

# The Man Behind the Door

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# I

The clock tolled in an abrupt silence as the shadows closed in. In front of the clock sat the lobby of this once great facility, the first stop on the road between this world and its undoing. The shadows cast their horrific figures over the floor, playing like small children on a playground as the last lights slowly died. Yet one remained; a figure ran across the lobby floor, his long flowing robes as gray and featureless as the facility itself, his grim expression hidden behind hood. His one light, the magiphasic lantern attached to his waist, stretched the shadows into long jittering tendrils hissing from the anger wrought from their final conquest running from their grasp.

Nathan ran down the hallway and sharply turned into the staircase, a dark iron spiral stretching up to the enshaded floors above, walls sizzling as the light from his lantern burned away the wretched dark from the gray walls. Nathan rapidly ascended, the smell of his breath wafting back to his nose as it reflected off the thick cloth of his robe and back into the layers of his robe's hood, which softly clung to the top of his sweat covered head, his white hair matted to his scalp. The voice spoke again as his ascension continued, echoing through both the barren hallways and through the anxiety ridden passages of his deteriorating mind:

“Why...do you...toil so? Your order...my captors...are dead... including her...and him...” Nathan tried desperately to ignore it, to push aside his lies, reciting an incantation as he felt the man's many fingers combing through his fraying mind.

“That spell grows...weaker,” the man sneered, “My curse already taints your soul; you WILL be mine.”

Nathan slammed open the door, pushing over the figure on its other end. It fell back, feet and hands still positioned to open

the door as the rigid, unmoving figure hit the ground, the dark tendrils that encased its body shifted and roiled in annoyance, yet the stillness remained. Nathan walked down the corridor and opened the double doors to his right. Inside was the facility's chapel, the only place within still not touched by the man's influence. He set down the satchel he was carrying and began feverishly flipping through the books within. There had to be something, someone must have figured it out.

He wrote down spell after spell into his worn notebook, pages filled with the crossed out remnants of his many other attempts. One of these had to do something. Eventually his satchel sat empty, and the books lay discarded in the corner with every other tome he had retrieved from the archives. Nathan placed his notebook back in his satchel as he mentally prepared himself, taking a deep breath as he stepped out into the corridor from the double doors from whence he came. The return of the man's presence was sudden and overwhelming. Nathans body buckled as he fell to the ground, hands instinctively grasping at the spot of searing pain on his lower back, touching it he felt the writhing shadow that had dug itself into his back.

It was bigger than before; the curse was spreading. He slowly got to his feet and turned a corner, meeting what he felt were the eyes of a shadowy figure at the halls far end and feeling a faint chuckle from the back of his mind. The man was mocking him. He walked down the corridor, carefully avoiding any apparitions or the writhing mass covered bodies of his stilled coworkers, passing dark junction after dark junction, each splitting off into their own featureless gray hallways. The House of the End was intentionally built like a maze, and its æthereal nature meant that it did not have any reason to abide by natural laws or the bounds of reality. It had been constructed this way as a stop gap, to try and slow the man down should he ever escape beyond the door so that help could be called for before the final contingency was issued.

That was the idea anyways. In practice the man understood, almost implicitly, what this facility was intended to do

and worked quickly to nullify whatever they could do to slow him down. There had once been a large group of survivors, people like Nathan who were working tirelessly, despite what had happened to try and contain the man once again. But eventually the reality of the final contingency set in, as did many of the survivors' attachments to those afflicted by the man's influence. What was once a united resistance to the man became a frenzy of competing interests. Some still wanted to contain him, others merely wanted to rescue their friends and loved ones, others just wanted out. They fell apart and their numbers rapidly dwindled until Nathan was the only one left, a single, dimming light against the unrelenting darkness.

Nathan came up on the entrance to the sepulcher, pressing on the touchpad of the lift and feeling it lurch to life a moment later as it slowly descended towards the center of the complex, the diagonal shaft was dark and its walls made of brown blasted stone, the grey walls of the rest of the facility were almost entirely absent here, this being the oldest part of the House, combined with its extreme importance made renovations from its original haphazard design almost impossible. The elevator stopped with a sudden jolt and its gate opened, Nathan could hear the clicks from the facilities built-in lights as they tried to automatically engage, but were stopped by the shadows currently coating them.

Nathan stepped forward down the hallway, passing by several empty security offices and a breakroom, stopping at each one as he felt the piercing sensation of eyes watching him. There wasn't a single thing he did that the man wasn't aware of, even, he suspected, within the chapel itself. His vision there was just a little blurry. Nathan entered the sepulcher's antechamber, walking through the empty security checkpoint and its several layers of detectors, the last one quietly beeping as he walked through it, even in low power mode it could still detect the corruption. He really was fucked.

Nathan sighed and stepped through the double doors and into the sepulcher and was immediately basked with the doors

dull whitish-blue light. It was massive, standing at hundreds of feet tall in the center of the huge excavation that made up the sepulcher's main floor. It was surrounded immediately by ruins matching it in both appearance and apparent age, and was surrounded even further out by the same blasted brown rock that made up the rest of the natural parts of the inner part of the House of the End.

Nathan stood on the far side of the room just in front of the double doors, in front of him and to his right stood the laboratories, their black and grey metal box-like exteriors jutting out from the brown rock walls and stretching almost as high up as the door itself, one for members of the House of the End and one for members of the other mage houses, though that had been empty for many years now and was largely used as overflow and storage for the first. Nathan walked closer to the door, trying to avert his eyes from the figure at its base. Its massive stone exterior was lit by the flowing magical energy that emanated from its edges.

Toward the center he could see the man, a dark shadowy figure as massive as the door itself, his body an inky black and his eyes a bright glowing white, hand reaching for the doorway as he slowly moved closer to it, his body barely contrasted from the endless void he floated in, and while his mouth couldn't be seen thanks to the contrast, Nathan could sense his cruel smile staring down at him. He walked closer to the door, stopping as close as he was willing to get to the figure at its base as he set his satchel down on a metal table that was set up nearby.

"How do you expect to save them if you can't even look at them?!" thundered the man as humanoid shadows began to appear throughout the ruins, "Is it regret? Guilt? Anger? All the above? I suppose if I were a lowly mortal and I had done all that you have accomplished here I would feel the same way." The man sneered as the shadow figures crossed their arms in unison.

Nathan tried to ignore them, reciting spell after spell, stealing brief glances at the figure directly in front of him, getting progressively angrier and more desperate as each passing incan-

tation refused to dispel or even move the shadows that enveloped the target of his obsession. Eventually Nathan reached the end of today's notes, crossing the last spell out angrily as he collapsed to the ground in despair.

"Look at them," the man barked. "LOOK AT THEM!" he barked again, rattling the sepulcher with his bellows. "Witness the consequences of your actions, witness what you have done in service of a lie."

Nathan meekly looked up from the ground at the figure in front of him, wiping the angry tears from his eyes, in spite of the shadows covering it. It was a uniquely female figure, facing directly towards the door, its arms raised up in front of itself, holding another enshadowed figure, an infant. Nathan exhaled heavily, trying to prevent his emotions from overtaking him.

"Elizabeth," he whimpered "what have I done?" Nathan sat down in the small metal chair in the corner of the sublevel 86's breakroom, legs spread on either side and back bent as he clasped his hands together, rubbing his open palm with his thumb. He had never wanted a family, he never really liked people and having grown up in an orphanage had almost no experience with families, aside from the ones that would come in and walk past him on the way to adopt other children. No one wanted some freaky antisocial white-haired kid with a scar and bright grey eyes.

That was until a recruiter from the House of the End came by, Archbishop Morgan. He sensed in the small freakish boy the capacity to wield a form of magic that few in the entire nation, or even the world could: the tomes of oblivion, the magic of the man. Immediately he was whisked away to the retreat, the House of the End's training compound, and the only remaining place where the man's influence hadn't been obliterated by their order's founder during his crusade. There he learned all that it took to be an end mage, a fancy position, and a title both lauded and feared by the masses. Many stories were written about his order, most of them wrong. In all actuality his order were glorified prison guards, the fancy powers were a side effect of that duty.

On top of learning his new powers, and his duties, he also made friends, the first true friends in his life.

One in particular caught his eye, Elizabeth, she had long flowing brown hair, piercing blue eyes and a contagious laugh. She was smart, funny, and one of the first women his age to not grimace at Nathan's appearance, a new experience for him. They became very close friends, encouraging each other through the many rigorous trials the retreat had to offer. After several years they both graduated the retreat and were sent off to their first tour in the facility.

The tour system was how the House managed the man's influence. Every end mage spent one year or so on a tour within the facility itself, and then few years outside of it, with early leaves only given for the most extreme of circumstances. It was in this first tour that his and Elizabeth's relationship blossomed further, beginning as dates on the facility's entertainment level to more intimate affairs. Nathan, having never expected this to happen to him, had wanted to take things slowly, trying to comb through his limited knowledge of romance movies as he looked for smaller bungalows in the Republic controlled city of Raven-guard to the facility's north, or the legendary city of Darnia to the facility's southwest, envisioning a quiet life in his time between tours with a woman he had come to love very much. That dream was shattered when Elizabeth walked into this very breakroom, sat down at the very chair he was sitting across from and handed him a small, gift-wrapped box with a beaming, ear to ear smile on her face.

He opened the box and found inside a pregnancy test. It was positive. He had sat there motionless, mind filling with shock and doubt as all the usual thoughts that such an announcement would bring rushed into his head, he was blindsided, snapped back into reality by Elizabeth leaping into his arms, hugging him tightly as she giggled and glowed with joy from every inch of her body, in that moment, all his doubt went away and he was happy, they both were.

*If only they had known*, Nathan thought to himself, as he looked

around the darkened breakroom, trying to figure out what he could possibly do. It had been three days since he went back into the Sepulcher. He figured after several months of rapid firing spells he needed a new tactic, but had yet to find one. He would have loved to simply wait for help from the remaining end mages or from any number of regional, or global powers, but command had panicked at the last minute and engaged the final contingency, erasing the House of the End not just from all records, but from the minds of the non-end mage public as well, along with locking down the facility.

There were people who this spell didn't affect of course, The House of Light with their direct connection to God Himself certainly knew, or at least some of them did, but the man scared them, more so than almost anything else, so he doubted help would come from them. That left only one man who could possibly remember them, the Monzat, the unending ruler of Darnia and the man responsible for his order's creation. But at the moment he lay dead, Darnia back under the control of a republic endorsed puppet government, and his cycle of rebirth seemingly still in its between phase. He doubted any help would come.

The Monzat's mention did help him recall an old legend he heard back at the retreat, one that stated that the very tools he originally used to contain the man were still somewhere within the facility, locked behind some magical door. He had used those tools to completely wipe out the man's presence in the world, so there had to be something, if it's even true the deep archives would be a good place to start. Seeing no other option, Nathan slowly lifted himself off the chair and walked towards the door, stopping to ride out the searing pain of his affliction, which had spread further on his back and even onto his forearm.

The man was getting impatient. Nathan opened the door and exited at the end of the hall, clipping his lantern onto his belt as he started to descend to the archives, hearing a faint chuckle echo through the facility.

"Chasing legends, are we? You really are getting desperate, just give in, and maybe I'll let you see them again!" the man said.



Nathan continued towards the archives, ignoring the man as he picked up the pace on his way down the stairs, hearing something beginning to descend after him from above.

“Oh well, I’ll have you soon anyways, plus, I am curious if this particular legend is real. It would be quite the nostalgia trip to see that desert dwelling demigod’s infernal little toys once again before I crush them into pieces.” Nathan got off on the archives level and sprinted towards the door.

Slamming it open, he ran down another flight of stairs, dodging falling bookcases and jumping at the sounds of running figures from across the hallway before finally reaching the door to the deep archives, a large vault-like door that had been left ajar when the seal had been broken. Above it sat the roof of the deep archives, basking in the blue light of the magic that flowed through. Nathan slid between the door and its doorway and continued downward, reaching the small rotunda at its base, running through a security checkpoint and into the deep archives themselves.

It was a large round structure styled after Roman architecture of old, it opened up in the center to a grand golden statue to The Monzat of Darnia, holding his hands up on either side of his body, palms extended to the sky, face obscured by his hood and metal helmet. Between his open hands flowed the magic that illuminated the main archives, a steady blue stream that flowed up past the hole in the ceiling of the deep archives, and into the ceiling of the main archives, where its energy was then distributed around the facility to power most of the tech contained within. Towards the outer walls stood the second floor, its ornate golden handrails glinting in the blue light, Nathan placed down his satchel and began his search.

Ten hours had passed. The once orderly deep archives now lay a mess of discarded books and scrolls, Nathan sat leaning against a bookshelf on the first floor, holding his head as he drowned his sorrows. Nothing, there was nothing, staring between his fingers, through fits of rage and despair he saw a figure, he let his hands drop to the floor, it was a woman, Elizabeth.

“Just give up Nathan,” the figure said in an even tone, “Let the shadows embrace you, and you can join me and Peter in the darkness. It’s not bad here, just dark. The man allows us to exist in his shadow, which shall soon encompass the whole world, so we’ll have a looooot of friends,” it said, bending down to his level and running its cold appendages across his face as the faint sound of an infant crying began in the distance. “And you can see him again, hold him, he’s happy, healthy, just like you wanted, just like what you tried to do that day soooo many months ago...” it said with a smile.

Nathan shook his head, meekly hiding his face with both hands as he leaned back into the pile of books he laid against, his heart beating through his chest. “You’re not her, that’s not him,” he sobbed as the crying got louder, “You aren’t real!” he shouted.

The figure chuckled, its voice slowly shifting from that of Elizabeth’s to something darker. “I am as real as the sin you committed in my name, or have you forgotten what you did?”

Nathan shuddered on the ground, eyes closed and overcome with emotion as his memories consumed him.

## II

Nathan walked through the security checkpoint, metal detector beeping as he went through. A guard put his hand up to him, telling him to go through again. Nathan stood there in a haze, the sleep deprivation and worry slowly eating away at what was left of his sanity.

“I just want to get let through, for God’s sake I work here.”

“It’s standard procedure sir, can’t have you sneaking any un-sanctioned weapons or items into the medical wing,” the guard replied.

“Please, I just...” Nathan was interrupted by the checkpoint officer as he walked up to the guard.

“Cecil, you know who this is?” the officer said.

“Some guy,” the guard replied.

“He’s the kid’s father, let him through.”

The guard looked at Nathan, eyes full of sympathy as he stepped back.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience sir,” the officer said grimly as he waved Nathan through.

Nathan took a right as he walked past one row of medical rooms after another. The medical wing was built inside of a large cave near the top of the facility. It served as a triage center during the Monzat’s great descent towards the door following his crusade against the man and remained as the house of the ends sole medical facility in the entire sprawling subterranean campus. It contained rows of freestanding metal rooms with windows on either side and a skylight on the top. Medical personnel scurried about, their grey robes intermixed with red crosses and white trim to distinguish them from the normal end mages throughout the facility. Nathan stopped at the fifth row of rooms and began to walk down, until he reached the third room on his right. Inside

he saw Elizabeth, his wife. They had gotten married a few weeks after she announced her pregnancy. She sat in a stiff metal chair, looking into a crib in the center of the room. Nathan stepped in, Elizabeth turned around in her chair to look at him, her hair a filthy mess of unkempt locks. Exhaustion etched in every inch of her face.

“How is he?” Nathan asked.

“He only had three seizures today, doctors said the meds are working so he’s in less pain, but they haven’t slowed down.”

Nathan looked in the crib at his son, his blue eyes covered by his eyelids as he slept, face curled into a small smile.

“He seems happy at least.”

“For now, when his veins turn black and he starts shaking later he won’t be,” Elizabeth said as she rested her head in both hands, desperately trying to stay awake.

“When was the last time you slept or had a shower?” Nathan asked, softly grabbing onto his wife’s shoulder as he looked her in the eyes.

“Three days ago I think, maybe I passed out for a little while, I don’t really remember, as for a shower I have no idea,” Elizabeth replied, mumbling to herself.

“Honey you need to sleep, this isn’t good for you, you need to take care of yourself,” Nathan pleaded.

“And who would look after Peter when I’m off doing that? You? The council only gave one of us time off, you’re still working,” Elizabeth said with a mixture of annoyance and desperation.

“I’m an officer now, I could get someone to watch over him, a friend, an underling, someth—”

**“I’M NOT LETTING SOMEONE I DON’T KNOW WATCH OVER OUR SON,”** Elizabeth shouted, body shaking from the exertion.

Behind her, Peter started to cry.

“Oh I’m sorry, I’m so sorry honey!” Elizabeth said rushing over to him as she picked him up and tried to calm him down.

“Elizabeth, I’m sorry,” Nathan said, reaching towards his wife.

“Go talk to the doctor, he’s outside,” Elizabeth said coldly, avoiding Nathan’s gaze.

Nathan stepped outside to meet the doctor, a young man with short brown hair and green eyes.

“Where are the healers from the House of Light? You said they’d be here two weeks ago,” Nathan yelled.

The doctor paused for a moment, choosing his words carefully before speaking.

“It’s a mess out there, the civil war has stretched to every corner of the republic. Last I heard, they were headed through the midlands. All the kingdoms there all split off to one side or another, some just split. It’s like a kaleidoscope of political boundaries and its shifting every hour, so they are going to be delayed. There’s also—”

“Cut the politics doc, my son is in there in agony because you PEOPLE don’t know what’s wrong with him. You say they do and now you’re saying you don’t know when they’ll get here? Are you serious?” Nathan yelled.

“Yes that’s ummm...That’s yeah,” the doctor stammered. “Look,” he said with a sigh. “I can’t imagine what you two are going through right now, I pray I never will, and yes, while his condition hasn’t gotten better, it’s not gotten worse. We can keep him stable until they arrive, you just need to be patient for a little longer. I know it’s hard, I know he’s in a lot of pain, and if it’s any concession—and I know it’s a small one—seeing an infant in the state he’s in hasn’t been easy on us either, and we’re all praying to God that he gets better.”

Nathan sighed, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be so rude.”

“You don’t need to apologize sir,” the doctor responded shaking his head. “Now is there anything else you two need?”

“Yeah, my wife refuses to leave our son’s bedside, says she hasn’t slept in three days, and can’t remember the last time she bathed, says she wants someone she knows to come in and watch

over Peter or else she won't leave, and I'm completely swamped with work. Can you see if you can help with that?" Nathan asked.

The doctor rubbed his chin for a moment, thinking, "One of the nurses mentioned she was friends with Elizabeth back at the retreat and I saw them talking after she gave birth, maybe that would work?"

"Maybe, just do something, God knows I already.." Nathan paused, trying to put the sentence together. "I can't have something happen to her as well alright?"

"I'll work something out," the doctor responded. Nathan nodded his head and took a deep breath. Looking into the room again, he saw Elizabeth cradling Peter in her arms with a tired smile on her face as his tiny hands reached up to her. Nathan smiled as well, walking back into the room to spend some time with his family before returning to his office. Nathan began to feel off as he sat alone in his office in a way that couldn't really be explained by sickness alone. He was the duty officer in Laboratory One within the sepulcher. Under normal circumstances, he was supposed to report such feelings to the Department of Containment and immediately undergo a cleansing ritual; however, given his diminished state, he chalked it up to sleep deprivation and stress and went on with his day. As it proceeded, he began to see shadowy figures in the corner of his eye. He felt as if he was being watched from empty corners and darkened rooms as he roamed around the laboratory, checking up on teams' progress and going to meeting after meeting.

Eventually he stopped in the bathroom. As he exited the stall, he felt an impending feeling of dread and his heart began to race. He had to get out of this bathroom. He sprinted to the exit, only to find it locked.

"Now why would you run when I have such an incredible offer to give you?" said a voice.

Turning around Nathan saw a man standing in the restroom who wasn't there before. He was an older man with a receding hairline, gaunt with recessed hazel eyes and thin black hair, wearing a fancy overcoat and suit.

“Who are you?” Nathan asked.

“I think you know who I am,” he said with a smile. “The one prisoner to which you are one of my many guards.”

“God damnit, I should have gotten cleansed hours ago,” Nathan chided himself.

“But if you did that, you couldn’t hear my offer, it involves your...handsome little son,” the man said.

“Speak,” Nathan said with a glare.

“I know the disease that afflicts him—the one that if left untreated will quite painfully kill him. It is a remnant from my side: a curse. Your House of Light can cure it yes, but they’re weeks out, and poor little Peter doesn’t have that much...time. I can remove it...for a price.”

Nathan knew he shouldn’t do this, knew he should cast whatever cleansing spell he knew and rush to the Department of Containment. Ten months ago, he would have gladly done just that. But, his duty to the House of the End was no longer his only, or most important one.

“What is your price,” Nathan responded.

“My freedom of course! Break the seal that binds me and suppresses my reach and I shall cure your son.”

Nathan was wracked with doubt, pacing around the bathroom as the man’s avatar looked on with boredom.

“I can see you’re conflicted. You’re wondering how you know I’ll keep my word. You wonder if I am telling the truth, and while it’s true that I may not be telling you everything, the fact that your son’s curse will eventually kill him is a truth as self-evident as the color of the sky. So yes, I may betray you, and I may in fact kill him. But, as I see it, one way his death is guaranteed, the other it is merely a possibility. So what is your choice?”

Nathan continued to pace, before shaking his head and looking directly at the man.

“No, there has to be another way, I love him more than anything but to let you out? To end the world? No, there’s another way out of this there must be.”

The man chuckled. "Ah so that's your answer, won't be your final one, but I suppose it'll do for now, have a great day," he said as the bathroom door swung open. "We will speak again."

With that ominous last sentence Nathan shuddered, fearing whatever that meant. He weighed his options on whether to get cleansed and have to admit his gross negligence to the Department of Containment, to risk his job, or to just go to his next meeting like nothing happened. Realizing that losing his job or getting demoted with the current state of his life wasn't really an option, he simply continued onto his last meeting. It was a long one and he hoped it wasn't too boring. He needed something to take his mind off of everything. It had been an hour into this meeting and it was as boring as he had hoped it wouldn't be. The minutes stretched on and on as he tried to keep his mind off what just happened. He felt like his soul needed a shower. A few minutes later his boss barged in.

"I'm sorry everyone, Nathan, I need to talk to you right now."

Nathan got up, his heart beginning to race as he saw the worry and fear in his boss's eyes. They went into a side hallway as his boss looked him in the eye.

"You need to get to the medical wing right now."

"What happened is he...is he," Nathan hyperventilated.

Shaking his head with horror, his boss placed both hands firmly on his shoulders.

"Your son is alive, but you need to get there right now. Go."

Nathan had never run so fast in his life. Sprinting at full speed through the security checkpoint out of the sepulcher and up the stairs, reaching the medical wing, he was let through the checkpoint by the guard and found his wife out in the lobby sobbing into her hands. He walked up to her.

"Honey what's going on? What happened?" Nathan asked with audible panic.

"I...I was holding him and suddenly he started to have a seizure again and then he...he...he stopped moving. They said his heart stopped. They were able to get it going again but now



they won't let me inside and...and...and they said that if it happens again, they might not be able to save him and..."

She broke down into incoherent crying and babbling as Nathan grabbed her and gave her a hug to try and comfort her as she continued to sob, tears welling up in his eyes as well. As he hugged her closer, he noticed something in the corner of his eye: a shadowy figure at the edge of the lobby. Its body was indistinguishable from the shadows around it, but its face was clearly visible. It stared directly at him; its mouth glowed and pulsed with light, etched into a cruel smile.

"Hello? Nathan?" said a voice as Nathan jolted awake.

In front of him stood a woman in a red and black robe styled loosely after eastern attire. Her face was completely obscured by a bronze mask with two darkened eyeholes and a black indented line down its middle. Her long black hair flowed in front of her as she bent down to the man holding a card with his name and face on it.

"Are you Nathan?"

Nathan sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

"You're really getting this desperate now? Or is it boredom? My wife was one thing, but I don't even know this woman!" he yelled, sighing as he looked down at woman with a glare.

She stepped back, as if taken aback by his statement.

"I'm not the man, or one of his illusions," she said, touching his hand with hers.

Nathan jumped back as he felt the first warm hand aside from his own in many months.

"You're, an actual person? So I wasn't alone in here? Who are you? Where have you been? What are you doing here?!" Nathan said jumping up from where he was sitting, eyeing the woman with suspicion.

"I was in there, with my master, like I always am," she said gesturing to the blue beam of energy emanating from the statues center.

"Your ma...lady, that's the entrance to a fucking ley line. It's a giant geode shaped like a nerve vein that transports magic.

There's nothing down there aside from crystals and a very hot death," Nathan said as he followed her down a small flight of stairs.

He continued to follow her underneath the statue to a viewing level from which the lay line was visible from the glass floor below.

"Ah, but ye have no faith," she said stepping over the hand railing. "Come, he is waiting for you—and he's not the kind of man who likes to do that," she said as she let her hands go of the railing and fell back into the energy, disappearing in its bright glowing flow.

Nathan stood at the edge, conflicted for a moment as to whether he should follow her, before realizing that he was out of options. He stepped over the railing, took a deep breath, and jumped in. His face slammed against the hard stone surface as he sat there motionless, eyes adjusting to the sudden bright light that flowed in through everything around him. He rolled on his back and saw that he was in a large open-air pavilion. Its many pillars, trellises, and gazebos were all made out of sandstone. The ground itself was made out of reddish sandstone tiles intermixed with greenery—both in the form of curated plant beds and from moss growing between the cracks. In front of him stretched the seemingly endless garden. Behind him sat a railing at the edge of a steep cliff with a massive canyon beyond it. The plants in the garden were unusual. Despite clearly being in a scorching desert, there were plants from every corner of the world, all growing as if they were within their natural environment. The temperature itself was also unnaturally cool, despite the direct sunlight and visible heatwaves ahead of him. Nathan wandered around the garden for several minutes, admiring the architecture and looking for anyone or any sign of someone else within. But, it was empty—at least until he heard a loud creaking. Turning around, he saw a large stone door that had been flung open on a blank wall on the far side that was not there before. Nathan walked through the door which entered into a large promenade that was covered with sandstone trellises in the shape of massive

arches. The trellises were filled with elaborate vines bespeckled with small red flowers and tied off pieces of red fabric which blew in the soft afternoon wind. Small metal encrusted lanterns dangled from the trellises and flecks of gold glinted in their light.

At the far end sat two thrones with a massive red and gold carpet stretching between the door and them. Behind the thrones sat an open balcony with the view of a seemingly endless metropolis stretching far out into the desert beyond. In one throne, the woman from earlier sat at attention. In the other, sat a man wearing a suit of armor covered by a large leather overcoat with matching coattails. This overcoat was then covered by various loose pieces of fabric and belts. His face was completely covered by a steel helmet that matched the rest of his armor. The helmet was covered in ornate etched patterns and symbols. In its center sat a large cross also inlaid with ornate carvings. All the helmet's carvings and etchings pulsed with an orange light that looked like breathing. The man was slumped in his chair with head in his right hand as he let out a deep sigh.

"So Mr...Nathan" he said. His voice teeming with a mixture of boredom and an undercurrent of disgust. "I suppose you're wondering who I am."

"I think I can guess. Desert scenery, glowing orange mask, a woman who I can now see is clearly dressed as your concubine—you're the Monzat aren't you?" Nathan replied.

"Yes, though for clarity's sake, she really isn't any singular concubine, or wife, or romantic interest," the Monzat replied as the woman turned to the Monzat crossed her arms and huffed.

"She's the amalgamation of all of the ones I've had over the years. Thousands of lifetimes of arguments—and good times I suppose—all tucked away into one person. And while I sit waiting for my time to return to the corporeal realm from this boundless aether, she is my only sentient companion. So while it may not seem like it, I am glad to have another man here, though I know you have no intention of staying," the Monzat said, standing up and walking to the circular tiled floor in front of the stairs leading up to his throne.

“You are after my artifacts, to right your wrong. But, before you get them, I must ask for the remainder of your story.”

“What do you mean?” Nathan asked.

“I saw your dream. I’ve seen all of them. And your mind for the little time out of the day where you were out of the man’s influence long enough for me to sneak in. But I don’t know how you got a screaming, seizing infant from the ICU roughly a mile down below the surface into the Sepulcher without anyone noticing. And I am quite curious as to what happened with that, and what happened next.”

Nathan sighed with both uneasiness and confusion.

“We, ugh, we used a sleeping spell that they taught my wife in family class back at the retreat. After that, she hid him in her robes, and we snuck through the security checkpoints and into the Sepulcher.”

The Monzat shook his head.

“A sleeping spell? From ‘family class’? What, are you people too bougie for milk and alcohol?” The Monzat cleared his throat, “I’m sorry, go on, I’m getting distracted.”

“Well there isn’t much more to tell after that. I snuck into the seal’s anti-chamber and shattered it,” Nathan said as he noticed the Monzat visibly grimace. “And then...then...” Nathan sighed as he held his head, as the image began to replay itself over and over.

“And then what Nathan? To face this demon head on, and see your family again, you must overcome your own. This is important,” The Monzat said, urging him on.

“I turned around and saw the shadows overtake them. They lunged at her like hungry snakes, her screams were, I...I can’t get them out of my head.”

The Monzat slowly paced around the rotunda, holding his chin in his hand. “And what of your son’s illness? You now know what caused that right?”

“Yeah, the man did this to another family about two centuries ago. That time the father only managed to crack the seal instead

of shattering it. They cured the child that time by simply bringing her outside of the facility,” Nathan replied.

“And why didn’t you or the medical staff know of this particular incident?” The Monzat said with an air of condescension.

“Some filing clerk misfiled the incident report in with yearly financial records. I found it a few weeks ago by accident.”

“GAAAH,” The Monzat turned away and yelled with anger, his body tensing up as he did. “One of my greatest conquests undone because some intern couldn’t do his job! God DAMNIT!”

With this, his wife came over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Honey, you need to calm down.”

“Unhand me woman,” the Monzat said, shrugging his shoulder and moving away from her as he angrily pointed at her. “Allow me my rage.”

He paced around for a few more minutes, trying to calm himself down.

“Why did you make me recall what happened in specificity? Why is that important to rescuing my family?” Nathan asked.

“Because, the man works with fear and grief. During my crusade and the great descent, my men reported visions of loved ones long since lost to them returning from the dead, only to be brutally butchered in front of them while screaming their name. At home children became sick and died, their wives suffered miscarriages and leapt off buildings. In the time before the man was contained, the world was his playground, and agony and loss were his toys. What he did to you was just a small taste of his potential.” The Monzat continued, “I asked you to tell your entire story, to confess every moment, since your internalization of such agony and grief acts as an anchor for him. That negativity feeds him—it’s why that patch of shadows on your back continues to grow, and why he has continued to subject you to greater and greater levels of torment as your time within that doomed facility has increased. He’s sucking you for all that you are worth. As a result of the remaining seals containing him within the facility, and your other coworkers being enshadowed, you are his

only remaining power source; a battery of misery that he intends to draw from for as long as it takes him to escape the House of the End.”

As The Monzat concluded his speech, the door on the far end of the trellis covered pavilion opened and a series of automatons entered. They were very thin, and made of bronze with sharp blade-like appendages for legs and blank rounded trapezoidal prisms for chests. They had thin, almost human arms and hands, and blank oval shaped heads and small neck parts that curved out from the small of their heads and into the top of their spines—which themselves glowed from the heat vents that ran down their backs. The ones on the outside of the formation were bigger and carried Tvarken Scepters. These were curved spears with crescent blades at their tops with one side being much longer than the other. They were used to quickly decapitate enemies and to fire condensed magical energy from their hollowed edges. Towards the inside of the procession walked a series of smaller automatons. The foremost three were covered with gold inlays and were followed by an entourage of normal automatons behind them. These three were carrying three small wooden boxes encrusted with gold. The procession stopped about halfway between them and the door. The three advanced, placing the wooden boxes a yard or so in front of Nathan and The Monzat. They gently opened them before backing up to their brethren.

“That is his plan anyways,” the Monzat continued his speech from earlier. “You are going to break him of such delusions, you and your wife and son are going to escape, with my help and with the help of my artifacts,” the Monzat said. He walked over to the boxes and gestured to Nathan to follow. “The first is a Darnian Sapphire. It will protect your family from reinfection upon freeing them, and will prevent yours from spreading further,” he said, placing the warm blue stone in Nathans hand. “The second is a spell book with the page marked containing the two spells needed to free your family from their bindings—and you from your sickness. Of note, the latter can only be used by someone

devoid of it, so your wife will have to do it upon your escape," he said gesturing to a bookmark towards the top of the book before handing it to Nathan. Nathan promptly began reading the spells to try and memorize them. "The third," the Monzat said, pulling an ornate silver sword out of the largest box, "is the Blade of Altara, made from a metal older than time, which—in lieu of my magics—is the only thing that can penetrate the man's wickedness." The Monzat admired the sword for a moment before handing it to Nathan. "Be careful with this one, I very much enjoy it and would love to see it returned."

"So these relics, this sword will help me fight him?" Nathan asked.

"It'll help you fend him off while you and your family runs," the Monzat replied.

"But didn't you use these artifacts to contain him? Couldn't I now do that?" Nathan asked, eliciting an uproarious laugh from the Monzat which faintly reverberated through his metal helmet.

"You misunderstand the power of these relics, and what I accomplished. They helped me contain him yes, as did millions of my best mages and warriors—on top of all three of the Master Spinweavers—and even with all that help, it was a struggle. You are but one man sick with an affliction, two when you free your wife. You stand no chance. No, there are some battles you must fight, and others you must run from. For you this is the latter"

"But I can do something at least right? I mean to let this, this evil continue it's..." Nathan said.

"It is what it is. As long as you are gone, he cannot build more power. He will be trapped there. Run and save your family. Leave the task of his containment to greater men." The sky suddenly turned black, and afternoon became night. The Monzat looked around with a knowing gaze. "It is time for you to return," he said placing his armored hand on Nathans shoulder. "When you return he will know you spoke to me and that I gave these artifacts to you. He will throw everything he has at you. You must fight through it with every ounce of strength you have! Your wife

and son are depending on you. I will help where I am able, but the legwork comes to you.”

“And how will I escape once I have them?” Nathan asked.

“Return to where my wife led you, fall through the ley line as before and you will be out—good luck!” The Monzat said to Nathan as the world went dark around him.



### III

Nathan felt as if he was falling, the world black around him. He hit the floor of the deep archives and was immediately hit by a guttural scream. Turning to his right, he saw an end mage enshadowed by the man's influence sprinting towards him. Nathan side stepped the shambling puppet and swung his blade, cleaving the poor man in two, his entrails splattering across the archives floor with a loud slapping noise. Nathan rapidly ascended the stairs from the observation post, turning to his right at the sound of another guttural scream. Nathan sprinted at another mage, charging with all his might, goring him with his blade before turning and running towards the entrance's rotunda. He moved up the stairs and past the large door, encountering three more thralls, all holding swords. Nathan deflected the sword swing of one, ducking underneath the blade and cutting its stomach open as it made a loud gasp and collapsed to the ground.

Still crouching, he lunged at the thrall in front of him, stabbing his blade through it as he rotated around it, cutting it open around its chest. The third hit Nathan in his still-uncursed part of his back. Nathan cried out, rolling around to see his adversary charging at him once again, snarling as it did. It slashed down at Nathan, who quickly rolled to the side and cut its arm, causing it to make a disturbingly human scream as it stumbled back. Nathan ran up to it and slashed its neck as it fell to the ground dead.

He sprinted up the stairs to his right and down the hallway, out of the archives, stumbling back as yet another thrall jumped him from the shadows and pushed him towards the railing. It grabbed at Nathan and tried to dig out his eyes as it pushed with all its might to force him over the edge. Nathan desperately

punched the thrall, momentarily disorienting it as he slashed it three times near the neck, falling over dead. He ran up the stairs and out the door into the security checkpoint but stopped after feeling a projectile whiz past his head.

In the middle of the room he saw a thrall guard pointing a pistol at him. Nathan ducked behind an overturned table and took a deep breath as he jumped over it, casting an impact spell that made the thrall stumble backwards. Nathan ran up to him, cutting off the arm he was holding the pistol with before flipping the sword around in his hand and shoving it through the lower part of the man's jaw. Nathan ran out of the archives and into the hall, feeling angry eyes from all around him.

The man was being silent, and it made Nathan uncomfortable. He turned to his left and dashed up the stairs, running into another thrall halfway up, Nathan slammed its head against the wall and then tossed it down the center of the spiral staircase, hearing it hit the floor far below with a pained yell. Nathan slammed the door open onto the 90th floor and turned to his right as he ran past the chapel and into the long hallway leading to the Sepulcher's elevator. Jumping over another thrall as he slashed his throat open and ran to the elevator, slamming his hand on the button as it slowly descended.

"WHY ARENT YOU DEEAATAAAD," shrieked the man, rattling the complex and knocking loose rocks off the elevator's walls. Nathan staggered out of their way to avoid getting hit by the falling debris as his ears rung.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAH KILL HIM KILL HIM KILL HIM," the man said as more thralls fell onto the elevator from above. Nathan charged at one, knocking it off before it could right itself. Another jumped on Nathan's back and began to slash at his neck. He backed into the moving jagged rock wall of the elevator shaft and slammed into it, hearing the thrall scream as it got impaled on a rock before sliding off and hitting the edge of the elevator with its head, finally falling down the shaft.

The remaining two charged at Nathan at once. He rolled out of the way, taking both their arms off in one clean upward slash

before decapitating one and goring another.

“You know what you just did?” thundered the man, “Those people were still alive, they could see what you were doing, you killed them!”

“SHUT UP,” Nathan screamed, waving his sword in the air, “You’re not going to sink your filthy claws into me again”.

The elevator neared the bottom. Nathan leaped off and began a dead sprint through the walkway, the shadows around him shrieking in a mixture of agony and rage as the light from his lantern burned them off the walls. He ran through the large antechamber and leapt through the security checkpoint and into the Sepulcher.

“KILL HIM!” the man shouted, as the hundreds of enshadowed people within the Sepulcher, Elizabeth among them, began to slowly shamble towards him.

“No...” Nathan muttered, trying to figure out what he was going to do.

“I told you, you will be mine.” The man said with relief.

“No, he will not,” said another voice as the enshadowed thralls stopped moving. From behind, Nathan darted a large orange light, within its center floated a translucent orange figure, the Monzat in æthereal form.

“Get your wife, and run,” the Monzat said before hovering to the center of the room, facing the door.

Nathan sprinted over to where his wife was standing, now facing him. Mid-step, Peter still firmly in her hands, Nathan pulled out the spell book he had been given and began to recite the marked spell, tears briefly welling in his eyes as the shadowy tendrils began to fall off his wife and son with faint hisses. She collapsed to the ground and Peter began to cry.

“Whe-where are we?” she said clasping the crying infant closer to her chest as she tried to get up.

“We are in the sepulcher we need to move, now!” Nathan said as the thralls around them started to move. Nathan grabbed Elizabeth’s arm and pulled her off the ground, grabbing her hand as they sprinted to the door, hearing the thralls break out into a

full sprint behind them. The two ran through the security checkpoint, through the antechamber and into the entry hall, sprinting onto the elevator as Elizabeth slammed the button. The elevator began to slowly ascend, and the horde got closer

“Nathan!” Elizabeth shouted with fear in her voice.

“I know,” Nathan said back, focusing his energy as he summoned another impact spell on the rocks above the door, blasting them into a landslide that covered the entrance. Nathan grabbed his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

“What just happened?” Elizabeth asked him.

“There’s a way out in the deep archives, it’s near the ley line observation point,” Nathan responded

“The deep archives? Can’t we just use the front door or, oh wait...” She shook her head, remembering what had happened. “They engaged the final contingency didn’t they?” Nathan nodded his head.

“Who told you about this exit in the deep archives?” Elizabeth asked.

“The Monzat, that’s what that orange light in the sepulcher was as well,” Nathan responded.

“The voice that yelled at us? That was him? Crap, you’ve had a busy...” she looked around confused, “How long has it been?”

“The longest six months of my life,” Nathan replied with a sigh.

“Oh honey,” Elizabeth replied, walking over to her husband but stopped when the elevator hit the top of the shaft.

“We have to get going, no way the man is going to stop now.” Nathan grabbed her hand once again as they ran through the junction filled corridor, hearing thralls running behind them, sharply turning the corner and running past the chapel and into the spiral stairs. Above them the couple heard the sound of the horde of thralls making their descent, some sliding down the stairs and getting trampled under the feet of others.

Peter cried as Elizabeth held him to her chest, trying to calm the infant down while also keeping pace with her husband, they slammed open the door to the 80th floor and ran into the

archives, Nathan stopped them as he heard the sound of metal clanking against metal.

“Get behind me,” Nathan said, looking ahead he saw two thrallled guards holding automatic rifles. Nathan pulled out his sword and threw his hand forward in front of him, casting a ward to deflect the oncoming bullets. Sprinting up to them he stabbed one through the chest while punching the other, flipping his sword around and stabbing the punched one in the neck.

“Let’s go now,” Elizabeth followed him, making sure to cover their sons face to hide the corpses from him as she quickly stepped over them and onto the marble staircase leading down from the entryway towards the deep archives.

The couple entered the lobby and past the large vault door. They made it to about halfway down the stairs before they heard an inhuman roar from the top of the stairs. They both looked up long enough to see the massive vault door get ripped off its hinges and thrown into the metal and glass wall behind it.

In the now empty doorway stood a massive creature, hundreds of thralls smushed into the shape of one very large humanoid figure. It roared again, all of the thralls screams in unison.

“Run!” Nathan yelled as they sprinted down the remainder of the steps at a faster pace, turning the corner into the deep archives and sprinting towards the observation point. Nathan stopped at the stairs.

“Nathan what are you doing!” Elizabeth pleaded.

“One second,” He said, watching as the massive figure lumbered towards them. Nathan focused all his energy on the massive statue behind him. “Come on, come on...” he mumbled, “just a little closer...”

The giant lunged at him and Nathan psionically pulled with all his strength, dislodging the statue from its base and slamming it down on the wretched amalgam of flesh and shadow. Its many bones and flesh caving in with a series of audibly wet cracks. Nathan shouted at the ceiling, hearing a faint but enraged yell in return. Nathan could see the surviving thralls dislodging

themselves from the mass. They had to leave now. He walked towards his wife as she asked where the exit was. Without speaking, he bear hugged both his wife and young son, and with the two firmly in hand, leapt into the ley lines magical steam.

Elizabeth opened her eyes last, shocked at the grass and dirt below her. Nathan had already stood up and began to remove his robe and shirt.

“Nathan what are you doing...oh my god!” She said, seeing the writhing shadowy mass on her husbands back, illuminated by the twilight before the dawn. He handed her the spell book and pointed to the spell.

“Get this thing off me,” The two sat lying against a tree with a small fire to their right, covered by both of their robes. Nathan had wedged his shirt between the tree and his gnarled back. The curse had left what looked like second or third-degree burns, nothing a good healer couldn’t fix but they were not there yet.

Nathan knew where they were though; they were 50 miles south of the facility at the southern edge of the Udathi mountain range, ahead of them by about 2 miles stood the town of Edwards Rest, a small trading post built around a transport hub consisting of a train station and a couple aerial landing pads. They could walk to it but both of them were completely exhausted from the turmoil they had experienced within the facility. Peter was fighting sleep with every ounce of his being. Nathan hugged both Elizabeth and Peter closer. He had his first sunrise to see.