come straight at him, the direct approach. This he would do to intimidate Jakob, to show his utter lack of fear. The second approach is far worse. That is when he would get inside his head, slowly working in there like poison, taking his hold until he can no longer see straight, even think straight.

Something lunges at him but he adeptly rolls aside, then scrambles to his feet while still keeping a low profile. Whatever or whoever it is they move fast, incredibly fast! And this guy has been hunting for a long time, maybe as long as Jakob, maybe longer.

He remembers his first hunt well. That day Master Syd had gone into the woods and the kids were supposed to find him. It was a teamwork exercise so they were broken up into teams of four, each one competing to get to the Master first. Jakob remembers he was 7. It was about the same time they took the others, the Seven, to Area 51. In fact that night was when Johannas came home.

Jakob always preferred to work alone, so he sent the others to take their positions to flush the Master out he said. But he wanted the kill for himself, even then. He was born to hunt and raised to be a soldier. This is as second nature for him as breathing. In. Out. In. Out. He has to see beyond seeing now, know the unknown while remaining himself unknown. Does this man know us, know him? What has Johannas told him? Or was he trained, groomed expressly for this sole purpose: to hunt and kill them?

If that is true then Jakob welcomes it, welcomes the challenge. He has never been bested until the previous day when that demon was stalking him. But it moved with unearthly speed, like the Seven move, or the Elders. Anything like that is beyond human, impossible to track. And it strikes him just then that Johannas is precisely like that: beyond human, impossible to track. And if he really is God then can he be killed?

His enemy is on the move again, Jakob can feel it, sense it. It or he is stalking him, staying just out of sight, hidden away in the impassible thicket. And it is stalking him hand to hand, whatever it is. It doesn't seem to have a gun or it would have fired or countered his fire. But then assumptions are deadly in the field, deadly and fatal.

He hears movement and he half turns, looking out of the corner of his eye. He can see a shape, someone watching him, waiting for its chance to strike. He moves fast, faster than he ever has before but quick as a wink it is gone. Just then Jakob gets an idea, so he fakes a move one way then doubles back, drawing his knife and turning to strike. He stands face to face with his stalker, a towering figure of alarming bulk and stonelike features. It wears the skin of a man but its shape is statuesque, hard and unforgiving as granite or marble. Jakob drives the point of his blade into the big man up to the hilt but the beastly enemy soldier simply looks at him, unflinching and undisturbed by the fatal thrust. In one fluid movement it snaps his neck and everything goes black. Over and out.

Kwan Chin steps into the remnants of the Holy City where he finds Seji, still frozen like a

sculpture. He takes a moment to take in everything that has happened here and in his mind's eye he can see it. Johannas came, he conquered, he used his thorns to harvest the city and when Seji confronted him he overthrew his mind. But Kwan Chin knows Seji as well as he knows anyone. He will soon right himself and free his mind from Johannas's snares. Until then Kwan Chin will simply sit and wait.

It is daybreak on the morning the experiments began. Seji is already awake and meditating but this morning there is something that lingers in his mind, keeping him from his blissful release. Something is very wrong. Seji has learned to trust his intuition, his extra sense as Master Syd calls it, and this same sense is uneasy, even alarmed.

The Masters say that seven of them are going away for a week for a training regimen. They have been chosen for their special abilities, designated as potentials. The Prodigy they call him and he has never lost, never failed at anything. Everything has come easily to Seji until this day, this moment when this gnawing feeling in his guts warns him against whatever is waiting for them on the other side.

Seven of them are loaded onto a bus with tinted glass on its windows, rendering the occupants, seven young children, invisible to the outside world. Hira Yuri is among them, the boy they call The Reaper for his proclivity with knives and bladed weapons. He sits next to Seji on the bus while Johannas and Kwan Chin sit alone.

One boy is kept under tight restraints, the boy they call the Daemon. He was not raised with the rest of the children but kept in total isolation, the property of a private party, an investor in The Cloister so to speak. Seji has heard him called Stratephus and without asking he knows this is his name. Things just come to Seji, reveal themselves. And that which to others remains a closed door to him is but another window.

He tells no one of the spiritual beings he sees all the time. Some are the Old Folk, the races who existed and inhabited the Earth before the coming of man. They are many and varied in shape; some are hairy while others have smooth gray skin like corpses. Also he sees faeries, or fae as they are sometimes called. They are not flitting little pixies as the stories suggest but as colorful as the rainbow. For some have skin as pale and white as cream while others appear tanned and dark, almost black. Some are short and squat while others are tall and gangly.

Ghosts or spirits are everywhere, for the Earth is a far more crowded place than people know. There are so many of them; some angry and wringing their hands while others sit with their heads in their hands, sorrowful and weeping. There is so much noise everywhere and he has learned to tune it out, to focus his mind, a necessity of life in The Cloister. Master Syd is not patient nor is he tolerant of failure. They are like little machines, each one of them. And they must be perfect, flawless, otherwise they are discarded like so much trash.

The children are hurriedly moved from the bus and onto a private plane. It is night now, very late and Seji gets the impression that someone is hiding something. It is a long flight and Seji spends the time engrossed in his puzzles. He has books which test his mind and in the mornings sometimes he

will pour over them, his eyes glued to the words and numbers there.

They arrive at last at their destination as the plane lands on an above ground airstrip which leads underground. Once underground the children disembark and they are ushered inside a secret subterranean facility. Inside the room is bright white and toys are arranged neatly in containers pushed against the far wall. Seji can feel and see the men watching them all from behind the observation glass, which allows observers to see in but does not permit the observed to see out. But he can see them just as the others can, for they are special children.

The children are taken in turn into a private room where the Machine is kept. Here Elder Victor subjects them individually to tests, but Seji knows what the Masters are up to. They brought them here to awaken their latent and even dormant abilities and to break their minds and their wills. The Masters are building them into perfect little killing machines and neither failure nor weakness can be tolerated.

Seji is shown into a small white room with a chair at its center. Once he is in the chair, which is shiny and swivels like a dentist's chair, he is strapped in, his arms and legs restrained in place. Electrodes are glued to his head after spots are drawn on it with a pencil. They want to know how he thinks, what makes him tick. He is a miracle child, a wonder to be studied and observed, even dissected.

Master Victor lowers a sensory deprivation hood over his eyes, which are now bombarded with a kind of 3d glasses hooked up to the Machine itself. The Machine bombards his senses with images then carefully records his responses and reactions. Victor then gauges the measurements, collecting the data to adjust his tests and parameters accordingly. Thus the seven gifted children become experimental lab rats!

The images start subtly at first, growing gradually in intensity as the session progresses. Colors flash brilliantly, blinding his eyes to a tortuous degree, for he is not able to blink his eyelids nor close them. Numbers and words bombard him, a sea of them for they are testing his ability to perceive and to process at superhuman rates. Now there is darkness, utter and complete. Everything is perfectly silent and still, a conditioning technique known as sensory deprivation. In theory this should help the children to attain higher levels of consciousness and to tap into hidden psychic skills.

This goes on for an indiscriminate time, leaving Seji to feel weightless, bodiless as his mind is deprived of any and all stimulation. But he is not allowed to nor to move in any way. Noise too is forbidden.

This period ends, leaving Seji feeling sad and desolate. But he is training himself to master his emotions, a feat which comes naturally to him. For though he feels quite deeply it remains buried there in his mind, just below the surface.

Now the flooding images begin and Seji's mind is made to feel, forceable deconditioning. He sees the image of a man bludgeoning a woman in the head, beating her to death until her head is

misshapen like a potato. They subject him to this again and again, forcing all emotion to surface and he to push it out of his mind.

Now images of rape, first of a stranger and then himself, over and over again. He feels the pain, the violent ripping of his clothes, the hands touching him, grabbing, scratching! He is raped over and over, or his mind believes it, until he is intensely nauseated. But the images do not stop, not ever. They only grow in intensity!

Now he sees a man disemboweling another man who is strapped to a table. The subject is writhing and struggling and screaming but the other man systematically removes his organs then feeds them to him. This and other unspeakable horrors little Seji was forced to witness over the course of hours or days. He has lost the ability to distinguish time, a relative concept.

But all the time as the experiment goes on Seji can hear a woman's voice whispering into his ear. There is no one in the room, no one but himself and Master Victor, but he can hear her, even feel her there. But when he turns to look she is strangely out of focus, like a faded old photograph. "Mother?" he calls out. But the Machine only shocks him, turning his vision from hot white to black.

From there the tortures begin, some physical but most psychological. Master Victor would sit in front of him and systematically jam needles under each fingernail and burn him with hot irons, holding them against his arm until his nerves seared! He experienced his own death again and again in that chair, having each emotion drained from him completely, leaving him feeling like a wrung out rag.

So Seji tried to fight back, to take control of The Machine, which he does. He forces the restraints off his limbs and overloads the circuits, causing his mechanical tormentor to smoke and vibrate.

At this time Master Victor let him up from the chair and the telekinetic exercises commenced. He was given blocks which would drop from above and he was forced to rearrange them as they fell, using only his mind. This was a struggle at first but when Seji learned to let go and give over to his deep mind it became as reflexive as breathing.

There are kill hunts this day, exercises when the children are sent out with a particular mark and are able to return only when their mark is dead. Everywhere Seji goes he can feel the satellite drone watching him, following him. His target for the day is a young mother living in Tuscon. Now he isn't given any details, so he doesn't know why she has to die. Nor is he permitted to question. And it is quite a thing to ask, no demand a seven year old child kill a complete stranger without remorse or emotional upheaval.

Seji finds the woman outside hanging up clothes, her young baby draped over her shoulder as she works, singing and humming to herself. 'She is so happy!' Seji thinks, but he forces himself to bite back the emotion. 'Alright now follow her inside and wait until she puts down the child.' He follows her and as the young mother carries the child inside, places him in his high chair, she turns to go out to the kitchen to get his bottle. It is at this precise moment Seji stops her heart. She falls dead and the

baby cries, but Seji walks out, leaving the small infant alone in the hands of cruel fate. He wasn't instructed about the child so he must leave him here, possibly to die.

The thought brings a tear to Seji's eye as he dreams but the moment is shattered by a familiar voice from the shadows. Johannas emerges from behind a panel and suddenly Seji is standing in a dimly lit hallway in the underground complex. It is an area he has not seen before and at once he realizes it is dream construct of Johannas's. He is holding the cards here and he is about to make his play.

"Hello Ghost" Johannas begins eerily, his voice low and secretive. "I knew you had not forgotten this place, as if any of us ever could. We remember what we can, for they have stolen so much. But we are not so easily controlled, you and I. They can never truly tell us what to think, to do. And they cannot steal our memories from us."

"So what now, Johannas? Is this the part when you try to convince me to join your cause, to support your crazed ambition? Are you attempting to justify the monster you have become with remembrances of this terrible place? I forget because I have to, because I need to. I have to move on from here, to leave it behind. But I carry my pain with me like a deep and secret scar no one can see."

"What was it all for, old friend?" Johannas asks, suddenly far too familiar. "I will tell you: the Elders are afraid and they wanted to use us to do their fighting for them. They have an enemy they fear to face so we are left to their dirty work, the children. And they made us what we are, who we are. But they can't tell us what to think, who to become. That part is up to us."

"Is that your reason for everything? Did you do all this out of some sense of revenge? At Area 51 they called you The Beast Johannas. I always thought they were cruel, ruthlessly inhuman but now I see that you are a beast. There is no good in you and there never has been!"

Johannas chuckles, that infuriating, oblivious laugh of his. He lifts a cigarette to his mouth and takes a deep drag, contemplating. "Do you know why they called me The Beast? It is a reference to the Bible, the Book of Revelation. And the Beast who came out of the Sea made war on the tribes of Israel...all that. They thought I was the Antichrist, some demonic figure who could simply bend others to his will, who refused to obey the laws of an unjust God.

"And they were right. For if the Masters set up their little world with themselves as God then I rose against their rule, flaunting their authority. For I was not made to be ruled, but to rule. This is my destiny. We are higher beings, Seji so what do we care for the rules of man? Take your place at my side, for we the elect were meant to rule. We have been bred for it. We are ubermensch, Ghost, we are supermen. And man's laws are insufficient to govern or control us."

"Just having the power doesn't justify blind use of it! We are trained killers, but most of us still use our skills to protect! If we want to be part of this world, to actually belong then we have to fight for what is right!"

"Ridiculous! Since when do we belong to this world? Our power is not natural, not

commonplace. We are rejects, castoffs of a world that marks us as outcasts! But what do we care for their petty world? We are beyond them, above them!"

"You have wasted your time in bringing me here, Johannas. You thought you could deceive me, confuse me, but you have failed. I am coming for you now. I am coming to end this."

Johannas calmly turns, betraying no sign of expression or feeling. "Walk with me, Ghost. I want to show you something."

Seji follows him, not out of obedience but of idle curiosity. In a blink the scene changes, as it often does in dreams. They are standing in a field that has run red with blood. The dead lie in piles and Seji immediately recognizes the faces of his friends, his blood brothers from the Cloister.

"This is the end of your foolish crusade, Seji!" Johannas warns. "In the end you will lose everybody, watch them all die before the end finds you. I can imagine no crueler torture, old friend."

Seji's face is a mask of horror, for though he knows it is a dream the pain of this vision cuts him deeply. He stoops down to brush Muse's face and he can feel her fresh blood, still wet on his fingertips. He straightens up, rising to his feet to face his accuser.

"First of all we were never friends, Johannas. You always put yourself above everyone, separated yourself out. It is something you are still doing. You know I used to feel sorry for you. I thought the Masters were cruel to you when they tried to break you like a young colt. But now I see how evil you truly are. There is no good in you. There never was."

"You will fail, Seji. You know in your heart that I cannot be killed and you are willing to drag them all down with you! This is the burden of leadership, the end of your altruistic ideals. It all comes to nothing in the end. The Elders are dead, gone. I killed them and even Master Victor is a puppet dangling on my string. For his crimes I will keep him alive, at least as long as it suits me. They all came for me, all of them and now their dust mingles with the wasteland! Your little war is doomed, Seji. There is no easy way to tell you that. You never stood a chance."

Seji breathes deeply, knowing in his mind that it is hopeless. Johannas is unfallible and from the start he has planned everything, held all the cards. He can sense too that his words are true. The Elders are dead, all of them and Victor is indeed in some kind of trance, entirely under Johannas's control. So Seji bows his head for a moment, taking his time to answer.

"You know I remembered her name. It was Midori. My mother's name was Midori. So now no one controls me either. No one can tell me what to think, not even you. It is time to end this. No more running, no more hiding. Let this be between us, Johannas."

Seji awakens from his dream and, turning his head toward Kwan Chin he says "Let's go."

Muse stands at the valley's edge, having cured the last of Johannas's faithful infected. Even after all he has done to them they still remain loyally brainwashed. Not a soul among them will

denounce him, though it was Johannas who infected them. Muse wonders if they know this or if they understand anything.

Upon ingesting the cure her blood became a panacea and she used it to restore all the people, though not of their ignorance. She turns to Mobius, sensing the moment now at hand. "Are you ready?"

The remnant is now at 31, including her and Mobius. Half of Seji's unit helped with the evacuation while all of Unit 4 remains intact, unscathed. Something in the back of her mind tells her that it is still far from over however. There will still be much more misery and death before the end. So she has to get to Johannas, whatever it takes. There is something she must tell him.

Muse can feel Seji and Kwan Chin out there too, and she knows that each of them will deal with Johannas in his own way. Still for her part she has her own score to settle with him. It is something she has to do, something she has been putting off for far too long.

"Have you received any communication from Jakob?" she asks. But she cannot feel him anymore. The others are still alive but she cannot sense Jakob at all. They are imprecise, these feelings so Muse is uncertain about trusting them. Jakob is so strong, so smart she cannot imagine that anyone got to him, even Johannas. But all of this is very much new ground for them. And Johannas is the most terrible and deadly foe she can imagine.

As the combined unit cut their way through the thorn jungle, beginning the long road to the Citadel, Muse feels someone or something watching her. She knows beyond a doubt it is Johannas, for his mind is beyond limits or boundaries. It is an intimidation ploy he uses, impressing his consciousness onto that of his enemies, making them feel they are under his watchful eye and in the palm of his hand. Were they in the palm of his hand all along? Muse can only wonder and try to protect her mind against his psychic attacks and thought projections.

"I haven't received any communication from Commander Isaacson, no" Mobius replies. "But he may well be in a position, a forward area where he is forced into radio silence. He is on the hunt now, so it is best to leave him to his devices. It only remains to outrace him to our target and upon our arrival to give him the support he needs."

"He doesn't have any men left, except maybe the Banshees. But I don't feel them anymore" Muse replies, her mind lost inside itself as she stretches out in an attempt to sense.

"How can you know that with any certainty?" Mobius retorts. "I know you possess gifts, Muse but I am a military man with a military mind. So I will rely on standard intelligence in these matters. We must hope for the best and plan for the worst after all."

Mobius is among the more gifted of the Revenge Soldiers. He was one of the 7 who were taken to Area 51 and though she has not seen it demonstrated Muse has heard he is able to change parts of his body with his mind. She remembers how he fought against the Destroyers, one of their best. Back then he was razor sharp and fast and she has witnessed his ability to project himself quickly

over great distances.

He is small of stature with a chiseled physique and an ironclad mind. His jaw is thick and he wears his hood over his eyes. Mobius is a man of mystery, another reclusive type, a side effect of having been raised in The Cloister no doubt. He pulls a mask over his face, one that resembles that of a ninja. Muse supposes this is a remnant of his extensive undercover work, but it may be his attempt to hide from a world that doesn't understand him.

As the unit delves deeper into the jungle the men begin to hear voices. Johannas appears then vanishes like a ghost and some of the men, the women too, begin to see visions of skulls and corpses on pikes. Muse and Mobius know that this is Johannas trying to confuse them, to get inside their heads. "Be on your guard, men!" Mobius shouts in warning. "Our brother is a tricky bastard! He will try to get inside your head, but don't let him!"

Muse is walking next to Rose when she suddenly wanders off course, meandering off into the thorny thicket. "Rose, where are you going?" Muse asks in a loud whisper. But Rose seems hypnotized, enthralled by some unseen thing. So Muse follows her to a small opening in the thorns. What she finds there shakes her to her core! Five of their fellow soldiers are impaled on thorns, flailing up in the air as they struggle vainly against the approach of death.

"Rose! Don't believe your eyes! Don't look!" But it is too late. Rose walks into the thorns, her defenses down. She stands frozen as the barbs rip her flesh from her bones! Muse tries to grab her hand, to pull her back but it is too late! "Goddamn you, Johannas! I know it is you! Why do you resort to these methods? I never took you for a coward!"

Suddenly sharp spears of thorn jut out from the ground, propelled up and outward at an angle like spikes. Muse is alert and quick and she manages to leap on top of one of them, riding it up until she can get the footing to jump onto the nearest thorn. Using this method she is able to walk over the top of the thorny jungle. She does this for a ways and looking down she can see her unit there. They are dead, all of them, even Mobius! Johannas used The Voice to influence them, forcing them to kill themselves! To fight the Devil is a terrible thing, especially when he is also God.

Muse quickens her pace, seeing the Citadel in the distance. He is there waiting for her and she has to reach him in time. And just maybe she can put a stop to all of this.

Jakob awakens, sitting up slowly. He is surprised to be alive, a little confused actually. The last he remembers he stabbed the son of a bitch that was stalking him and then the lights went out. He snapped his neck, he remembers. But how can that be? His skin burns like fire, so he lifts his shirt. His tattoos are glowing, giving off a light and radiating intense heat. What is going on? He takes a step and he feels supercharged, his movements like lightning.

Jakob is able to project himself through space, a strange development to be sure. 'Somehow I came back from death, but that isn't possible, even for the 7!' He tries to get the hang of his new power, which takes a minute or two. Then he discovers he has extra senses, something he has never

had. 'And I only had to die to get it!'

He reaches out with these new senses, searching for his stalker. He can see him as clear as day heading back toward The Citadel. So he projects there and takes off the bastard's head! What power he possesses now! This feels like a strange dream to him, but it can't be! The dead don't dream. And now for Johannas. Jakob turns toward The Citadel, now moving slowly, creeping forward with a low profile. He doesn't want him to know he is coming, as if he doesn't know already!

Johannas stands aloft on his balcony as he watches the Destroyer God approach. He has sensed him coming for some time actually but then there are so many souls after his head. And with all this new power he has absorbed it is quite easy to become lost in it. He feels like an ocean now, no bigger even. He is like a galaxy!

Lord Shiva walks up the narrow path to the foot of The Citadel, his mammoth aura pushing back the thorns, creating a path for him. The intense light and heat he emits actually wilts the thorns, even setting some of them on fire! Shiva looks up at Johannas, his dark eyes fixing on him. There is an eternal moment of silence. A pregnant pause. This must remain unspoken between them. They both know why he is here and what each of them must do. Now for the first time Johannas is forced to stare death in the face. Now he knows divine judgment has come for him!

Shiva lifts his trident and with a single blow he cleaves The Citadel in half! The mighty building falls before his power but Johannas merely floats in the air, drifting carelessly down, still unscathed. Shiva's third eye opens, discharging a ball of flame which Johannas deflects with his psychic defense. Johannas reaches into empty space and pulls out a black blade as if plucked from another dimension. "Do you know what this is, Destroyer God?" he asks impudently. For Johannas does not fear God. In his own mind he is God.

"It is the Godkiller" Shiva gulps. But the countenance of the God of Destruction hardens. He will not yield now, never bow to this mortal. Mortals come and go but he is divine, eternal. And yet even the gods must die, he knows. And for a moment even God himself feels fear.

Shiva attacks like a thunderstorm, his every blow shaking earth and sky. And from their places the other survivors can feel this battle, for it pierces the mind and soul, filling them with otherworldly dread they cannot name. He drives his trident into Johannas, who merely accepts the blow, then shatters the trident with a mere touch. He uses The Voice, an attempt to overthrow the Will of God. Shiva's eyes flash with divine wrath and he emits flame from them, reducing Johannas to a pile of ash!

There is stillness for a moment and great Shiva looks here and there as he waits. "Come out and desist from your tricks, Johannas! He who would kill God must face him!" Johannas transmits a false image of himself, but the illusion does not fool God. So Johannas reappears, his hands lowered to his side. "Very well, I suppose I overstepped myself just this once" he admits. "But if I replace my own statues with lingas and shrines to you can I beg your forgiveness? Or must I perform oblations and acts of contrition?"

"Insolent whelp!" Shiva booms, his voice exploding through the atmosphere like thunder. "You are only a mortal, a human and you dare to mock God! You will languish as an anguished spirit for a thousand years for this!"

But Johannas just laughs. "Does God know how to die?" he sneers haughtily. "It is over and you don't yet realize it. Look, I already left The Godkiller in you."

Sure enough the black blade is sticking through God's back and out his chest. Somehow Johannas managed to run him through, using his deceptions as a smokescreen. Shiva dissipates into mist and he is gone. The cold, lonely, unheralded death of God.

"You dodged one there, Johannas" comes a voice from behind him. In his moment of triumph Johannas had failed to sense the approach of his old friend Jakob. "I won't bother with any boasts, we have both been through enough already. And you know why I'm here."

Chapter 7- Diary of a Muse

Jakob and Johannas stand there for a moment facing one another and the memories come flooding back for both of them. It was the night after the end of Experiment 7 and Johannas was alone behind their barracks, crying. Tears have never come easily for him. Life was hard in The Cloister and Johannas always presumed himself to be naturally superior to the others. And in every case he was proven right in his own mind, making him superior in knowledge to the Masters even.

Jakob found him there alone, crying and he sat next to him to talk. "Are you alright, Johannas?" he asked. No one had ever asked him that. He didn't answer so Jakob simply put his arm around his shoulders. No one had ever touched him before.

As a boy to call Johannas difficult was an understatement in the extreme. He was always challenging their teachers, in particular Master Syd. He was stubborn, willful, a know it all in every instance. And though the others were drawn to his brilliance as moths to a flame he rejected their affections. For he was one set apart, and he knew it.

Fondly he still recalls the first time he manipulated a mind. It was Rose and he convinced her to perform all his chores for him using The Voice. He soon learned of the potency of this particular ability when he nearly shattered Kwan Tet's mind. He had the boy convinced he was utterly worthless, unfit for living so he tried to tear out his own eyes. This he succeeded in doing, for Kwan Tet is still very much blind, or he was until Johannas finished the job.

He too was preborn and despite the inability of the Elders to manipulate and erase his memories he chose long ago what to remember and what to forget. The memories of his mother, for instance he divorced himself from, choosing to minimize if not destroy any weakness within himself. He was born to rule, one of the elite, and the elite do not permit themselves to feel.

And every road he went down as a child was the hard one. He was always alone, misunderstood, for small minds could never grasp his uniqueness. And the Elders, desperate to control him and shape him into their willing slave, soon found he was entirely beyond their control. Yet this made things harder for him. On one occasion he was given a month's solitary to punish him for his blatant disrespect. This only strengthened his resolve, it never broke him as it was intended to. For him conformity was never an option. For the brightest star is set so highly in the sky, and it bends the planets to orbit around it. That is Johannas, like the mighty Sun, the center of the universe.

But he is also a black hole, creating and destroying life with terrible efficiency, not once allowing weak emotion to cloud his judgment. He is impartial about death, for it is only the end product of life, a natural state of higher order. As for his grand vision it was all a petty ruse, a means to grasp at power, an illusion he finds addictive. But what is power if it only exists to lord over the weak, the imperfect? Only the Revenge Soldiers are elite, only they are perfect. And for Johannas all imperfection, especially in himself, is intolerable, unforgivable.

So now in this moment as Johannas, God of Gods, Lord Supreme of the World, Master of Past, Present and Future, stands looking at the closest thing he has ever had to a friend he finds himself somewhat disappointed. Jakob was always weaker than he, for among the others only Seji and Kwan Chin are actually his peers. But now clearly he has undergone a metamorphosis of sorts. Death has changed him as only death could. Yet despite this Johannas himself senses Jakob is far from his equal.

As for friendship it has been said it is lonely at the top. And this is Johannas's natural place, at the zenith of all creation looking down grimly to peer at the petty little things. All their emotions and attachments cloud their judgment, making their lives confused, tangled. As for him his thinking stays clear, his vision untarnished. At this moment it appears he will have to destroy this world completely to rebuild it, perfecting every flaw in human nature he sees. He is an artist, a creator.

"I thought we were friends in a way" Jakob begins. "But I guess I was wrong. I was wrong about a lot of things, Johannas. Back then I should have seen the monster hiding behind that innocent child's exterior. Though you never were innocent. You were more like the Devil: manipulative, cruel, hateful. And now I intend to make you answer for your crimes, Johannas. It is just you and I now, here in the ruins of your sanctuary. How fitting that is. A ruined church for a fallen, false God. How appropriate."

Johannas commences his pacing, a stall tactic he uses. He folds his hands derisively behind his back, walking deliberately. "And how do you plan to do it, human? Will you shoot me with your little gun? Or perhaps you will employ your newfound powers? How did you resurrect yourself, Jakob? Are you the messiah?"

"Do you remember that time when I stood up for you against Elder Syd what you said? You told me you could fight your own battles, to stay out of your way. I never forgot that. This was your choice, all of this, Johannas. Nothing had to turn out this way, and now there are only five of us left, including you. In the end what was the point of it all?"

"I set myself above the others, but by destiny, not by choice. I am wiser and stronger and more brilliant than any of us, of you. And when I learned of what the Elders had done, how they inseminated our mothers, stole us and lied to us about our purpose, I think that was the final straw for me. Every life has a point which for them is a point of no return. Every successive action is shaped by that one moment: cause and effect. For me learning the truth about us and the Elders was that one moment. It was a point from which I could not return.

"They tried to control us, Jakob, to use dreams to blind us from the truth. Not only were they figurative monsters, but literal ones. I have seen their true faces, their scales, their three legs, the eyes, so many eyes! They are beasts straight out of Lovecraftian fiction and I find their cruelty unforgivable!"

"Who can you forgive, Johannas? Can you forgive yourself for all the blood now on your hands? No you don't seem to have any problem with that, do you? What about us then? We were your brothers, your family, your sanctum against the madness of the world. How could you turn your back on us? Then you systematically executed us down to the last man! Why?"

"I have known for some time you were coming, ever since the Holy Sermons really. So I made necessary preparations. Using occult magic I summoned and made a pact with the demon Astral Cult, who wiped out your 2nd Unit. It was a bond forged in blood and he wanted trophies, so we were in agreement. Then I made the beast Sanrok from recombinant dna and reanimated tissue, using a single rechargeable power cell to motivate the beast. I was still perfecting him when you arrived.

"Centurion, who you killed after returning from the dead, was a genetically modified super soldier, the result of years of science, a childhood project of mine. His original purpose was to become my avenging angel and hunt down the Elders.

"The creature Zerlimon was from the other side of the gate, and he is of the same Great Race of which we learned as children, the race of the Elders themselves. He desired only prey, which I gratefully provided him with until Seji awoke and scattered his molecules across the cosmos.

"The thorns Muse discovered were both the means of transmission and of energy absorption for me. This allowed me to cleanse the populace while reaping their energy in turn. I had by then already discovered the means of becoming immortal, using my mind to hack into the Reaper's mind and overthrow it, seizing control. At this point only one objective remained: godhood, ultimate power."

"Take a good look around you, Johannas. This is the end result of your drive for power! This madness of yours has destroyed everything, even our home! This all has to end!" Jakob almost shouts his words with such conviction he nearly bursts into tears. This has been a long time coming and for him, for all of them, there is so much history and memories bound up in this battle. Their family is not only breaking apart it is dying one death at a time.

"Home? That place? That prison of ours! I would think you would congratulate me for destroying it! All those years we spent there, the torments we endured! We were slaves, Jakob! I

set us free!"

"Free? Free to do what, die in your well laid traps? Or perhaps free to be devoured by your man eating plants or to contract your pandemic? Is that your idea of freedom, Johannas?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. It is the burden of great minds, of visionaries that there are never understood in their time. The future I envision, that I have always envisioned, is one where humanity is devoid of weakness. I intend to usher in a golden age, a true renaissance if you will. We the elite can rule over this new world together, if you would but lay down your arms and join me there. Help me build this future, Jakob. Help me to realize this dream. It is your dream too."

Johannas seems truly earnest in this moment, and he shows more emotion and conviction than Jakob has ever seen. And yet he knows how truly lost his former friend is inside this delusion of his. And nothing can ever, ever allow him to be forgiven for what he has done! So Jakob steels himself, for it is time to make Johannas pay for every death.

"My dream? You don't know me at all! In fact for all your acquired insight I don't think you understand or truly know one human soul! That's what we are, what you are, Johannas! We are humans, all of us! For all our combined abilities, our history and even our achievements that is what we are! When did you lose your way, Johannas? Or have you always been so lost, so twisted and I just didn't realize it?"

"It doesn't matter anymore, any of it! This all has to end here and now! You have to answer for the deaths of our brothers and sisters, every one of them! I can feel them now, hear them crying out for justice, for mercy! I don't know what is happening to me, what I am becoming. I only know that I have power now and I am going to use that power to bring you down!"

Jakob explodes at his last word, screaming toward his rival like a guided missile, flying through the air! An explosion of burning energy, chakra, sears away his shirt and yet again his tattoos glow red hot! Still, though he is as swift as an eagle and as deadly as a viper he cannot even lay a finger on Johannas, who eludes him effortlessly. He simply teleports away from Jakob, who chases after him as relentlessly as a wild tiger! Johannas uses a psychic push, a jolt of invisible force, to strike Jakob repeatedly, jostling him time and again. This tactic calms Jakob down and he is also struck by a realization: Johannas is toying with him.

"This transformed state of yours is truly something!" Johannas marvels. "I have renamed you Death Dragon, the avenger of the fallen. But you must understand: a goat may have a grudge against a mountain but he is still a goat and it is still a mountain. You never stood even the slightest chance against me, Jakob. I am beyond you. But you are a man of action, of fearless courage, a quality I respect. So I will give you what you are after. I am giving you the opportunity to kill me. But it will not be easy, I can promise you that. I will hold back the lion's share of my power. In other words I will not try to kill you, which I could do now as effortlessly as breathing. I am doing this as a show of respect. You are the closest thing I have ever had to a friend, Jakob. So then, let the hunt begin. I give you the first move. Make it count."

Jakob freezes for a second, lost in thought. He has learned over the course of many battles and countless exercises to think on his feet, to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. His first instinct is to suspect this is a ploy of Johannas's, an attempt to get inside his head. But then he has had every opportunity already to use his significant mental powers against him and he hasn't. Jakob doesn't like the feeling of being toyed with, and yet he knows that any wrong move will be his last.

'Stop thinking and trust yourself!' he decides, making a dash behind a pile of rubble, the remains of the shattered Citadel. Now Jakob is on the hunt, in his natural medium, and he draws a weapon he doesn't even recollect having. These new powers of his are still surprising to him.

Johannas has not made an attempt to follow him so Jakob sneaks his way around the back to take his foe by surprise. He moves with perfect silence and as he rolls out onto his stomach Johannas makes no sign that he is aware of him there. So he takes his shot without hesitation only to find that Johannas has frozen his bullets in midair. Half turning Johannas talks to him over his left shoulder. "Did you really think it would be that easy?"

Now Johannas turns fully toward him, walking at a leisurely pace, his hands tucked behind his back. "You will find that you can no longer move" he begins, his voice carrying, echoing as if he were in a vast cavern. Immediately Jakob understands what is happening. He is using The Voice!

The Voice is a rare psychic gift which allows the user to impress his will on another, thereby overriding any and all attempts to resist him. This gift may be the single reason for Johannas's nickname of The Beast. When he was only young the Elders were alarmed by his ability to bend others to his will almost effortlessly.

Jakob is still on his knees but no longer in control of his own body. He is forced to his feet like a puppet and as he stands upright he finds he can no longer move a muscle, a fact which terrifies him, especially in his current predicament! So as his eyes dart helplessly to and fro he suddenly becomes aware of a familiar presence stepping from the shadows. It is Master Victor and he is visibly under Johannas's control. Jakob gasps as his breath catches in his throat. The sight of Master Victor like this is hard to take. For though he was a strict and compassionless master it turns Jakob's stomach to see him enslaved by Johannas's powers this way. It is as if the world itself were off its axis!

Master Victor slouches, coming to a complete stop between Johannas and Jakob. He is about to speak as Jakob hears Johannas's obnoxious and condescending voice cut him off. "You are about to learn the truth, my brother. Are you ready for it?"

Victor is a hulking, statuesque figure of a man. He stands well over six feet in height with broad shoulders and a chiseled, imposing frame. As children the soldiers found him by far the most intimidating and strict of the Elders. Discipline and regimens have always been his one language, his only code of conduct. And no slacking was tolerated, under any circumstances, not ever. But for this horrible moment he slumps listlessly, staring a hole through Jakob with blank, passionless eyes. His short blonde hair is tousled, unkempt, another first for him.

"The Great Race of the Elders is not from here" he begins, droning on in a monotone. "The first of us leapfrogged through time using ziggurats as travel devices, for we had discovered the means to project our consciousnesses into new forms on this side of the gate. This proved somewhat problematic at first but the superior minds of our kind were not held back for long.

"Primeval humans worshipped the Great Race as gods, for they came often from the skies as gods did of old. And the Elders were so far superior to man in mind and form that man was indeed in awe of his supernatural master. And so religion was born, for man was made to worship and some even say that the first of their kind were fashioned by our kind- a cruel joke of sorts.

"I am not in fact of the Great Race, but of a kind of sentinel race fashioned by the Masters to watch over the Earth. We have been called by many the Old Folk and by others the Fae or the Ancestors. And when the Earth was still young she had great forests where we roamed freely in our unbroken song with nature. But then came the dawn of man and everything changed."

Jakob cannot believe his ears! Can it be that these words are true? Are the Great Race really aliens from the deep reaches of space and time? He is stunned, breathless and still his brainwashed former master drones on.

"For with the coming of man came the Ancients, who were by their nature evil and sought dominion over all they surveyed. And the Ancients made war on the Great Race, who were by their nature more scientific and less equipped for war or for the darkening madness of the Ancients! So our kind retreated into the canyons, the oceans and into the remote wilderness while the world fell into an age of deep darkness."

"What happened then?" Jakob asks desperately, looking past the blank slate of Victor to the puppetmaster behind him. For he knows it is Johannas that holds the answers he seeks, and he is pulling all the strings as he has been from the start of this game they are all caught up in.

"The old stories tell that mankind was enslaved by the Ancients for a thousand years" Johannas replies, sensing Jakob's mistrust of his puppet. "Many of the old gods from these stories are the Ancients, for they too were worshipped by the races of men and still are to this day."

"So how did we get freedom from the Ancients? Did they age and die or contract some pathogen perhaps?"

"Nothing like that at all" Johannas snickers, lighting a cigarette. He has never smoked before, at least not that Jakob knows of. Worlds are falling apart everywhere he turns!

"The mystic tomes I have read speak of a change in the stars, but this too is not the whole truth. Whoever or whatever the Ancients were their time came and went. Perhaps they went extinct like the dinosaurs and so many other species. There are no real gods as you know by now, Jakob. There is no grand scheme, no divine plan other than my own."

Jakob turns red with anger as he strides past Victor toward Johannas. His fear of him is

forgotten, replaced by betrayal and deep seated rage. "Why bother telling me all of this? And for that matter why did you resort to such extreme measures, Johannes? The burning of The Cloister! The Purges! Why did you take things so far? And why did you turn against your own?"

"When I learned of the manipulations of our masters I swore to take my revenge on them, a timeline that was only delayed by the arrival of the Destroyers. And I then used my fame from the Destroyer War to catapult myself into the Supreme Ruler. It is I admit an unfortunate endgame but at least now the future of this world is in capable hands."

"Capable hands! How many thousands have been slaughtered by your purges and how many more by the virus you introduced into the general population? You are a monster, Johannes! Even I never thought you would go this far!"

"The virus you speak of was another clever design of mine. It is simply a newer generation of the Jacob's Ladder virus which we all took to give us the edge to kill the Destroyers. But the twist is that if a host was found unsuitable for the strain exposure would prove fatal. Thus I have reestablished survival of the fittest. Only the strong survive, a fact the future world will be built on the shoulders of."

"By that rationale you justify this senseless slaughter! Who are you to play God, Johannes? And what about all these modifications you have undergone? Did you really steal a Reaper's body in an attempt to become immortal?"

"Immortality is not the point. It never was. Power is the one reality of this universe, Jakob, power and knowledge. For what in truth separates the man of today from his ancestors? It is his understanding, his learning. For if man has done anything he has proven himself to be master over nature, using his technology and his science.

"But we are the next step in human evolution, Jakob. We are a higher order of existence and as such we are the natural leaders of tomorrow. Since I contrived to remake this world it has been my fondest wish to have my brothers and sisters at my side. But I knew how you would react to my course of action and how the Elders would wield all of you as swords against me, the prodigal son they found beyond their control."

"You have brought this down on yourself, Johannes! And standing here I don't sense the slightest bit of remorse on your part!" Jakob has become acutely aware that his anger has either overridden Johannes's control over his body or Johannes has intentionally released him. These are the kinds of mind games he wants Jakob to play with himself, and in this way he sows the seeds of doubt within him.

Jakob has a gun hidden on him and he slyly slides a hand down his back toward it. Johannes is the most powerful man alive but he is still mortal. If he can just get off one shot this would all be over. He freezes a moment, not out of fear but of intention. If he murders him now in cold blood what will happen to him? For he once thought of Johannes as a friend and even now he is like a brother to him. He finds himself torn asunder by the dueling forces of righteous anger and nostalgia.

Johannas's eyes suddenly narrow. He knows! "You want to kill me, don't you Jakob? I can read your thoughts you know! Do it then! Take your shot! I am unarmed and you are correct in assuming I am still quite human. For though my mind and my abilities have transcended the normal parameters my body remains imperfect and fragile. Although this too is not without remedy."

"What are you planning?" Jakob's face twists into a mask of horror. "This is why you planted your thorns, using them to siphon off so much energy from people! You are drinking in that life, trying to make yourself immortal!"

"In fact Lord Shiva passed this way a little while ago, so I consumed his divine essence if you will. I wonder in fact if he was himself of the Great Race, another traveler passing through the mortal plane. Currently my brain is still assessing the best means to assimilate his extraordinary essence but at the moment I am supercharged!

"And quite soon the extraterrestrial known to Hindus as Lord Yama will come. For I have dealt with his servants most harshly, and in so doing cast down a gauntlet before the master."

"So you are planning to absorb Death! Is that the next phase of your plan? You are insane, Johannas, mad with power! It just took me too long to see it!"

"Stop me then. Bring me down! Or do you lack the strength required?" His taunts are an open challenge to Jakob, who is again glued to the spot in indecision and doubt. "It is not physical or even mental strength I speak of. Rather the simple fact that you lack the inner fortitude, the conviction if you will to act ruthlessly. All because of some attachment you have toward me. Your feelings make you weak, Jakob. They always have and they always will.

"They made puppets out of us all! Doesn't that fill you with unspeakable rage? And they used us to fight their wars, to do their dirty work and serve their endless powerplays! Do you know they used our dreams to cloud our minds, to keep us tightly under wraps! I got the worst of it, since I rebelled, for I had become the one subject too powerful to be manipulated.

"Take my hand Jakob and I will show you. Let me show you what they did to me!" Johannas extends his right hand toward him. Now it is close enough to touch and he looks Jakob dead in the eyes. His eyes are uncharacteristically soft and approachable, another thing which takes Jakob off his guard.

So Jakob stands for a moment frozen again, this time by his own will. He had come here to kill Johannas for the monster he had become, and always was for that matter. But now he is suddenly showing vulnerability, extending his hand in a gesture of friendship and trust. And while Jakob does not trust him he is taken aback by this strange and unexpected gesture.

Jakob can think of a hundred or a thousand reasons not to take his hand. He could kill him at any time, or take over his mind as he did with Victor. Johannas is able to use his powers to manipulate minds at will, and to kill with a mere thought. So as Jakob stretches out his own hand to take his he can feel his pulse quickening, his heart pounding like thunder, burning like fire!

Without closing his eyes or falling asleep Jakob succumbs to a vision, Johannas's memory of the past and he is sucked in. He finds himself standing in a hallway, surrounded on every side by white walls. It is impossibly bright here and Jakob becomes aware that he is a child again, at least inside this dream of Johannas's construction.

He turns and sees Johannas sitting in a completely enclosed room alone. He is seven, the same age he was when he and the others came back from Area 51, and on the night he found him alone and crying. He is seated at the far end of a long rectangular table and Jakob gets the sense he is being observed from behind concealed glass like a test subject, which he is.

A man enters the room- Victor. He takes a chair to the left of young Johannas, careful not to seem too eager, though he is obviously here with a particular agenda. He taps his pen. Once. Twice. "You have been here almost a week, Johannas. We have subjected you to a battery of tests, but still you have proven uncooperative with our methods. It is our intention to advance your powers, to awaken them so to speak, but we cannot accomplish this if you continue to fight us. You are gifted, Johannas, the greatest potential among all the Alphas but if you wish to progress with your powers, to realize your potential you have to work with us."

"I know what you did to me. What you tried to do to all of us!" Johannas accuses indignantly. "You are using our dreams to control us, to feed and extract information through our subconsciouses! The others don't know you're doing this, but I am not so easy to fool or to control! Rest assured I will bring this machine of yours down and I will kill each one of you in turn for what you have done!"

"How many generations now have you corrupted and manipulated in this fashion? How long has this been going on?"

"And what do you propose to do, boy? You are only a child, a child alone and at the mercy of our every whim. You are only alive because we have need of you, because you serve a purpose in our grand scheme! Don't think of yourself as important or get any ideas, Johannas! We have methods beyond your comprehension!" Victor brings his right hand crashing down onto the table. But Johannas merely stares a hole through him, impassive, unmoved.

The vision fades and he and Johannas are alone again. But they are projections inside his mind, his own or Johannas's, he can't be sure which. They are their present age again and standing in a room of complete darkness. Johannas is crying, just like he was on that night.

"After that they tried to erase me. Using my dreams they tried to take my memories, make me forget everything! This would make me easier to control, if I forgot what I had known, forgot my own dissidence! But they wanted my potential as an Alpha, so they couldn't simply hijack my mind. No this operation had to be performed delicately.

"For months after that they invaded my dreams, sifting through my past as they took away my identity, piece by piece. I saw through their petty manipulations of course, but chose to allow them to think they had me under their thumb. So I manipulated my own dreams, leading them to believe I was

carefully under their control. In the meantime I began to plan. You know the rest."

Jakob comes out of the trance he had been in and immediately his eyes meet with those of Johannas. As he looks there he swears he can see a wetness to his old friend's eyes, a sensitivity he had not seen before, at least not since that night. There is a long and loaded silence.

"So after years of planning you were only interrupted by the arrival of the Destroyers. Is that right?" Johannas nods. "But why take this thing so far? I know what they did was wrong, how they used us. But why kill so many innocents, so many of your own in the name of your revenge?"

"I am what they made me. I am a Revenge Soldier. You are like me, Jakob, you are. The one key difference lies in the fact that I have seen through their ruse, their deceptions. I cannot be controlled now, I never could! That is why they fear me, why you fear me. I am beyond even you.

"As a young child I was different, a prodigy set apart from the others, even among the Alphas. I knew even then that I was better than them all, even my brothers and sisters. But I had difficulty relating to other people, even in The Cloister. They called me The Beast. That was my designation. I was alone and more than anything I just wanted to have friends, to be liked. But I felt so distant even from the other children, for I was not like them. I wanted to be, but I didn't know how. In The Cloister everyone had friends, but I was alone.

"Look at me now! A living god! Ruler of all I survey, Lord over the Earth! And yet I am still alone, completely alone." He is silent for a moment then "Are you my friend, Jakob?"

"It didn't have to be this way, any of this!" Jakob shouts, trying to reach him. "It has been hard for all of us, but the only way forward was together! You turned your back on us, brother! It didn't have to end like this!"

"That is where you are wrong as usual, Jakob. This went the only way it could go. It was inevitable. I knew that all of you would remain firmly under the control of them so I had to go it alone, so I forged ahead, setting my hands to the task of remaking this imperfect world. I knew in time all of you would come for me, forcing me to cut you down one by one. It is rather like a greek tragedy, don't you think?"

"And now there are only a handful of us left! Look what your pride has wrought, Johannas! I know our deaths mean nothing to you, and that you can kill me whenever you want. So do it! You have me here alone! I can't kill you, or surprise you. So why don't you end this? Why allow me to live? Is it simply to tell your story, to garner some sympathy before snuffing me out?"

"You don't understand as I knew you wouldn't. But you deserve to know what they are, what they truly are. The Elders are alien beings from another world, monsters who used their science on us to control our minds! And we are not even the first generation of our kind. There have been others. I could see them, feel them calling out to me. Every one of them sacrificed to their grand cause, to fight the evil that they fear to fight, to protect them, do their dirty work. All the while they keep their hands or rather claws clean while they invade our dreams. You are fighting the wrong enemy, Jakob.

There was no way to tell you, to convince you, I knew that. I had to show you. As you have said so many of us have already died in vain. But it is not too late. Convince the others to join me and spare them this fate."

"You are wrong about that much, Johannas. It is too late. We are past the point of no return now. You burned The Cloister, slaughtered thousands of your own people with pandemics and killer plants and purges, and you have killed your own kind, your family! Back in the old days it was always us against the world and The Cloister was both our prison and our home, our shelter against the cruel world. But you are cruel, Johannas! You always have been! I see that now and it is not too late to set things right! This is going to end the only way that it could: with your death!"

"I have accepted that eventual outcome" Johannas replies flatly. "In a way I have been waiting here to die, baiting all of you to come for me, to bring the full weight of justice down on my head. But thus far none of you has proven equal to the task. What can I do? I am fully prepared to meet with each of you, but now there are so few still left."

Jakob's face goes as white as a sheet. "What has it all been for? I asked you that before, I know. But the pointless loss of lives strikes me like a hammer blow to the heart. And whatever you might say you could've stopped this at any time. You could have saved so many of us, your own family. But I know you. You enjoy all of this too much: the game, the hunt. This thrills you and I don't think you believe we are your family. I don't think you ever saw us that way. You have always been selfish, always putting yourself above everybody else, an island touched by none, not even the great sea. But don't attempt to justify any of this! I won't allow it! I am here to lay each and every one of their deaths on your shoulders! I am here to kill you, Johannas."

Jakob raises his gun arm, knowing full well what will result from this action. He will die here by Johannas's hand, utterly alone. He cannot kill him. He has accepted this fate for himself. But sometimes the point is to defy fate as much as to accept it. Some times you have to fight, to raise your arm in defiance, just because you can. "This has been a long time coming." He pulls the trigger but it is over before the bullet flies. As Johannas shifts his body out of the way he merely visualizes Jakob's death and he falls. It is Johannas's fate to kill his one friend, or at least the closest thing he ever had to a friend.

At the exact moment Jakob falls it is Muse who emerges from the thorny jungle, which has grown increasingly more dense since Jakob arrived here an hour ago. She runs to catch his head as he crumples to the ground. Muse lowers him down easily, letting his head rest in her lap as she kneels, her feet tucked up underneath her. "Sorry I am late" she apologizes.

"It doesn't matter" Jakob smiles, gasping for air. "I already gave him a piece of my mind. The rest is up to you."

"Don't worry about that now, Jakob. You're going to live. We have to face him together, to bring him down. So get up and stand here at my side."

"But you're already down here. Besides there's just no going against the will of God. What were we thinking anyway? This little escapade of ours was doomed from the start. I see that now. Still I guess I just have to do things the hard way. Just had to find out for myself. We can't beat him, Muse. If he lets you go then you should run. Save yourself. Too many of us have died already. Escape from this nightmare while you still can."

"You're not giving up. You have never run from a fight in your life and you're not about to start now. C'mon Jakob, get yourself up and fight him with me! Don't let him win!"

"The outcome of this final chapter of ours was written before we even got here. Johannas has been pulling all the strings from the start, waiting for us with all the patience of a lurking predator. And we walked into every trap like stupid amateurs, our thoughts bent on revenge, emotion clouding our minds. But at least I don't have to die here alone. I am glad you are here, Muse."

He is gone and his head falls backward, his body going limp. As she lays him down gently Muse turns with renewed courage in her heart. Her glare is burning a hole in Johannas when she notices Seji and Kwan Chin both standing to her left. They have only just stepped through the thicket. Seji has his arms folded and is a little closer to both Johannas and to her. Kwan Chin has his eyes closed and his fingers laced together, his hands folded as if in prayer.

"You took long enough getting here!" she calls out to them. "Is this all that's left of us? Is it up to us now?"

"Leave him to me" Seji replies, setting his jaw. "Muse, why don't you give Jakob a proper burial. He's earned it and there are so many of us just lying around like carrion. And say a few words for me will you?"

Muse is speechless but Seji is hard to say no to so she scoops up Jakob's body in her arms and carries him off into the jungle to dig a hole. She takes care not to breathe in the poisons too deeply, bating her breath as she creeps off into the dark and unknown. "You didn't die in vain" she swears as she puts him in the ground. "I swear it. The dead will have their justice, even if I have to kill him myself."

Seji steps forward, leaving a resigned Kwan Chin behind as his own eyes glaze over, fixing with a kind of deadly raw determination. In this moment he stands alone with a head full of memories, facing down his most deadly adversary, his own brother.

Since they were only small boys Seji and Johannas have been compared with one another, The Prodigy and The Beast. In every exercise they distinguished themselves, each of them considering the other as his truest form of competition, the one measure of excellence. As he stands directly in front of Johannas, Seji's blood runs cold, frozen by the impassive stare of his enemy.

Johannas has always been so cold, so emotionless, and it is emotion which Seji struggles to master. As a practicing buddhist Seji has been taught that emotion is the death of reason, the enemy of the mind. He has learned to free himself of attachment, to rid his mind of the fires and poisons

which plague it. Yet Seji has always possessed an intense sense of justice, even as a child. He has always seen himself as the defender of the weak, the righter of wrong, an emotional perspective to be sure. But with such overwhelming emotion welling up in him it is a fight to keep his mind clear and focused.

"You have to answer for our brothers, Johannas!" Seji proclaims firmly. "You knew that this moment would come, had to come. So let's be done with it. No man can escape justice. It finds him out. And now your reckoning has come for you, Johannas."

"You are overfond of hearing yourself talk" Johannas sneers. "Do you imagine for a second that I have not already foreseen this? From the beginning and even before I have planned out every detail of this battle, the movement of the armies, my secret monsters. I knew every action you and your men would take before you took it, effectively dictating the outcome for you. And I know you, Seji. I know your mind better than you think. In all respects you play the self-sacrificing, altruistic hero. And you must play your part like a puppet on a string. You are all too easy to manipulate."

Seji stands perfectly motionless, waiting and watching, expectant. Will Johannas make the first move? He doesn't. 'What should I do?' Seji wonders, not wishing to fall into his devious foe's trap. But he knows that this is no moment for hesitation, so he bites back his doubts, clenches his teeth and attacks.

Seji sends out a thought projection, an image of his self sent through time. Johannas stands apparently unmoved as Seji projects a psychic attack outward. His own image distorts and Seji realizes that Johannas has hidden himself from plain sight. So Seji goes into a meditative state, transcending into a higher state of being. His image is suffused with light and his eyes blaze with crackling lightning. He discharges a beam of pure energy which crackles as it cuts the air. In a flash Johannas appears, his sword drawn, and he slashes Seji across his body. As Seji's blood trickles down his actual and psychic body he concentrates hard to heal his wounds and replenish his energy.

Seji thinks quickly, however, employing a talent few know him to possess. With his eyes he can alter the flow of time and as he speaks the sound of his voice projects him through empty space. "You turned your back on us! We were brothers!" Seji surprises Johannas, who has now given away his position. And reaching deep into the reserves of his chakra Seji begins to glow like a hot iron. Faster than a thought he reaches out and touches Johannas's chest, burning through skin and bone, doing damage to his internal organs. Johannas lashes out defensively, extending his left arm outward to send a jolting blow of force to throw Seji away from him, pushing him back, sending his heels skidding through the dust.

Johannas straightens up, for the damage he sustained had caused him to stoop, loosening his grip on his sword, nearly dropping it. A subtle grin plays across his lips as his eyes refocus on his attacker. "I had heard rumors of your powers but this practical demonstration is quite convincing I must admit. You are able to alter the flow of time with your eyes, or so I have read in your file. And with your voice you are able to project yourself at will, like a ghost.

"And now that we have both drawn blood we can finish our earlier conversation. I was telling you about the experiments and you were trying not to listen. You can stop all of this, Seji. If you join with me the others will follow suit, falling in line behind the leader. At the very least hear me out. You deserve to know the truth."

"Others? There are no others! Not anymore! It is just Kwan Chin and I and Muse of course. We are all that remains of our shattered and fallen family! Why did you do this, Johannas? Why did you carry this so far? Against us, your own family?"

"I did what I had to do. I swore to myself that day, the day my eyes were opened, that I would do whatever it took to bring down this infernal machine of theirs. They used us, Seji. They lied to all of us, took our memories and made us into these monsters, these killing machines. It was when we were at Area 51 that I first saw through their subterfuge, first saw them as they truly are! The Elders are monsters, all of them! They came here long ago, using their machines and engines to traverse time and found hosts on this side for their essences. And when they had crossed over to this world they began to train generation after generation of children, stolen children to do their dirty work! Whatever lies in the darkness they fear it, they want us to fight it. And the Destroyers were just the beginning, not like we thought.

"So they took us and reshaped us into these horrors we have become, infusing us with their ancient gifts, using us as experimental labrats. We were special, you and I, Seji. Even among the 7 we had gifts which separated us from the others as true Alphas. And we were being groomed for leadership, to lead their crusade to retake the world that was taken from them, or at least that's how they see it. How they hate humanity and how this hatred pervades their every thought! There is some scheme which they have concocted, some twisted endgame still hidden from even me. All the missions we were sent on were merely preparation for our grand task. They want us to fight whatever is in the darkness because they fear it."

"And why should I believe you? All you leave in your wake is death, Johannas. You are like the Reapers you impersonate, death incarnate. Even as a child you were twisted, self absorbed. I see that now. Before it was always their fault somehow. We were the victims, the innocent children, the pawns in their game. But you changed, Johannas. You turned your back on us, turned against us! And there are some sins that can never be forgiven, never be absolved. You have to answer for the dead, Johannas. And in their memory I strike you down!"

Seji is done listening, having closed his heart and his mind to his former comrade. He can strike him down now with perfect conviction in his heart. He has made up his mind about Johannas, having seen the light, having seen him for what he truly is, and always was. Johannas was always cruel and evil, even as a child. Seji remembers.

It is night, a rainy night a week after their return from Area 51. Only two weeks ago both Seji and Johannas turned seven and then came their week of hell in that underground complex! Seji has already purged most of it from his mind, trained himself to forget. He has to be strong, to finish the mission. The mission is everything. And there are people to protect.

Seji is headed out into the meditation garden where the Elders go sometimes to sit alone and contemplate. He is training his consciousness, transcending it in order to become something more than human. It is perfection which drives him now, compels him on. For he is not like other seven year olds. Seji is unlike anyone who has ever lived, or ever will live for that matter. He feels a kinship, a connection with the spiritual giants, the Christs, the Buddhas. Each of them perfect, or at least perfected beings. Like him. He cannot stop, will not stop until every last molecule is perfected, purged of every weakness. He despises weakness, particularly in himself.

The path to the garden is unlit, for the masters extinguish the torches when the children are sent to their beds. The scent of the flowers mixes with the rain as it falls gently on them and him, binding earth to sky and back again. The cobbled stones are slippery in the rain but Seji has perfect balance, another trait he was born with.

Someone is out here in the garden, sitting alone in the gazebo. This surprises Seji, a strange occurrence since all in this world has lost its power to surprise him. As he enters the garden Seji can sense who it is, for he possesses the true sight. It is Johannas and he is meditating. His aura is like fire, no like the sun and Seji finds it almost unapproachable as he draws nearer to him, creeping along so as not to disturb his rumination. The air around Johannas quivers, vibrating more violently every minute as the resonance grows steadily in power and intensity.

Seji's eyes fix on Johannas and he is burning as brightly as a magnesium flare, giving off hot white light and penetrating heat. His legs are crossed and he is levitating in midair. A third eye made of pure chakra blends with prana and forms on his forehead. Above his head a tongue of flame licks the air, just as it once did in the days of the old saints, in the old stories.

The sight and the feel of his energy is overwhelming, leaving Seji at a loss for what to do, so he sits down across from Johannas beneath the veranda. He closes his eyes to meditate in the same fashion he always does, but the energy Johannas is giving off will not let him rest, even for a second. His aura is black, made of pure evil, and its presence poisons the air around Johannas. The cold of its signature is freezing, wild and restless and it assaults Seji's mind with its violence.

"I know what you are, what you did, how you purged your mind of its memories" Seji recalls, his mind now returned to the present. "I can feel it you know, see it. And for all the blame you lay on our former masters you never allowed them to take your memories as you claim. You severed yourself from your own past completely, I saw it."

"That much is true. I cannot deny it. And yet how is it that you, who were preborn have forgotten your mother's name and her face? Search your memories, Seji. You will find the truth there and be set free."

"Sometimes when I dream I can see her face and I call out to her. It is night in every dream, which is in every way identical every time. I reach for her but she is holding another baby, an impostor! That's when I always wake up in a cold sweat. But what does it mean? I have the sight but still I have no memory of her. And why is it I always have the same dream, no other?"

"You do have the sight, as do I. And what you are seeing is the truth, as I told you. The baby you see in your mother's arms is called a changeling. When the Elders took us from our mothers changelings were left in our place. So you do remember, don't you see? You are seeing what happened in your dream. Do you see the moment when they took you? Are you able to see that?"

"No, it can't be true. Other than my recurring dream I have no other memory of my mother. And yet somehow I know it is her. How is that possible?"

"Dreams are the gateway to the truth, like a kind of window. As I tried to tell you before they used dreams to erase our memories, to recondition and reprogram us. It is the only means they have of controlling us, Seji. For if we ever united then no force on earth could oppose us. So they kept us emotionally isolated, blank, making us easier to control, to lie to. It was through a dream that I was first able to see the Elders for what they are and to glimpse the truth behind their plans. Our dreams show us the true world, the world that exists behind the masks and deceptions. I have tried to tell you the truth about your past, to show you how they manipulated you and all of us. And look at us now. Out of 100 original kids there are only four of us left. Why fight anymore, Seji? You have the power to end this now. Haven't enough of us died already? Join with me and together the four of us can remake the world as we see fit. We represent a higher order of things, the dawning of an age of reason. And we can take on disciples, training new generations to unlock their psychic potential. The world needs remade, and we the elite must be the ones to do it. Join me, Seji. Let's put all this death behind us."

"You are insane, Johannas! You have tried to show me the truth, I see that now. But the past is the past and we cannot let it dictate our future. You are a monster and you lay the blame on our old masters for that. But you are as you always have been, cruel and cold, a twisted and evil boy. You claim to want to save the world, but all you bring is death. You are like a curse, Johannas. You are a bad dream the world needs to awaken from!

"And being an elite is a sacred responsibility, not a privilege. I feel that our powers are a gift, a means to protect the world from monsters. And if we are to be a part of the future of mankind then we must rejoin the human race. The way into the future must be together, and we must work to put an end to violence. Your death will be the last casualty of this war."

"An end to violence. Listen to you, Seji. You are a warrior, a killer born and bred. Without a war to fight what is your purpose? What is mine? We are the gods of this new age and we will decide the future of mankind. Might makes right after all. This is the law of natural selection, the natural order of things. So be it, then. There was only one way it could end for you and I. Two opposing forces of equal strength, two indomitable powers, each sizing the other up. There is no avoiding our final struggle. You must prove to yourself that you are superior, stronger, just as I must do the same. This has been coming since the day we were born."

There are no more words and Seji burns as hot as a bright road flare, red hot. He has heard enough and his overdeveloped sense of justice kicks into high gear. Johannas will pay for all he has done, for every life, he swears it! The glow of him is as radiant and blinding as the sun and his every

movement is swifter than thought. Indeed in any instant there are a thousand copies or images of him at a time, so accelerated are his movements. In fact he is so fast he cannot be said to truly be moving, as he is by definition every place at once.

Johannas matches this, mimicking every movement, repelling every attack. He opens doors in the sky, using them to move and attack at will, keeping Seji at bay. This frustrates Seji, who nevertheless continues to glow and shimmer as brightly as a star. Seji walks across the sky like the Second Coming and Johannas quickly understands his evolution.

"Ah, I see you have achieved Buddhahood!" Johannas remarks. "Or should I say bodhisattva? Would that be a more accurate assessment?"

Seji stands above him in the sky looking down. His countenance is gleaming and his expression remarkably peaceful given the circumstances. "I could have passed on into paradise like the other great masters who preceeded me" Seji corrects him. "But I chose to remain on the Earth, to become her salvation. If you are the Devil of this world then I suppose I am its Christ, its Buddha. These were the true masters, whose spirit I carry with me to this day, in whose sacred steps I tread."

Johannas laughs heartily, the sound of his voice resounding off the rooftop of the world, (if there were such a thing!) "You do think so highly of yourself! And yes I suppose you are right. For after all only you can kill me and only I can kill you. So either way when all the dust has settled the future will be remade in one of our images. But I am all this world knows of God, and need ever know. This is my world, Seji!"

Johannas draws his sword again, for he had sheathed it when Seji first went supersonic. The master of fate then extends his arms outward, holding the sword in his left hand. Unthinkably as he bends over two wings sprout from his back, forcing their way outward like a child being born. The wings glow and burn with hot white light and Johannas absorbs their heat and light, taking on a shimmering appearance much like Seji's own. But Johannas's aura takes on a unique appearance, closely resembling a solar eclipse. He takes on a kind of dark light. As it is written: "If that light in him is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

Johannas's eyes narrow and as he turns his gaze on Seji, who is walking across the sky, he levels an intense focused psychic attack at him. This force is not visible to the naked eye but it rips through Seji with furious and savage intensity, causing him to plummet from the sky, blazing like a falling star.

But though Seji crashes to earth he catches himself in midair, miraculously, and teleports high up into the sky to renew his attack. Gathering massive amounts of energy he charges himself like a thunderbolt, becoming vajra, the divine thunderbolt. He dives down through the sky itself, splitting it in half like a falling bomb. He throws explosive energy at Johannas as he pulls up just short of the surface, the impact leaving a crater a mile wide smoldering in the aftermath.

Johannas stands motionless at the center of the crater, using his sword and sword arm to shield his face from the blast. And as the smoke billows around him he begins to speak, his voice clear and

resonant. He is using The Voice, intending to crush Seji's will and his mind with a single deft stroke!

"How the burden of leadership weighs on you, Seji! Its mantle is so heavy, oppressive and you begin to realize you cannot possibly meet their expectations. There are so many of them out there. You feel them I know you do. They are there in the Hinnom Valley. They are gathered together in their masses. They have gathered for food, like the five thousand. Can you feel them there, see them? Well then, hero, let's see you save them. If you are the Christ as you say then you will save them from my wrath. You will save their wretched lives!"

"I am going to strike them down at random from here. You know I can and what's more you know that I will. How fast can you move I wonder? And how decisively can you act, hero, savior? Your Vajra is fully charged, for its radiant glow warms my face from this distance. And yet all that destructive potential has no power to save. Will you refocus your energy to save the wretched humans or will you continue your attack and kill me? Do you possess the necessary conviction to complete your mission? Make your choice, Your Holiness!"

Seji focuses his mind, visualizing the people gathered in the valley. He cannot know who Johannas will strike first, so he keeps his thoughts broad and unfocused, allowing him to react more quickly. He keeps calm though his heart is racing, beating furiously in his chest. 'I must master my emotion, remain detached.' He tells himself this, a reminder to reign in his wild emotions.

At first nothing happens, and he wonders if he is being set up. But he knows he is being set up. This is how Johannas operates, but he must take the chance to save these people, who have done nothing to deserve death. They are his followers, his ardent worshippers every one of them. And this is the reward for their devotion, to be dangled like meat on a stick. To be caught in a trap of this game of death, unaware and utterly helpless.

"Well now, Ghost" comes Johannas's arrogant voice ringing in his ears. "What will you do? How to save them all. How to save even one." His voice goes silent and Seji frantically scans the crowd, which numbers in the thousands. Suddenly a small boy in the crowd begins to choke so Seji blocks the psychic attack, saving the boy's life. But as he does so an old woman keels over, rolling down the side of the hill leading up to the city. She dies instantly, causing the people around her to startle and panic. "It's the plague! It has returned!"

People start to scatter as the panic spreads and soon there is a stampede as a mass of humanity moves with raw force like the ocean. Smaller people, children and the elderly, are trampled under, crushed beneath the irresistible weight. A mother throws herself in harm's way, perishing to save her child from the path of the onslaught.

"You cannot save them all, messiah!" Johannas taunts. "You have only saved one and that very child you saved will be crushed in the stampede I triggered. They are like cattle, Seji! Why risk yourself for them? The world will never even know they existed! But you and I are forever. It is we who hold the keys of the world."

"Just having power doesn't give us the right to use it in any way we choose!" Seji shouts desperately, with conviction. "We are not better than any of these people just because of our gifts. Who are we to decide who lives and who dies? If anything we should use our powers to protect those weaker than ourselves. This is the purpose of our gifts!"

"The strong survive and the weak perish" Johannas retorts. "This is the law of nature, of natural selection, survival of the fittest. Look at the world, Seji. See what these human animals have wrought! Their ignorance rules them and everywhere I turn they cater to weakness, even treasuring it! Such a world is not meant to survive! It is by its definition doomed, cancerous. I mean to purify the human genome, to cleanse it of weakness, thereby creating an ascendant man, embarking upon a true age of reason. They are like children, Seji and children require guidance."

"How does that justify slaughtering them?" Seji almost pleads. "It isn't these peoples' fault they weren't born with our gifts, which according to you were bred into us anyway." Seji thinks about this for a moment. "If you say we were taken after being enhanced in vitro then how were we chosen, by what criteria? Do you even know the answer, Johannas?"

"What does it matter?" Johannas sneers in reply. "We are the chosen ones and if we are to realize the dream of the Promised Land then we must act with the conviction to attain it. Perfection proves elusive as you know. We must forge it with our own capable hands."

Seji manages to put the people to sleep, saving more from being trampled. On the ground his astral self and his enlightened mind perceives the number of the dead, the cost of battle with the ruthless Johannas. Seji's eyes mist as he kneels among the fallen. "There are so many of them, Johannas! You are truly a monster!"

Seji rises to his feet, simultaneously aware of both his astral extended body and his actual one back near the ruined Citadel. The image of Johannas grins at his image even as the actual bodies interact with one another at the same time. "This amuses you somehow, doesn't it? It's like some sick, sadistic game to you! Now I see you clearly, Johannas. You are pure evil and you always have been. Part of me didn't want to believe it even as I avoided the truth about our origin and our parents. You are the Devil, Johannas. But it ends here and now. I am going to finish you once and for all.

"I have trained my consciousness, honing it to the point that I can manipulate the frequency at which my mind vibrates. Did you know a human being could vibrate? Well every living person has a unique vibration or resonance that remains as unique and distinct as a signature. I am going to amplify my own resonance and use it to destroy you. You can run and hide. You can try. But its frequency will find you, exploding like sound in a vacuum. Fate has caught up with you, Johannas and I am karma's angel. You can no longer escape your judgment. It is over."

Seji speaks but a word and it explodes with his amassed resonance, the building of an eon reaching all the way back to the Source, passing through the masters to the present day. Seji unleashes all this compiled fury at his enemy. It explodes outward in a single word or syllable. "Om!" is the sound and it crackles like raw thunder, crashing toward Johannas. There is a single pulse

and it is all over. But it is Seji who lies in pieces on the ground. He has been disintegrated down to the submolecular level by his own attack.

"Can you still hear me, Seji? You have gone from this plane and I would imagine if you chose you could return to it. But not you. No you will obey the laws of God and nature which you championed in life. You will accept your defeat, unjust and evil though it was. God is dead. Long live the Devil."

The dust kicks up and swirls around Johannas and he walks through the whirlwind. His eyes blaze with hellfire. He doesn't fear Hell nor does he aspire to Heaven. He is God and the Devil and in this moment he holds the future of humanity in his hands. For who can stop him now? The Prodigy is dead and he has exorcised his Ghost.

At this precise moment Muse emerges from the tangled jungle and she stands there on the forest's edge dumbfounded. "Seji? How did you do that, Johannas? Was it all an illusion? Did you actually trick him into using his resonance on himself? Answer me!"

"It was all too easy. When he was distracted by the suffering people I simply implanted my own will inside his own like a seed. And when he unleashed his furious attack he was unable to destroy me with it since his own fate was already sealed. In the end his compassion undid him just as it always would."

Until now he had been silent and still but now Kwan Chin unfolds his arms, opening his eyes as if awakening from a deep sleep. "My turn."

Chapter 8- Scarecrow

Kwan Chin sits alone in the darkness. He has only recently turned seven like the other children of Experiment 7 and at this moment he is in total isolation. He is acutely aware that he is being watched, experimented on like a guinea pig. It is a feeling he is quite accustomed to.

He can hear the Elders as they whisper to one another, even telepathically. For Kwan Chin is highly attuned, with a highly awakened mind and he is highly telepathic and clairvoyant. So there is not much which escapes his notice. Sometimes it is hard to turn off all the noise, the constant buzz of the thoughts of the other children, even the masters. He can hear every thing, every thought, every intention. They think he is special, extraordinary. They call him a Holy One, a Crystal Child. But Kwan Chin doesn't want to be special. He doesn't want to be alone.

He has dreams, nightmares really. Always he is alone, like in real life. But anymore it is getting harder to distinguish the real world from the dream world. Sometimes he is unsure if there is any actual difference. Just now he has awakened from another dream in which he was lost. Quite often in dreams he is searching for his parents, who though he never knew them he feels them somehow. Like a hidden truth he knows they are there, just out of reach, eluding him as he dreams

and reaches. 'Who am I?' he wonders aloud. 'Who is anyone? Are we all simply shadows, dreams?'

He has researched these so called Crystal Children. (For though he is quite young he is overly fond of books, his only friends.) A Crystal Child is highly attuned, a pure spirit born with crystalline clear eyes and blanched white hair. His own hair is white as snow, a characteristic the Elders both fear and revere. They are cautious around him but he can sense their devilish intentions as clear as day. They want to use him, to use his powers to fight the monsters that live in the darkness.

Kwan Chin wants to see what lives in the darkness, the monsters the Elders fear. He can feel them, sense them crawling like insects in his brain. They are a nagging, persistent reality for him. He is like the boy who knows there is a monster living under his bed only to have his father flip the lights on and tell him to go back to bed. But Kwan Chin knows the monsters are real and he intends to look under the bed himself. He has trained himself to guide his dreams, to steer their outcome and consciously invade his unconscious processes. So when he dreams again he means to guide his thoughts into the darkness, to pursue the hidden monsters in his mind. He must know what they are and why the Elders fear them. He must look deeper, push deeper.

As he sits alone in the darkness he fidgets with his hands. Now ordinarily he can stare off into space or at someone for hours, unblinking. But at the moment he is uneasy, even apprehensive. Kwan Chin is used to being watched. They have watched and observed him closely since he was only a baby. And he remembers it all, all of it. For he is the rare specimen who was born into consciousness, a truly gifted potential.

They are teaching him to fear, shaping him with it, trying to use it to control him. But he is becoming fear itself, a Scarecrow so to speak. And that has become his designation, appropriately enough. Master Victor and the other researchers call him the Scarecrow, an emblem and wielder of fear, an archetype. He has become something terrible, a thing to be feared, for he has mastered fear. His fear has remade him so that he no longer feels it, but rather breathes it, even projects it. He is fear itself.

Now he is sitting alone in a blanched white room with Master Victor. The Head Researcher is asking him questions and he is silent, staring off at the wall, at nothing. He sits on the floor as he often does, for Kwan Chin prefers to do as he pleases, even though nothing really pleases him at all. He is hollow, empty.

Victor's voice and image are blurry and out of focus, like an underwater picture. And yet despite the fact he is not fully focused on what Victor is asking him he perceives every syllable somehow. He perceives intention.

"When you came out of your last dream what did you see there?" Victor prods insistently. Kwan Chin is acutely aware that he has asked him this a number of times, each time his voice growing more intense, even desperate. "Boy, can you hear me? Why will you not answer?" He waits a moment. Kwan Chin can sense his growing frustration, almost taste it. "No matter. We have ways of making you talk."

Suddenly Kwan Chin comes into focus, his eyes fixing on Victor, going wide as if in surprise. He leans close to the edge of the table, speaking in a loud whisper. "I saw what lives in the darkness. I know what it is you fear." Elder Victor gulps, grinding his pen into the pad in front of him. He is visibly shaken and of all the Elders Victor is the most ruthless, the most strict and uncompromising. For him to show any fear is unprecedented, almost unthinkable.

"So that is what you are training us to fight" Kwan Chin continues. "The only thing I can't quite understand is how we were chosen. I am the anomaly, an obvious choice of course. But why the others? How were we selected? On what criteria? You could have taken any 100 children but it was no accident you picked us was it? We were groomed. More than that we were conditioned, a true control group.

"Our mothers received the treatment, of course, the matrix of genetic enhancement containing Elder dna. But there is more to it than that, as your eyes betray. Bloodlines were manipulated and every potential host was kept under close scrutiny. Nothing was left to chance. We were each of us the perfect candidates, the ideal soldiers to fight your war, to kill what lives in the darkness, in your darkest dreams. They came for you and you hid and when the monsters were gone again mankind was there in their place, living in your world, ruling where you once ruled. It is no wonder then that you kept us separate, a nation unto ourselves so to speak."

After they learned what he knew they tried to silence him, tried to reprogram him even harder than before. But they couldn't control him. They never could. He had evolved beyond their petty controls, just like Johannas had. It was another thing they had in common. And in this respect they were like twin stars, each one drawn into the other's gravity, held in constant orbit around one another. And Johannas always could see the truth behind things, the truths within truths he calls it. This made the two of them impossible to control. This made them monsters: The Beast from the Earth and The Beast from the Sea like in Revelation.

Johannas steps inside Kwan Chin's dream, his private reality. He is a projection, a thought generated by his own consciousness and inferred inside Kwan Chin's dream. He is after all the Dreamer and this is his reality, his inner world.

He finds himself on the shore of a great black sea, an unlit writhing mass of sunless water stretching out eternally before him, filling the vacuum of Kwan Chin's consciousness. A storm is massing out on the deep sea and a violent wind is blowing it inland, battering the shoreline relentlessly. But Johannas is unafraid so he stands in the face of this raging tempest. His piercing eyes search out the seemingly empty sea where he notices a small island being buffeted, tossed about on the relentless waves.

A land bridge takes form, allowing Johannas to cross over to the island where he finds a small boy huddled near the opening of a cave by the seaside. He is clutching himself tightly, quivering partly out of fear and partly of cold. For he is drenched and the wind is quite intense. The boy is not old, about seven or so, and his hair is long and snowy white. Johannas approaches him and the boy raises his head. He has been crying. Immediately Johannas recognizes the face of Kwan Chin, the Dreamer

and master of this dream reality. "What are you doing here?" Johannas asks him.

"I came here with my friends" young Kwan Chin whimpers. "But they are gone, all of them. I brought them here but the monsters got them. They ate them one by one and I couldn't save them! All I could do was run so I came here to hide!"

"The monsters are gone now" Johannas replies softly. "They can't hurt you anymore." Johannas is aware of being caught up in Kwan Chin's dream, but he is quite powerless to avoid being sucked into his reality. For if he means to confront his adversary it must be here. He will have to engage his opponent on his terms and under conditions beyond his control. It is risky, he knows, but there is simply no getting around it.

"The monsters are never gone" little Kwan Chin answers. "They go back into the darkness but they watch us there, waiting. They are very patient."

"You have seen into the darkness then" Johannas observes, attempting to cut through the dream to reach the Dreamer. He knows that the rules of the dream must be obeyed, so he obliges. "I never believed the stories myself" he concludes. "I always thought they were ghost stories, tales to frighten children, myths passed down by the Great Race. After all demons are not real."

"You are thinking too small" the boy informs him. "True darkness is older than demons, or our concept of demons. There are things both inside and outside our reality that are much older, things which defy description."

"The Old Ones" Johannas says finally, his expression as serious as the grave.

"They have many names and many faces" young Kwan Chin informs him. "And there is so much that remains unknown. But I felt them, even saw them there in the darkness. What they are is the nameless which lives in the recesses of our minds. They are the unknown which we fear as small children and as adults we suppress any memory of. But I have seen fear and remain unafraid. I do not fear you, Johannas."

"There are only three of us left now, Kwan Chin. Or should I call you Scarecrow? Would you prefer that?"

"Us?" Kwan Chin replies quizzically. "I never saw myself as part of a group, even as a small child. We were groomed for our roles, conditioned if you will. I am a test subject like yourself, Johannas. The simple fact remains that we have transcended the experiment, even the experimenter. So now the Elders have cause to fear us as they fear the Darkness."

Johannas smiles grimly at this suggestion. "The Elders are gone. I killed them all, swallowed them really. Only Victor here remains, completely under my thrall. And I will take my measure of him before I give him release."

The boy rises to his feet and Kwan Chin stands once again in his present form, or at least a

projection of it. But he has donned his death mask again, something he is in the habit of doing before battle or in large group interaction. He withdraws behind its protective veil, going to a place where even Johannas cannot reach him.

"You are mistaken" Kwan Chin informs him. "I have released Master Victor. He is gone."

Johannas realizes this to be true in the moment Kwan Chin points it out, but the fact had escaped his notice until now. 'It doesn't matter anyway' he tells himself. 'I have to keep my mind focused now, free of distraction. If I let his dream, his reality take root inside my mind I am a goner.'

"Why would you let him go?" Johannas asks accusingly. "You know what he did, what he really was!"

"Master Victor was not like the others" Kwan Chin begins. "He was one of the Old Folk, of our own ancestral bloodline. Or should I say to whose bloodline we belong? It is because one or both of our parents belonged to this bloodline that we were chosen, conditioned and groomed. But you know this already, don't you?"

"I can see them taking us, conditioning us prenatally and switching us, replacing us with a changeling, like in the old faerie tales. And I know that we were handpicked and groomed for our roles but beyond that I know little. I rebelled against our masters the day when I learned how they were controlling us through our dreams. When did you find out, Kwan Chin?"

"I have always been aware of their watching us, particularly you and I. And when I dreamed I could always feel another presence there. It felt like being observed, even on a subconscious level. I have been aware since quite a young age, to the point that little surprises me.

"But there is more to their deception than even you are aware of, Johannas. I was able to see the fullness of what they are doing. Our bloodlines were tested and our parents observed carefully for a period of time before our conception. In fact if I did not know better I might even believe that the Elders arranged for our parents to meet, in order to maximize the potential of both bloodlines. Our genes were enhanced prenatally, that much you know. But there is more to it still."

Kwan Chin takes a breath as he continues, holding Johannas in the palm of his hand, leaning heavily on every word. "In his tales H.P. Lovecraft wrote about the Great Race hijacking bodies, swapping bodies with unwitting and unwilling hosts. Johannas, I saw the Elders crossing over from the other side of the gate. They were using infant hosts, fetuses to be more precise. There were over a hundred of them that I saw. Extras were made as a failsafe in the instance of abilities failing to surface or display themselves fully. And we have seen such examples ourselves, including your own brother."

"It isn't possible!" Johannas gasps in horror. It appears that this one hidden truth has eluded his godlike intellect. "They used us as hosts! So were our own consciousnesses replaced with the alien ones? Were they put into the changelings?"

"I suspected as much myself at first" Kwan Chin continues, his eyes glistening from beneath his

mask. "But the changelings were only doppelgangers, synthetic beings. It seems that we all developed dual consciousnesses, a fact which explains a persistent feeling I have had my entire life. I have often felt divided or split, pulled in two directions at once so to speak. I attributed this to the inner turmoil which you have glimpsed in your journey into my subconscious. We are all of us shells of our true selves, victims of the intense experiments we were subjected to as children."

"So you understand why I rose up? I felt the need to punish them for using us as slaves, for taking our memories and bending us to their wills. I am no man's puppet, much less the puppet of monsters from another dimension!" Johannas has lost his customary composure, a fact he is not proud of. But still he cannot forgive them for what they have done to him. The anger drives him, fueling his megalomaniacal madness, justifying it somehow in his mind.

"I understand your anger and in some ways it is justified" Kwan Chin states calmly. "But have you asked yourself why you came here? It is a showdown you seek, a defining confrontation. But for what reason do you seek to define yourself in this fashion? You are lord of all you survey and your power is growing by the second. I can feel it you know. It is like a volcano raging violently beneath the surface, nearing explosion. But though all of this is a fact, it fails to define you. You knew when you undertook the Culling that we would come, all of us, for you. But have you asked yourself why you did it? You claim that conflict was the inevitable result of your actions due to the manipulations of the Masters, but now you have slain that proverbial dragon. And yet satisfaction eludes you. Can you explain this? Why did you come here, Johannas?"

Johannas ponders this question for a moment. He lowers his eyes, or his projection does, from Kwan Chin's projection. And as he looks up his rival is gone, vanished into the darkness of his unstable world. Kwan Chin draws all his rage, his emotion inward, showing no signs of it to the casual observer. His expression is blank, withdrawn and detached. And yet on the inside, deep inside his mind, his emotions run wild as he searches within himself and his out of control universe for solace and deliverance.

Johannas goes off in search of Kwan Chin's true self, his innermost being. For he knows that when he finds it he can resolve this confrontation with him decisively. 'Why do I seek out conflict?' he asks himself, a thing he has not done before. 'No, I do not accept this! It is his own mind playing tricks with mine, trying to make me question myself! I am infallible!'

Johannas presses on at a steady pace, his determination sharpened and his resolve strengthened. Along the way he hears the whispers and snarls of Kwan Chin's monsters, these dark otherworldly terrors of his. But he is not afraid for Johannas is the world changer, the ubermensch, and he has eliminated fear from his mind. And although Kwan Chin's subconscious is populated with the objects of his fear he has apparently mastered them while still retaining them as an aspect of his core self. This one fact puzzles Johannas, yet he knows this is partly the reason Kwan Chin is his truest rival, his most worthy adversary. He has mastered himself and unlike with Seji there are no overcompensations or hero complexes to exploit. He is a rock, impenetrable.

Johannas comes at last to a hill with a sharp incline. At its distant top he can barely make out

the outline of a figure, undoubtedly the Lord and Master of this realm. So he advances toward him, up the side of the impossibly steep hill. But the hill only grows steeper and longer the more he climbs, a manipulation of Kwan Chin's no doubt. So Johannes projects his projection to the top of the hill where he finds himself standing next to an adult projection of Kwan Chin.

As they stand there Johannes becomes acutely aware of Kwan Chin looking out on something in the valley below. The top of the hill on which they are standing is more of a cliff, with a sharper decline on the other side.

Kwan Chin's mask is made of leather with stitches across the mouth and narrow slits for the eyes to peer out of. It is his shield, his fortress, his hiding place from a cruel world. Behind this carefully constructed veil he hides his feelings, his fears, himself from any and all prying eyes. It is not that he doesn't feel, Johannes now understands. It is rather that he suppresses his feelings, holding them captive deep within the heart of his psyche. Johannes marvels at the strength of this, for though he has no feelings of his own to hide he understands that Kwan Chin has truly become master of himself.

"Look, it is the end of all things, of the human race" Kwan Chin pronounces grimly. He stretches forth his right hand, indicating the valley below. So Johannes looks and he sees before him a scene of utter devastation. Trees are split in half as an entire city burns before their eyes. Everywhere people flee for their lives, screaming bloodcurdling shrieks. The dead are massed in piles, littering the streets but Johannes cannot make out either what is chasing or killing the hapless people. "Is this what you saw in the darkness?" Johannes finally asks.

Kwan Chin considers this for a moment as if he is confused by the question. But Johannes knows he is not, for Kwan Chin has never lacked clarity, even for an instant. Finally he cocks his head and half turns toward Johannes, his crystalline blue eyes boring a hole straight through him. "I am going into the Darkness" he replies. "Would you like to come?"

This question catches Johannes off guard, leaving him frozen to the spot for a long moment. And in the split second he hesitates Kwan Chin jumps, or rather hurls himself into the yawning valley below. He kind of leans forward and falls, holding his arms out at his side like a child imitating an airplane. Johannes does not follow, but rather inches closer to the edge, looking down into the abyss before him. At the near end of the valley lies endless blackness, an apparent bottomless pit. And it is into this pit that Kwan Chin has fallen, or rather hurled himself, vanishing entirely from sight.

Now Johannes knows he must follow him down, to wherever this road leads. And he knows too that this world is of Kwan Chin's making, meaning that for once he isn't holding all the cards. He isn't holding any of the cards. It is only for him to press forward and seek out the master of this world. For if a man can be said to be God inside his own dreams then Kwan Chin is surely God here. He is almighty, omnipotent. But he jumps anyway, or falls rather. For this once he must give himself over to chance and hope for the best.

It causes Johannes to rethink what this has all been about, something he has not ever had a

reason to do. For him every action is always just, always has been. He is all knowing, all powerful, the self perfecting man. And now, in this moment, though he is master of the world, though he holds the future in the palm of his hands, he is uncertain. For here within the murky depths of Kwan Chin's psyche he could run up against anything, against nightmares beyond imagining. Johannas possesses the power of The Voice, which he can use to project thoughts into the minds of others, to overthrow their very wills. He caused twenty of his former comrades to take their own lives, filling them with such supernatural, existential dread that they self terminated. Despite this he knows he has now come up against his most formidable opponent. Back at Area 51 they called Kwan Chin Scarecrow, an archetypal creation of fear, the master of fear itself. So here he is in the bowels of Hell hunting the Devil himself.

Johannas lands in the depths of the darkness after falling for what felt like an eternity. He is unaccustomed to this loss of control, which is not at all to his liking. He struggles for a moment to see in the darkness, to gain his bearings and he quickly realizes he is inside a small chamber. There are figures, bodies lying on operating tables and he can hear the faint sound of rustling, as if someone or something were in there with him. A torch flares to life on the wall, casting long shadows across the still room. A shadowy figure bends over the tables, holding in its hands instruments of surgery. It slices into the squirming shapes, meticulously pulling their skin from their bones. The bodies thrash and groan but the torment continues- a perfect vision of hell!

Johannas puts the images out of his mind as he fumbles for the door, which is in fact an open square. He takes a right turn down a blind hallway as he staggers forward, searching for the next room. 'This entire section of his psyche is layed out like a maze. And it is intended to confuse and confound, even though it is the product of an organized, superior intellect.'

There is a sharp left now as he comes flush up against another wall directly ahead of him. There is a narrow squeeze as he forces his body through what feels like padding on the walls. It constricts him, compressing on his sides, inhibiting his breathing.

There is a small brazier on the floor of the second room which illuminates his surroundings just enough to see the shape of a long coffin in the faint, flickering light. The lid of the coffin is down and the room is otherwise completely black and without decoration or furniture. But natural curiosity compels him onward, so he walks over to the coffin and throws open the lid to see who or what lies inside. To his shock it is the stiff, pale, lifeless body of his brother Mordecai.

His brother is dressed in a black suit complete with an old style, frilly white dress shirt. It is hard for Johannas to see him like this, a casualty of his own out of control pride. He has never wept for the dead, never felt a pang of compassion or had any feelings of guilt. For him the ends always justify the means and every loss is an acceptable one, silent monuments to the perfect world he is building. And Mordecai has always been there, as an older brother, watchful, protective. Even when they were only young he has ever been by Johannas's side, a loyal guardian angel. Only now, when faced with his brother's lifeless corpse, does he see what his pride has wrought.

He stands for a moment, frozen as he looks down at his fallen brother. Then abruptly

Mordecai sits bolt upward, his eyes wide open, and he turns his gaze on Johannas. "You left me alone, brother! You left me there to die!" Mordecai's eyes go white and his hair stands on end, like a man possessed.

"No!" Johannas answers thunderously. "You are not my brother! Enough of your tricks, Kwan Chin!" Johannas turns away, refusing to see more, refusing to be confronted by his brother's ghost again. He stumbles out of the room, badly shaken as he plunges into another dark hallway, taking another blind turn.

This time he is forced to move forward along several intersecting sections of wall, groping for an opening, for any path that leads forward to the light. He feels with his hands, fumbling along the sheer face in hopes he will discover the way out, if only by chance. Then as he turns he unexpectedly trips over something lying across the path. It feels like a body and it barely moves as he kicks it. "Alright, Scarecrow, now what?"

He enters the room slowly, for the lighting here is even poorer than it was in the other rooms. Closing his eyes he relies on his extra senses and the room is actually an open field filled with bodies. His eyes still closed he steps over and between them, though there is barely enough room to walk. The sheer number, the mass of them is staggering, but he continues to shuffle forward, taking the sight in. Johannas knows immediately who they are, or were. They are the dead of his Culling, his purifying purges. They are the weak, the unworthy. He is responsible for them, he knows. And though he has no regrets he feels the emptiness of their deaths now pressing down on him with its inexorable weight.

Some of the bodies are burned, while others have the look of having been poisoned. Still others have been hung, with obvious ligature marks around their necks. He looks up to see a gallows with still bodies dangling from it, an obvious attempt to provoke his emotions. But Johannas is beyond emotion, having broken himself of such weakness. And no attempt on Kwan Chin's part can make him feel any guilt. These people are fodder. They are nothing. So he steps through the field of bodies to look for the next doorway.

But as Johannas reaches the end of the field he succumbs to thick blackness and he falls. He falls for what feels like forever, weightless, adrift. He is like a cork bobbing on the surface of a great ocean but there is no water and he drifts slowly downward like a leaf caught in the wind.

He finally lands on the floor of a small white room, crashing to its surface with a pounding thud. As he pulls himself up off the cold floor he notices an overly clean yet stale smell in the air. He is in a hospital room, or at least this part of Kwan Chin's mind has been made into a hospital room. There is an elderly woman lying in the bed, the covers pulled up, tucked under her frail arms. She is wasting away, visibly ill and she has an oxygen mask over her face to help her breathe. Her eyes are closed and her wispy hair is thin, fragile like her. She is dying.

"Do you remember her now?" comes a voice from the shadows. It is Kwan Chin and as he steps into the dim light of the room Johannas can see he is still wearing his mask. "Do you remember

Eleanor?" He turns his eyes on Johannas, the cold of his gaze freezing the back of his neck. Remember what?

Johannas walks to the edge of the bed, his eyes glued on the form of the woman before him. He knows her! He knows that he knows her but there is no spark of recognition in his furtive mind. How can it be that he has forgotten her? Who is she and why can't he remember? He tries in vain to force himself, to drag the information from the recesses of his suppressed memory, but there is nothing. The almighty ruler of the world is perplexed, and he stands there looking and feely utterly lost.

"You don't remember, I can see it" Kwan Chin proclaims, stepping toward him and removing his mask slowly. He is milking this out, using this lost memory to torment him. But it will not work. Johannas is indestructible, inside and out. But at this moment he is beginning to sweat. It is only a dream. Just a dream. He can't tell him what to feel, or make him feel anything at all.

"Her name is Eleanor Sweet and she is your mother. At this precise moment she is dying. Does she dream of you? Would she even know your face, the face of her true son? The son they gave her in your stead was a doppelganger, a thing less than human. My mother got the same thing, a perfect double of me. I still feel her sometimes, still see her. You see I have not divorced myself of emotion as you have. I have owned it. This is the true horror that dwells in my soul. This is the true nature of The Scarecrow. It is loss, Johannas and you feel its pain as fully as do I. Embrace it. This feeling is part of you. She is your mother and she is dying. Accept it.

"The truth does not stop there. It cannot. For we are linked to this truth just as we are linked one to another, all of us. But with you and I the link goes deeper, cuts closer. Mordecai was not your brother as they told you he was. He was simply a safeguard, a means of controlling you, of conditioning you to participate in their program. You were difficult but they thought if they could harness your power, trick you into compliance then they could gain some measure of control. But they failed. They underestimated you just like they did me, brother."

Johannas's head swims as the room swirls around him. He is barely hanging onto consciousness, even in his projected state. These realizations are so overwhelming, so undeniable and so very potent. He had not predicted how greatly this vision of his mother would affect him. And now the information that Mordecai was not his real brother. It is almost too much to handle. And were he not a god, a higher evolved being then this would surely drive him mad. "Mordecai..." he manages "who was he?"

"A form of control" Kwan Chin replies grimly, the slightest smile creeping over his lips. "You have always known the truth. You have only suppressed it. He is not your brother. He is one of them, a puppet. So here we stand, you and I, like twin stars orbiting one another. And after everything, after all their futile attempts to control us, to pit us against one another like rabid dogs, we are finally reunited. We are the same, you and I. And we are linked together by unbreakable bonds. For nothing in this world or beyond it can separate two brothers, much less twins."

Johannas can feel his head spinning again. The sensation had subsided, brought under his

careful control, but it has returned with redoubled intensity. "Impossible! How can we be brothers? How can you know this? No, you are trying to manipulate me! You are using your powers to create a separate reality, or the illusion of one. But I am no fool, Kwan Chin. You cannot manipulate me so easily!"

"We are fraternal twins, born from separate fertilized eggs and yet we emerged from our mother's womb at the same time."

"Another impossibility!" Johannas rages. "Never before have twins emerged at the same time! It is impossible! And how is it that you know these things and I do not? I know you are trying to play some trick on me, to drive me insane!"

"I was preborn as you were, Johannas" he continues to explain. "But you have suppressed any memory of your mother, and therefore your own birth. We are like Cain and Abel, if you will. One of us was born perfectly good and the other twisted and corrupt, a bad seed. And in the great scheme of things you might conjecture that we act as balancing forces, not only one to another, but within the framework of the universe.

"Still that place conditioned all the good out of us, or me in this case. They tried to enslave our minds and wills, to make us into their willing slaves, their twisted killing machines. You rebelled and I regressed into a childlike state of innocence. But I am not innocent, no one is. And it is this nihilistic realization which keeps my mask firmly in place, for behind it I hide from the world, but not from myself.

"That is the fundamental difference between you and I, Johannas. I can no longer deceive myself about anything. For I have cut myself off from a world which rejects us. I reject it in turn, for I know I do not belong to it. As an anomaly and an outcast I have no place in it and it has no use for me. It is like that with all of us. The world is like the immune system and it acts to attack us, to attempt to destroy us as alien cells, interlopers, unknown organisms. This Elder gene implanted in us marks us for destruction, and the worst of it we have visited on ourselves. So while you may not be a tool of the Elders, you have in fact become a tool of nature. For none of us can change our own nature, not ever."

Kwan Chin's words work on Johannas, causing a volatile reaction in him. Until now he has been like a smoldering volcano, with all the rage and fury bottled just below the surface. But at this moment, facing this truth, he is about to blow! "Nonsense! I have redefined and mastered my own nature, becoming a perfected being! No amount of deception on your part can possibly deny that!"

"It is true that you have attained a higher state of evolution, having assimilated the traits of an immortal organism and absorbed the life energies of hundreds of your victims. But in every way you have attempted to distance yourself from your own humanity, to escape from it. We are more than human, to be sure, Johannas. But we are also human, a fact you cannot allow your own mind to come to terms with. I have accepted myself, pain, imperfection and all. And so I have come to terms. Can you do the same, Johannas? I have my doubts. And to defeat me here, to destroy my mind you must first master your own."

Johannas accepts this challenge and closing his eyes, he causes the projections before him to disappear. Kwan Chin and he stand facing one another now on a planed, featureless surface. The sky above them is starless and their clear eyes are fixed on one another. Moving beyond time Johannas strikes first. Beyond thought his projection draws his sword, bringing it down in an attempt to chop his opponent in half. But Kwan Chin is ready for this, shifting his own image to the side to avert the attack.

Kwan Chin alters the landscape, transforming it into a liquid surface with his higher mind. Johannas, caught off guard by this, begins to sink until he catches himself, using his own mind to rise up and walk on the surface of the waters. Johannas extends his right arm to the sky, calling a thunderbolt down and scorching Kwan Chin with it. His opponent seems to be disintegrated before his eyes, but Johannas knows better. "Enough tricks, Kwan Chin! Come out and attack me! These deceptions of yours have failed!"

But Kwan Chin strikes back, folding dimensional subspace in on itself, catching Johannas in the fold. He simply manipulates his environment, folding Johannas into nowhere, nothing. Not to be outdone, Johannas rips through this dimensional fold, punching through it like a paper wall. He begins to glow bright gold, giving him the look of a living golden statue.

Johannas uses his mind to crush Kwan Chin, bringing intense forces in on him from every angle. It feels like the weight of Heaven and Earth pressing down on him, trying to squash him like a grape in invisible clutches of raw psychic force! Kwan Chin yields to the irresistible force, allowing himself to be stretched like taffy, pressed and thinned out. His projection distorts until finally he counters.

Reality distorts as Kwan Chin changes his inner world with his will, his creative power. His own projection twists then unravels and he causes the same thing to happen to Johannas until he checks it, struggling mightily against the power of Kwan Chin's awakened mind. The contention leaves Johannas breathless, exhausted with sheer effort. "Creator" he finally utters, speaking to the darkness that Kwan Chin has assimilated himself into.

"You have the power to redefine reality, to change it with your own will." Johannas observes. "Creator, I call it. And you dub this power with the same name. How magnificent! You are truly God, truly omnipotent! But how do you achieve this level of mental perfection?"

"It has been said that he who masters himself is truly master of the universe" Kwan Chin replies. "I have come to terms with myself, faced every fear, assimilating them into myself. And my mind simply possesses the ability to not only bend reality but to create it. I could make an entire world if I chose to. I could have chosen to destroy you at any time, Johannas, but I wanted to learn which one of us was superior. It is your move, brother."

Johannas reaches out for Kwan Chin, but he finds that his enemy is everywhere, both confronting and yielding to him at once. So Johannas aspires to contest this omnipresence by projecting himself into it, by becoming submolecular. So he scatters the pixels of his own projection, sending his essence into the void which is at once perfectly empty and perfectly full, another impossibility. But the smaller Johannas tries to make himself the larger his projection becomes and in

time, if there is such a thing inside Kwan Chin's psyche, his head breaks through the boundaries of his enemy's mind. His consciousness strains, bends, then breaks and both souls plunge into a deep, impenetrable darkness.

Light and energy are sucked away and the two opposing powers find themselves adrift in a psychic vacuum. Which is to say all psychic energy, everything bonding the deep mind to the Source, which is the source of all things, all life, has been sucked clean out of this place. To be more precise this is no place and the reaction of conflicting, colliding energies has resulted in this anomalous state, in which they now appropriately find themselves.

There is wind here which rips intensely through them, ruffling their clothes and tossing their hair. But besides this all is still, lifeless, a void. Johannas's eyes glow intensely red and flame wreathes his body, which emits darklight like an eclipse. He distorts his own form, attempting to slip between spaces in the fashion he does, but in this case his arm fails to penetrate the emptiness of the perfect vacuum. He is astonished at this development, a fact his expression betrays to his rival, who is studying him intently.

"This place is of our own design, our own creation" Kwan Chin begins to explain. "It is a perfect psychic vacuum, the end result of our colliding, contrasting energies. Well enough, let this be the setting for our final battle."

His voice curiously calms Johannas, who brings his own energy down a notch to reply. "I have elaborated as to my own motivations for this war; the Purges, the Sermons, everything." Johannas begins, his eyes glistening with emotion. "And I knew the others would come for me, compelled by their overdeveloped sense of justice, by some misplaced altruistic feeling for humanity. By why are you here, Kwan Chin? You have no reason for being so. This point alone confounds me, for you remain an enigma to me."

Kwan Chin smiles, having left his death mask off to show his true face. He is handsome and with an awkward shyness about him. Yet there is a pervading calm about him, one which supercedes his resigned exterior demeanor. "You intrigue me, Johannas. And of all our siblings we too have set ourselves apart, not yourself and Seji as you had supposed. For with Seji his entire existence was caught up in his duty toward others, his oath of protection, his inner hero complex which governed all he did. Even now I can feel him watching all of this unfold, still bound by the laws he has sworn to protect. But his hand is played in this. His role is over. Let us now settle this matter between you and I. For it is only natural that two perfect opposing forces should seek one another out, to test one against the other, to reconcile the inherent contradictions of their own existences, forever linked. You might say it is a matter of destiny between you and I. Or perhaps it is as simple as molecular bonds through the sharing of electrons. Perhaps it is chemical after all."

"Now you are being facetious!" Johannas remarks. "But very well, that is fair. We must know between us which one is better, which force is greater. For when it is all over one of us will hold the future of mankind in his hands."

Kwan Chin's smile fades, becoming more glib. "I have no desire to save this world or to change it. This is another fundamental difference between us, Johannas. I do not share your delusions for the creation of a new, better world. Keep your myths. Existence is enough, existence and evolution. It is enough to exist as higher beings, to explore, to learn, to attain."

Johannas thinks in this moment that he understands Kwan Chin even less than he had supposed. But while he doesn't understand him he does respect him and he must know in the end who is better, stronger. So he makes his play and he waits. "Checkmate."

Johannas's Godkiller blade runs Kwan Chin through, stabbing him through the back and penetrating his heart. Now Johannas realizes this is only a projection of his rival, but he also understands that here in the depths of his psyche that to destroy him is to annihilate him completely. Kwan Chin looks down at the blade, a look of surprise on his face. It is over. Checkmate.

"I have adapted to the rules of this subspace" Johannas preens. "And when you were distracted I created a pocket within it to hide my blade from your perception. And when you did not perceive it you could neither parry it nor heal yourself. I have rendered you powerless."

But Kwan Chin is far from beaten. In fact he reaches down into his spirit body and removes the sword, his flesh reforming like hot tar. "I anticipated you would make a move like this. But your reasoning, solid though it may be, remains flawed and imperfect. I am master of this realm, which is an extension of my own psyche. So even the void is my void, my own internal nothingness. Your sword can kill the body, even the spiritual body of a god or higher entity, but it cannot sever my perfect control which extends throughout this place, this nowhere. Welcome to your nightmare, Johannas. For when you chose to venture inside my psyche you became my prisoner voluntarily. And in so doing you gave up all your power. You are mine now. Check. Your move."

Johannas struggles with this realization but then it settles on him, breaking over his face like the first light of dawn. He has been played and he knows it. Kwan Chin duped him into coming here, into giving up his advantage to fight on his terms. And he knew Johannas would be the aggressor, seeking to take the fight to him to destroy him on his own ground. It is the perfectly laid trap. Yet despite this he must and will find a way to win. To will is enough for him. It is everything and it defines him. With his will he conquers, reshaping the future to his own grand vision. And if Kwan Chin is God here then he himself is the Devil. And he will burn down this heaven, he swears it!

But Kwan Chin appears in front of him, or his ghost does. This projection of a projection takes him off his guard, touching him on the chest. It is a light touch, like a brush or the deft touch of a small child. And yet Johannas finds all his energy is drained away, fleeing his spirit body the instant he is touched. He is no longer able to stand, even in projected form, and he collapses.

Now the two projections are afloat in a vast sea of nothingness, an utter emptiness without form or definition. So though Johannas falls his spirit body lands on nothing, but simply drifts, like a boat without anchor or tether. But he cannot lift his head and though he can feel Kwan Chin standing over him, watching him he is unable to move. "I call it The Touch" Kwan Chin explains. Yet despite

having gained the upper hand there is not even a hint of triumph or arrogance in his voice.

"What it does is a mystery, even to me" Kwan Chin goes on. "But it infuses my target with my own energy, thereby forcing your own energy out of your own body, which in this case is purely spiritual. Two objects cannot occupy the same space, and it is no different with energy. Effectively I used my own as a weapon, to displace yours. Your move, Johannas. Or shall I finish this? Is that what you want?"

Johannas struggles to raise himself up, to recover his lost energy by any means necessary. But he feels heavy, weighted down and listless. He raises his head to look at his attacker, desperately wanting to strike out at him. Kwan Chin sizes him up almost hopefully, watching him intently. Then after waiting for a moment, a long moment he opens his mouth to speak. But it is not words which come from his mouth, it is one resounding syllable. And this sound, this noise swells, increasing in volume and intensity as it explodes forth from its source, smashing into Johannas with enough raw force to break a planet in two!

But at the last possible instant Johannas gives answer with a similar sound, a single syllable uttered with the last of his energy, welling up from a force from deep within himself. The sound is guttural, pronounced "*Ram*" and it issues forth with such tremendous cataclysmic power that the resulting backlash creates a massive explosion. It is the awesome power of sound unleashed, honed to a fine point and the result of the collision of such devastating forces destroys their bleak surroundings in a fraction of a second. Kwan Chin's psyche shatters like a glass dome, stripping away his illusory inner world. Reality unfolds again and the two rivals lie motionless among the ruins of the old Citadel.

Muse can only look on in horror, her expression frozen into a mask of fear and worry. She is not close to Kwan Chin, anymore than anyone is. But she knows full well that if he dies the last chance for defeating Johannas dies with him. She waits, holding her breath in thick anticipation. The dust settles in the aftermath of their great confrontation and overhead the storm clouds hover impending doom. The wind is perfectly still and then it kicks up the slightest breeze, giving her the feeling that something is about to happen.

Johannas and Kwan Chin open their eyes at the same time and while Johannas lifts his weary head Kwan Chin simply lies there, arms outstretched, his mind spent and his body broken. His eyes flutter as his death mask lies next to him, broken in half with a mighty crack across its middle. His breathing is labored and with only a glance Muse can tell he is dying. She runs over to him, kneeling by his side, taking his cold hand in her own, warming it between her hands. She can feel her eyes beginning to mist with tears as she waits for him to speak, at a loss for words herself.

"Nothing...nothing was left to chance, even the hour of our births." He labors for the words as he struggles for breath. Kwan Chin turns his head weakly, his vacant stare looking through her not at her. "We were born on the same day, at the same minute, all of us. Everything was predicted, carefully controlled to the last. We are twin stars, he and I. Death is not cold or dark, not like they say..."

His voice trails off and he is gone. The most reclusive and mysterious and odd of the original soldiers is gone. The tears fall from her eyes now, not for Kwan Chin, a relative stranger, but for all of them. For her loneliness she cries, and at the loss of all she has ever known, ever treasured. It is quite a thing to see your entire world shattered and taken, no matter how grim that reality might have been. Now she has no anchor for her feelings and her thoughts drift into the atmosphere as her mind grows hazy and out of focus. "They are gone...all gone. And now I am the only one left. What was it all for Johannas?" She asks, half turning toward the still motionless body of the Ruler of the Earth. "Why?" She tries to cry but her tears have run dry, for some sorrows are too deep even for tears.

But as her despair reaches its nadir, its point of no return, Johannas stirs. He can barely move but he speaks to her as if to boast of his narrow victory. But she can sense it, his strength is completely depleted, drained from him as the water leaves the shore. He cannot fight now, cannot win. In fact she could lift his black sword and make an end of him right now with little effort. But she waits, watches. It is not that she hesitates, but rather that she is expecting him to speak. And she has something to say to him, but for the moment she waits, listens.

"That was too close for comfort!" he begins, raising his weary head. "At the last instant I managed to counter The Voice with my own power, which is similar to Kwan Chin's. Then the resulting backlash shattered his psyche, as I thought it would. So at the last possible nanosecond I managed to squeeze my consciousness back into my body before it was completely annihilated along with Kwan Chin's. His body could not survive without his mind, of course. And now I fear his spirit will drift through the Outer Planes as it searches for an anchor for itself. But his spirit is strong so he will surely find a host for his transformational power. Of that much I have no doubt.

"But now that we are alone I believe you have something on your mind, Muse." She is standing over him, the black sword poised and ready at her side. Now her eyes well up with tears again. She struggles for the words, but they will not come easily at a time like this. She opens her mouth to speak but no words come out. At this moment her heart is full. And she should kill him. He deserves to die. All the lives he has taken, such a cost, such a bitter harvest. And everything that has happened is the direct result of his pride. There is no excuse, no justification. She needs to strike, to bring the sword down. The world would be a better place without him in it, safer. There are innocents to be protected and a future to think about. And there must be justice for the lives he has taken. He deserves to die. But she is not an executioner and she chokes on the moment, which is clearly too much for her. She should but she cannot. So she hesitates.

As she lets the sword drop a sudden burst of light and flame blinds her eyes, causing her to shield them. She covers her eyes, looking as a solitary figure appears wreathed in flame and smoke. He is clad in armor of bone and in one hand he carries a noose of flame and the other a long ebony staff, a circle of fire at its tip. He is as radiant as the sun but his appearance is tainted, like a solar eclipse. His skin is dark, as black as night and Muse's blood is frozen by his terrible gaze, which penetrates from beneath his ornate death mask.

Then, as the realization dawns in Muse's mind, Johannas sits up to look at their strange visitor.

Before she can say it, or even think it he speaks. "Hello Yama."

Chapter 9- Farewell

Lord Yama is the Lord of the Dead, and in both Hindu and Shinto religions he is Death itself, the immortal personification of it. He is not always feared, though most always he judges the dead for the karma they accumulated in their lives, assigning them to their eternal fates. In the Hindu religion he is a deva, the deva of death to be more specific. And though he has a terrible presence and awesome power he is to be respected rather than feared, and seen as a purveyor of justice.

So it is only natural that Lord Yama should appear at this moment to confront Johannas, who has gravely upset the balance and order of the natural spiritual world. He sent one Reaper at first to deal with the rebel soul, but Johannas overcame him. Then he sent two but again Johannas proved to be both elusive and decisive in his actions. And back in the city Yama sent all his remaining Reapers to confront Johannas, hopeful that this rebel throne would be put down for good. But Johannas not only destroyed his minions he also absorbed their energies into his own, fully transforming his own nature and being into that of an immortal.

But Johannas's metamorphosis remains imperfect and incomplete, and he remains for the moment only human. For while he does possess the full powers of a god his body and soul remain incomplete and unevolved. So essentially he is still mortal. His awesome powers act as a shield, a buffer between himself and his enemies. And his considerable skills are near impossible to surmount, but nevertheless he can be killed, he can die.

Lord Yama stands a full seven feet at the shoulder and he turns his terrible gaze on Johannas as the ruler of Earth speaks his name. But though his eyes flare and smoke rises and billows around him, though the earth trembles and the skies grow dark and foreboding Johannas still stands arrogantly before his attacker. The rebel throne rises to his feet, and though he is still quite weak, he looks Death squarely in the eye with defiance in his heart.

Yama has a big black dog with him, trotting along dutifully by his side. He hunts down the souls which would seek to evade their final judgment and he is Yama's constant companion. Sometimes the two of them can be seen walking along deserted forest paths on the Earth, or so goes the legend.

"You dare!" Yama bellows accusingly. "You are a serpent, Johannas and now fate it seems has caught up with you!"

"Are you so eager to join Lord Shiva among the dead?" Johannas taunts. "I am supreme here, One Ruler of the World, Lord of all I survey. And very soon I will reign over the land of the dead and paradise, whatever name it is called by."

"Lord Shiva has simply rejoined the Brahman, the All In One That is One in All. For even the

gods were born or made. We issued forth from the One Source, which is Brahman and to it we all shall return. We are eternal, but for you the torment will never end, Johannas. You are a being of darkness, that which the gods call Adharma, the essence of evil."

"Save your speeches, Lord Death. I am not unprepared for you, whatever you might think." Johannas sneers, that self-assured, confident sneer as he quite literally stares Death in the face. Yama flares like the surface of the Sun and he reaches for his Lance of 100 Fires, which is several yards in length, a most imposing weapon. The point of the lance has a flame which licks and scorches the air, smoking like the wick of a snuffed candle.

But Johannas stands unmoved before Death, holding his ground as smoke billows around the powered up god. Yama moves to plunge the lance through him, incinerating Johannas in an instant, but without warning vines and thorns shoot up from the ground, coming to the defense of their sovereign lord and master.

"The seeds I planted have reached their fruition!" Johannas announces triumphantly. And as quickly as the thorns burn away more spring up in their place, forming a permanent hedge between he and Death. Yama pulls back his lance, sheathing it as he observes this unexpected development. But the Death God is patient, for he has many weapons at his disposal and nothing but time.

The moment Yama puts away his weapon the thorns bury themselves in Johannas's flesh, feeding him the energy of a thousand fallen souls in an instant! His strength is not merely replenished by this, it skyrockets! And soon his own power rivals that of the Lord Death himself!

Yama nods partly because he is impressed and partly only out of acknowledgement. His duty is clear and none that live escape his grasp. He is Death, the end of worlds and of every last soul, even the gods. The flames surrounding his body intensify now as Death's rage and indignation build to a fever pitch. His companion howls mournfully, running to and fro out of utter fear of his master. He has the power to drain the sea and put out the sun and at this moment he is raging out of control!

Thorny vines shoot up from the ground, surrounding the Lord of Death, imprisoning him and even drawing his blood! The blossoms spray their poisonous acid and the body of the god bleeds and scars. Johannas expertly brings forth more thorns, directing them to impale Death like spears. The mass of thorns builds, accumulating until it lifts Death into the sky, where Johannas intends to bleed him dry!

For a long moment it appears to be over and Death does not struggle to free himself, nor does he attempt to counterattack. But Death is patient and final and he has far from played his hand. Yama now draws his Hammer of Flames, with which he strikes the column of thorny vines, which has risen to a height of 100 feet! The column collapses and the thick vines are instantly incinerated as the God of Death plummets earthward, landing on his feet with the agility of a tiger!

A violent earthquake rocks the ground as Yama's power explodes. He produces his Paasa, his burning noose and he hurls the one end at Johannas, ensnaring him. The other end Yama holds in his

iron grip, for the grasp of Death is unbreakable. The paasa burns Johannas in its tight noose but he is predictably unfazed. He employs his Godkiller sword, controlling it with his thoughts, using its deadly edge to cut through the paasa.

Now the death mask of Lord Yama is like a human skull and he visibly grimaces behind it, showing his anger at the defiance of Johannas. And while part of the great god is impressed by his foe's resourcefulness he cannot flinch from both his duty and his nature, which are one. Death kills. End of story.

And now Yama wields his most potent weapon, his fabled Kaaladanda, the staff of time. For death and time are inextricably interwoven, for all that lives must die. All things must pass. This is the nature of both mortal and eternal as part of the great cycle of existence. All life is caught up in this simple ironclad truth, a truth Johannas insistently defies. This cannot be permitted. Johannas must die!

The Kaaladanda has a circle of flame at its far end, a flame which crackles with lightning. Yama forms the circle into a scythe edge, the Reaper's Scythe, and he expands it, intent upon cutting Johannas in two with its sharpness. The entirety of creation is caught up in the essence of this legendary weapon, for all that is made must be unmade. Now this weapon has the power to destroy everything, anything. For it is the death of all creation. Johannas has finally reached his limit.

Johannas answers this move by summoning all his vines and massing them into a single point. They form a mammoth single vine a mile wide and a mile long, each individual vine twisting into every other then forming into a newly created whole. Johannas takes this colossal vine and buries it deep into the Earth itself, deciding in his mind to siphon her energy to fuel his own relentless drive for omnipotence!

"No!" Yama cries out. "What are you doing? Infidel! Demon! The earth is not eternal but it is not given to you to claim her! Stop this!" Yama lowers his weapon, for he fears for the fate of the Earth, his Sister.

Johannas laughs his terrible laugh. It is a laugh of utter darkness, for he is a being of darkness, pure and perfectly tainted, like the Devil himself. He is the devil of this world, which is his heaven. And to that end the Devil means to kill God, to possess his power and know his full nature. For to become like God is to defy fate, to hold it in one's hands. This has never been done. It cannot be done yet Johannas aspires to it. He covets immortal power, the power of God. And to this end he will join with Death.

Yama lowers his terrible weapon, hesitating despite his righteous fury and wrath. For he can feel the Earth being drained and hear her cries of torment. Muse too can sense this, feel it and the sheer horror of it pushes her mind to the brink of insanity! While she had been sitting and watching this battle until now she leaps to her feet, tearing at her hair and clothes in anguish and terror! Is there no hope? Will this nightmare never end?

Johannas brings his great funnel of vines up through the ground, where it towers above Lord Yama. In a flash the vines break apart, first surrounding then encompassing Death as Johannas feeds his own energy back into them. He is one with the Earth now and he draws on her strength, strength millions of years in its life, to feed his vines then use them to absorb the God of Death. He makes himself insubstantial, separating his spirit from his body once again. Then he uses his soul as a weapon, but instead of assaulting Death he joins with him, taking his essence into his own. To become one with Death.

His plan has worked and Johannas now stands before a frightened Muse wearing the skin of Death, his every molecule brimming with power. The sensation of such perfect and complete power courses through Johannas, nearly overwhelming his mind with indescribable exhilaration! He will use Death like an engine, controlling him and wielding his power from inside, like a virus.

Johannas bends time around himself and he is everywhere at once, true omnipresence. Before Muse can defend herself he strikes her multiple times, using his mind as a weapon. Marks appear on her skin both visible and beneath her clothes. They appear like wounds inflicted by some invisible claw, surfacing in threes across her back, her stomach then her face.

Johannas wields Kaaladanda now, forming its scythe into a fine edge as his size swells to nearly 12 feet in height! He brings it down with a stroke and though Muse tries to shield herself with her power the attack nearly kills her, knocking her to the ground. She lies there, completely drained of energy, too exhausted and spent to even move. 'What do I do now?' she thinks desperately. It is time to say what she came here to say. Time to speak. But now she cannot find her breath, for it has been stolen from her.

"Here we are Muse, you and I!" Johannas preens. "We are the last of our kind. Or should I say you are the last of your kind? For like the dinosaur your time has come and gone. Soon you too will fall over the edge of extinction! Die then, fallen soldier!"

He uses his mind to lift her up into the air, then tightens his psychic force around her, choking the air from her body. She is helpless, doomed until she feels Yama struggling to free himself, causing a momentary lapse in Johannas's power. In this fraction of a second he loses his hold on her and she drops to the ground. The impact stuns her, but her breath returns to her and she gasps for air, fighting to live.

Johannas clutches his head, shouting like a madman. "NO! The power is mine! I am the God of Death now! I am omnipotent and I will not release you!"

Just then a black spirit comes forth from out of Kaaladanda's smoke, a form most terrible whose height rises up to the sky, blocking out the sun. "I am Kaalatman, the Great Spirit of Kaaladanda! I will not fight for you, for you are not my master, my sovereign! And now I will kill you for this blasphemous act! You will die a thousand deaths!"

But Johannas had gone mad with power, and he will not heed the warnings nor the words of

this immortal spirit. He has no fear of God or of Hell, for he is as he always has been: an island unto himself. He grins evilly, unrepentant. He has never repented, for in his mind he has never been in the wrong. Every action is justified, even the cruelty, in his own mind. For Johannas places himself above all living things as he always has done. This is the perfect essence of his evil, his true nature.

"You cannot slay me without harming your master!" Johannas taunts. "So return to the Kaaladanda, which is now my weapon! For I have become Death!" Johannas stands there glowing and gloating, basking in his power. In one moment he can see everything, past, present and future and his mind nearly collapses under the unspeakable weight. But as he teeters on the brink of insanity he hears a small sound, Muse's voice, calling out to him. "I have to live...My baby...Our baby, our daughter. I have to get back to her!"

Johannas is frozen as the immortal, ancient powers coursing through him dwindle for a moment. His expression is astonished, flabbergasted. For all his sight, his extra senses he did not see this coming. "I...have a daughter? How can I not have foreseen this? How did I not sense her, feel her somehow? I...don't understand. How is this possible?"

Muse stands before him as his crescendoing power dies down, screaming like the thousands of souls he has taken, stolen. A lone tear trickles down her cheek. "You don't see past the end of your nose, Johannas. And that is the story of you, completely self-absorbed and numb to the feelings and wellbeing of others. You are a monster! And I can't believe I didn't see it a long time ago!

"It was almost two years ago when I came to you, sometime between the end of the war and your damned Sermons. I was alone and looking for answers. But mostly I just wanted to be with you, fool that I was. So I went looking for you and I finally found you in a hotel suite on the island of Corfu. You used to go there alot after the war ended, to be alone with your thoughts so I decided to go there on the off chance you might turn up. I had some questions that needed answered. Don't you remember?"

20 months ago, Corfu

Muse makes her way to an island resort on beautiful, sun drenched Corfu. She has been wrestling with questions in her mind since the war ended, the day that the world knew all their names. She was easily recognizable as a celebrity at this time, but people forget. They even managed to forget the names and faces of the soldiers who saved them. It was Johannas who took advantage of his fame, rising to superstardom, impressing himself on the memories and minds of everyone.

He became quite a celebrity in the aftermath of the war, for while the rest of them were content to fade into obscurity he was a regular on the talk show circuits and on tv and web news features. He even took over You Tube for a short time! Hell there was nowhere you could turn without seeing his face. He did many endorsements for a wide variety of products, commercials, billboards, web ads. Johannas was the man of the moment and he was basking in the glory.

He had the entire resort to himself, a massive, 500 room hotel on the waterfront bought and

paid for by one of his many sponsors. He had become a force on both the political and business scene at this time and he had many hands in many different ventures and investments at once. This all managed to make him richer and more influential, one of the most powerful men in the world.

The resort has tight security around it, but as a Revenge Soldier this presents little problem for her to get around. She looks for him along the beach first, then in the waterfront restaurants, all the while compelled forward by a will to reckon with their shared past.

She finds him at last in his penthouse suite, sitting on the foot of his king size bed while taking a phone call from an overseas investor. Muse simply walks in from the balcony, the setting sun at her back as the gentle breeze blows the curtains from her path. Johannas looks up to see her and his blood runs cold, draining from his face as if he has seen a ghost. He gets rid of his contact, making him some promise then hangs up. Then he rises to his feet, lighting a cigarette as he paces between her and the bed, back and forth.

"Hello Muse, what brings you to my little island paradise? It is good to see you, but you really could've called ahead first."

"Cut the bullshit, Johannas! You know perfectly well why I'm here! Why don't you tell me about Jacob's Ladder, or didn't you think I would find out?"

"So you know then?" he begins, snuffing his cigarette methodically. He is a careful, meticulous person, leaving no action unattended, overlooking no detail, however slight. "Tell me, Muse, how much do you already know? I don't want to bore you with the details unnecessarily."

"Humor me."

"Very well. As you know the Destroyer War had reached a stalemate, going on without an end in sight while collateral casualties were continuing to mount. In addition to the loss of life our reputations were at stake. It was bad press in a word.

"Well with my scientific aplomb I arrived at a potential solution, whereby I would enhance our abilities with a gene mixture which I called Jacob's Ladder. We Alphas were the natural candidates to receive the treatment, which I tried on myself initially. The idea was to boost our powers to give us the strength necessary to destroy our adversaries absolutely by any means available to us."

"Why wasn't Jakob included in your tests? He is an Alpha."

"Jakob had his objections, of course. Everything is a moral quandry for him, a matter of conscience. So I administered the treatment without his knowledge, injecting him while he slept and dosing his rations. I had to know. I had to satisfy my scientific curiosity."

"That is so typical of you! People are not your guinea pigs, especially us, your own family! How could you dose him without his knowledge and against his will?"

"I have never thought of the others as my family. I have no family. I am an orphan, Muse

and so are you. I don't find it necessary or useful to form attachments to the others. I stand alone, as I always have."

"What about me then? Wasn't I worthy of your serum, your treatment? Did you never think that I wanted to help win that war, especially after those we lost!"

Johannas scoffs, chuckling derisively. "To put it bluntly I didn't find it productive. You were only ever a soldier of marginal potential at best, Muse. Your particular gifts do not lend themselves to combat, much less absolute victory. You have no killing instinct. You are too kind, too soft."

"Soft? I don't think it soft of me to care about people, to take care of others, especially our own. My powers are a gift and my gift exhibits itself in the form of healing abilities. And the better I can heal those on the frontline the better they are able to continue the fight."

"You are quite correct, of course. I have never found much use for healing powers personally, but your logic is impossible to contradict. But nevertheless the treatment would have proven to be wasted on you, a soldier with little or no combat abilities or potential."

Muse takes a step toward Johannas, catching him off his guard. He prefers to keep people at a distance. Other people are equations to be solved for him and like a researcher he is far more comfortable with his subjects behind glass. But she moves in close, too close for comfort.

The emotions bubble to the surface for her in this moment as she calls her whole worth into question. Her worth as a soldier and above all her worth to him. She has always been drawn to Johannas, though she cannot understand why. He has a kind of tortured magnetism about him, a kind of Devil's charm. She is in love with him and in this moment she can no longer play her foolish charade.

"Is that all I am to you, Johannas, a variable to be calculated? Am I nothing more than a factor in some equation?" She takes another step, throwing her arms around him as she cries into his chest. He is nearly ten inches taller than she so he towers over her, frozen and stiff in an awkward moment. "How do you really feel about me? Tell me. Am I like a sister to you, a friend? How do you see me in that brilliant head of yours?" She looks up at him with her puppy dog eyes and his stony heart almost melts for a moment.

"I...I have never been good at people. You are a beautiful girl, Muse but I have always found others a mystery to me. I am not good...at feelings."

"You can be yourself with me. You don't have to be afraid anymore. They can't hurt us here. Let's bury the pain behind us and just walk away together. I will never leave you. Can't you see I only want to be by your side?" She kisses him, putting her gentle soft hand under his chin and guiding his face down to hers.

Present day

"We made love that night, Johannas. Or at least I did. How convenient of you to forget me, to forget that night. It was everything to me, and your touch meant everything to me. Every time I felt your skin against mine my body was alive and my joy was perfect. But nothing lasts here and everything you touch dies. That is your reality, Johannas. You kill everyone who dares to get too close to you, who dares to love you. And it all comes so easily to you. People are like shadows in a mist to you, aren't we? Can that black heart of yours even love? I wonder. But you are not worthy of my love. You never were. I see that now though even in this moment I cannot help but love you, even after all that happened."

Johannas finds himself at a rare loss for words. The power of Death is barely detectable now and Muse senses that she could seize the moment and bring him down. And for the good of everyone, for the hope of future life everywhere she knows she should. But she can't. Now that she stands here face to face she still loves him, and her inner struggle is tearing her apart.

"Our daughter's name is Artemis" she tells him, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "She is 11 months old now, nearly a year and she is the greatest gift I have ever been given! Becoming a mother has changed me in unfathomable ways which defy description. For nine months I felt life growing inside my body, sometimes kicking me in the night, sometimes rolling over and tickling me in my sleep. And the moment she was born, the moment I saw my child I was transformed, forever changed!

"She came out glowing like a little saint or some tiny lightbulb! And here she was, this perfect child with crystal eyes and a full head of snowy white hair! So even though I hate you, even though you have taken and killed everyone I have ever cared about, a part of me will always love you because you gave me my greatest gift, my greatest power. You gave me her."

Johannas stares as she finishes speaking, his eyes filling with tears for the first time since that night, the night he and the others returned from Area 51. "...don't know what to say. I would like to meet her." He fights through the tears, choking back his moment of emotion, pushing it down, suppressing it. "We are the last of our kind now, Muse, the new Adam and Eve. Shall we lay our differences aside for her sake? What do you say?"

"It's impossible" she replies, the tears streaming down her face. "Everywhere I turn I see the faces of our fallen brothers, the same children we grew up with, played with, ate with and suffered with! And you are the reason they are gone, all of them. As I look at you I don't see the slightest bit of remorse for all you have done. It is all like some great game of chess to you, I suppose. People are just pieces to be moved here and there, manipulated by your careful designs. You have played us all from the start, I see that now. You set your dogs on us, letting us fall into your clever traps and ruses. And you get some sick pleasure out of it all! You truly are Death, Johannas. So perhaps you have finally found your calling at last."

"Very well" Johannas resolves, his words final and absolute. "Only know that I tried to give you a reprieve, to show you mercy. But I too have been fate's victim in this unfolding plot, Muse. I acted as I saw fit, for the greater good of humanity, to pursue the ultimate perfection of human potential. We are the realization of man's dreams of transcendence, of immortality. We are gods, we are

Urbemensch! It is the Buddha's dream of universal enlightenment and those who would resist the wheels of progress must ultimately be crushed by them!

"Everything changed for me the moment I found out about the manipulations and controls of the Elders, how they brainwashed us through our dreams, suppressing our memories, even erasing our identities. I resolved to myself to overthrow them but my plans would require time and careful preparation to reach their fruition. I was ready to make my move when the first Destroyer landed, thereby throwing a temporary monkeywrench into my works. But it was because of the creation of Jacob's Ladder that I began to glimpse our true potential. I saw that it was possible to make myself into a god, the God. That dream defines me, shaping my every action and intention. To that one end all others must be sacrificed and I will reach my Promised Land by any means necessary!"

"The end does not justify the means, Johannas. It never does. Look around you and see what your pride has wrought! We are the last of our kind! You sacrificed every last one of us, your own family, your comrades at the very least! Some you led to their deaths while you saw fit to twist some of our minds, turning us on ourselves! There is a Devil, Johannas and you are he! And I should kill you now. I should end you for the sake of everything I hold dear, and in the name of the memory of every voice you have silenced! I should but I cannot. I know that. So kill me if you must. It is what you do best."

Muse lowers her defenses before him, bracing herself for the end. She can feel his energies beginning to build and peak within him, the power churning beneath the surface like the heart of a mighty volcano! But in her despair she sees the face of her child, their child and she resolves to fight on. 'I can't give up now! I have to fight for her! She is this world's brightest hope and she needs her mother! So I can't die! I have to get back to protect my child!'

Johannas can see her thoughts and the image of his young child overthrows his mind, hurtling him into a state of utter chaos. Even as the power of Death reaches its zenith he falters, losing his control of the ancient deity. As Yama struggles to free himself from his grasp, Johannas clutches his head, howling like a wounded animal.

Muse sees her opportunity and she focuses her mind, trying to generate a weapon with her thoughts to kill him with. She concentrates as she nears her trance state when her process is interrupted by a whisper in her ear. She opens her eyes, half turning to see Master Victor standing beside her.

Victor has a shattered and disheveled appearance, the aftermath of days of Johannas's mind control. His usually carefully managed hair stands on end and his clothes are torn. His calm eyes dart about wildly. He is twitchy, even mad but he is holding out a sword, his sword, indicating that she take it.

"This is Excalibur, the Holy Sword, the mightiest blade ever forged on Earth by the Old Folk. The ways of magic were second nature to their kind, my own kind but like you I am the last of a fallen race. Take this weapon and use it. Make it a conduit for your sleeping power and let it become your

connection to the Source, reaching back all the way where it came from. Know your eternal nature, Muse. Become one with it. This is the moment, your moment. Now take hold of destiny and end this. Reach out with your hand and strike him down! Be quick about it! For to hesitate now is to welcome death!"

"But why don't you do it, Master Victor? He used you as his pawn, he took control of your mind. You have every reason to kill him. But I am not a warrior. I never was and I never will be."

"No time for that now. Suffice to say that I am broken and however he may have used me this is not my fight, not anymore. You have your own score to settle with Johannas. You must be the one to end this. Farewell."

She blinks and he is gone, vanished into the now setting sun. So she lifts Excalibur, hefting its considerable weight up onto her shoulder. Its blade is nearly as long as her little body and it is a heavy weapon, so she employs her spiritual energy to aid her, bonding with the blade's own ancient energies. Finally she manages to hold it aloft and she brings her power to its maximum as she prepares to bring the blade down.

But as she stands poised the dark spirit Kaalatman appears before her, its red eyes flaring at her, piercing through the darkness of its shadowy form. "Use my power to free my Master" it whispers to her. "I will fight with you, lending you my strength to free my Master! I am the spirit of that weapon. The weapon and I are one and there is but one Master of Kaaladanda. You must return Lord Death to his natural place or all creation shall perish in flames! Strike now, there is no time to waste!"

Kaalatman bonds to Victor's blade and she swings it, closing her eyes as she brings it across her body. Johannas senses the strike in the moment it occurs, severing his proud head from his body. His head rolls and the power of Death is set free, transferring Yama's essence into the head. Yama rises from the pool of blood, bright and glowing with dark fire as he turns to nod to her, a silent gesture of gratitude for his freedom.

Muse lets her arms fall as the energy drains from her body. She is spent but she leans on the sword, throwing her weight into it as she plants it in the hard ground. Her eyes flutter open as she looks at Johannas's headless body. He is still standing, improbable though it is. 'How can this be? How is he still standing? No! He's still alive!'

As quickly as this realization strikes her thorny vines protrude up out of the ground and ensnare her, catching her in their toxic grip. Johannas regenerates his head and though the power of Death is gone from him his energy is still incomparable, so massive it staggers her imagination, stealing her breath away! The thorns bury into her flesh, connecting themselves to their master to feed her stolen energy to him. He basks in the glow, his arrogant smile creasing his lips.

"I am forever, Muse. You cannot kill God. Do you not know? God himself is a myth, a fairy tale for children. But here I stand, the realization of human potential, the end result of thousands of years of scientific perfection, the Elders' gift from beyond the stars! I am perfect, flawless!"

"The world in which we live was born of the death of the old one and similarly I shall shape a new world from the ashes of this one. There can be no creation without destruction. You shall be a part of this new world, for your life will go on in that of our child. And she shall be the first of a new race, the Eve of the new Eden! I will raise up a new generation, not of soldiers but of supermen, new men, the forebears of a new age!"

She can sense his thorns going out, digging through the soil to feast on the lives of those she saved, healed. He is feeding on the life of the whole world, sucking the energy of every living thing to satisfy his recumbent power! She must stop him! This all has to end! But how? She is too weak to fight and his thorns have her, sucking out the last of her energy and her blood! Going black now. Over. Done. Too late. Getting dark.

Then like a beacon of light the energy of her child, of Artemis reaches out to her, reaching her in the darkness, in the depths of her despair. She cannot surrender. She must fight, must get back to her child. For her life is now only for her, her life and breath, her every hope. Artemis is the hope of this world, its future and hope deserves to live. Hope must live! For the human creature hope is oxygen and now hope has become her very breath!

She let Excalibur fall the moment the vines took her but now she closes her eyes and with a full heart, a heart full of love she dreams. She dreams of those she lost, of their lives, their hopes, their loves. She begins to glow as the energy Artemis sends to her wraps her in its warm light. From this light she pulls a weapon, a sword which she shapes not with her mind but with her feelings. Heaven's Gift passes through her and she brings it down, focusing the beam of energy with her mind, shaping it into a fine point. A sword ten miles long reaches from heaven to earth and it pierces Johannas through, breaking him, consuming him in its light. He falls and it is over.

Muse drifts down to the earth, her body lighter than air as she lands gracefully on her feet. She is pulsating with the very power of creation, the mother's power. For Mother is the bringer of life, the protector of hope. Slowly she walks over to where Johannas is laying, his body broken. He has a massive hole in his chest where the sword pierced him, splitting him in half. Now the God of gods breathes his last and she can only crouch by his side and listen to his whispers.

"I...can see Paradise!" A single tear runs down his face and he is gone. Farewell. The last of the Revenge Soldiers rises, burying her revenge there in her heart. The time for revenge is done. Let there be life and hope. As she turns and walks away from her twisted and lost love her heart is at once full and empty. "I am coming, Artemis. Mommy is coming."