

# **Dreaming of Eden**

**By**

**James Lucien**

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**Dedication:**

To all those who have loved without fear.

The most beautiful moments of any day are sunrise and sunset when night meets day and the darkness touches light.

## Chapter 1 – Genesis Elicitation

*“Gods among so many unconscious drones. Our kind is responsible for the genesis of this world. We should be revered by all!”* Sephiroth commands from across the pool table without speaking a single word aloud.

His presence is fierce. His stance marauding. He conjures escalating fear in every passing moment. Even the dense fog of rank tobacco haze avoids him. Furthering his dark eminence, his face is hidden within constant shadow. Though it is true, the only light source within the crowded saloon is a dim candle upon each of the round wooden tables that surround them, and a wrought-iron hundred-candle chandelier over the aged stage behind Jonas at the other end of the saloon.

Sephiroth bears no weapons that Jonas can detect, besides his gleaming vampiric fangs and a lone steel gauntlet. Yet Jonas squeezes the hand grips of his two custom-built triple-rotating-barrel pistols, one holstered on each hip, with sweating palms, his pointer fingers stroking the triggers anxiously.

Jonas meets Sephiroth’s blood-red eyes, which seem to burn through his white drooping-spiked hair like hellish orbs, and his non-verbal reply is relayed to him. *“Demigods, how can you believe us to be so when our powers are restricted? Our influence limited? When at times we are driven to become devils? The creation of this world occurs by infinitesimal degrees of the populace, and the overall result is eternal genesis that is far beyond control.”*

*“Satan, the Devil, is a human creation,”* Sephiroth retorts with only a glance. *“Fear created for the purpose of control.”*

*“When I speak of devils, I speak of destructive forces. Not an entity equal but opposite to the creator force.”*

The heavy footsteps of Sephiroth’s white-leather combat boots, matching his white-leather trench coat, cause the worn floorboards to groan as he makes his way around the pool table. *“I warn you now that I will give you no further warning.”*

The overt celebrate atmosphere of the saloon is choked and strained by a growing undercurrent of ominous ambiance. As if evil forces are cumulating beyond the wooden walls, readying to siege the souls of all those within at Sephiroth’s invocation.

Jonas’ muscles tense under his black Dragon Skin body armor and leather trench with indigo stitching, which along with his black boots, hair, and eyes, is a divergent reflection to Sephiroth. *“I am only here to chat.”* Until I have gotten the info I need that is. Then I will neutralize you.

As Sephiroth pulls his cue stick back at an acute angle, his chest is exposed for a moment. The steel gauntlet upon his right hand runs up his arm over his shoulder and covers his chest. Three large spikes protrude from his trench on the same shoulder. A pallid vulture rests upon the opposite. Sephiroth strikes the cue ball hard and it hops over the seven, hits the fourteen splitting the twelve and the nine. All three sink in different pockets. *“Is that what you told the once great Alchemist-Zero?”*

Jonas has not picked up his cue stick once and knows he will not be given the opportunity either. *“I gave him an alternative option.”*

*“Taking down a fable to become a legend yourself. So Seraph has plunged into the abyss for a greater avatar?”*

*“I relinquished the use of an avatar, so I may live a more virtuous life.”*

Sephiroth strikes the cue ball at an unusual angle. The cue spins in an arch between the four and the two and slaps the ten into the corner pocket. *“So your execution deliverance was virtuous?”*

*“He is the only one to ever die in interrogation.”*

*“The only one not to break under the mental torture, to die of thirst rather than give up his coordinates, that you are aware of.”*

Jonas looks away, giving no reply to his credible accusation. He forces the violent upsurge of guilt back into the dark recesses of his mind where his vicious demons lurk.

The walls of the old saloon are littered with withered wanted dead or alive posters; Billy The Kid, Vash The Stampede, Doc Holliday, Mad Dog Tannen, Jesse James, Remy LeBeau, and of course Sephiroth himself, though the only features apparent are the glow of his eyes through his hair and the glint of his fangs.

As Sephiroth goes to the bar for a refill, Jonas casually scans the saloon in search of anyone who may be Sephiroth’s acolytes in hiding. They could be anyone, anywhere.

Twenty men and women dressed in cowboy hats, boots, spurs and all, sit at the long red-oak bar that runs along the left wall. Another ninety sit at the forty tables playing cards. Another twenty stand on the balcony that wraps around the entire saloon. And still, more occupy the bedrooms upstairs enjoying intimate encounters.

Most of the men watch the can-can girls on the stage, in frilly black and violet satin corsets with taffeta skirts, and purple feathered headpieces, sashaying, twirling, and kicking to the saloon music of a piano player. The gawking men are ignorant that one of the dancers is Jonas’ partner, Aliya Belladonna. Her appearance has been altered to match the Old West style can-can girls, her midnight-black hair flowing through the air as she dances.

Aliya is a true goddess, as divine as an angel. Although Jonas would never admit it to her, Aliya’s degree of beauty is beyond extraordinary.

He is dreadfully aware that she cannot be trusted, and yet he secretly yearns for her, craves to embrace her, longs to reveal his innermost secrets to her. Complete foolishness. Even so, his formidable resolve wanes more so each day, as if she has cast a persuasive enchantment upon him.

Jonas breaks his coveting stare, returning his attention to Sephiroth, whose malicious aura seems somehow to mute the rowdy saloon as if his personal will holds dominance over the environment.

As Sephiroth downs his beer, he gives Jonas a glance. *“Legend has it that you’ve also roped the Last Cowboy and vanquished the Akuma Ronin.”*

*“Walker and Woo stole millions.”*

Sephiroth places his mug on the rail of the table. *“They nobly shifted funds from the hands of war into the mouths of the starving.”*

*“Robin Hood was a simple crook and so were they.”*

*“And so you chose to send trusting companions to their demise, simply for using their abilities to make your world a better place to exist.”*

*“How can you place all your faith in a chimera?”*

*“How can you believe your world to be any less an illusion? Reality is perception, subjective. If you can accept that hellish existence, then why deny a utopic nirvana?”* Sephiroth lines up his shot. *“Within this world, our only limitations are those of our imagination.”*

*“Reality isn’t truly known until you include all layers of interpretation, and the Alphas of this world can be twisted no more than the natural laws of what you daftly refer to as my world.”*

*“Evolution has proven anything is possible.”* Sephiroth banks the cue ball off five walls, barely missing several of the solids, splitting the eleven and the thirteen. The eleven sinks in the corner pocket and the thirteen in the adjacent side pocket. The cue comes to rest center of the table, in alignment with the eight ball for the final shot. *“Join me in creating a Neo Eden. Refuse me and I promise you will never hear such an offer again.”*

*“I stand firm in my subjective perception. Your world will never be anything more than a blinding matrix of lies.”*

*“You fall prey to the naive ramblings of a child.”*

He knows of Justine! But how? *“Her wisdom has proven greater than yours or mine.”*

As he chalks his pool stick, Sephiroth stares at the can-can girls for a moment. He then speaks aloud. “Killing the spiders to save the butterflies...” He bends forward over the table with a twisted grin, lining up his winning shot. “It’s only rational until you realize that by striving for it...” He looks up at Jonas, his eyes burning a demonic crimson, and snarls, “You become a spider yourself!”

His pallid vulture takes flight with a squawk, feathers left fluttering about.

Sephiroth pulls back his pool stick and his armor glows as if the steel had been drawn from a forging fire. As he takes his shot, the crimson energy transfers from his armor into the pool stick and then into the cue ball. The eight ball is smacked by the cue ball, absorbs the energy and pops off the table.

Switching into attack mode, Jonas’ mind and body accelerate, causing the world around him to slow drastically. Jonas pulls his triple-rotating-barrel pistols as the glowing eight-ball strikes him in the chest, exploding on contact and throwing him into the air.

He manages to fire seven shots as he is blown backward through the crowded saloon.

Sephiroth pops the pool table into the air with a swift knee, and each of Jonas’ explosive bullets hit the green felt, clouding the air with jagged splinters as the table is ripped in two.

Jonas slams into Aliya and she cries out in painful surprise as they crash into the rear wall.

Ignoring both the pain in his chest from the exploding eight ball and the pain in the back of his skull from smacking the wall, Jonas jumps to his feet as Sephiroth, in rapid succession, charges and flings an onslaught of beer mugs and shot glasses stolen from surrounding tables.

Glass shards erupt across the saloon as Jonas shatters each one, fire and smoke exploding from his pistols.

Leaping from the stage onto the closest rickety table, Jonas fires continuously, pistol barrels spinning madly, as he jumps from table to table, knocking mugs and cards to the floor.

Excitement imbued in his twisted grin, Sephiroth dances through the saloon, twirling between patrons and jumping aerial cartwheels over tables. He dodges most of Jonas’ shots. The others are reflected by his trench. When Jonas gets too close, Sephiroth grabs bewildered men from their barstools and women screaming from their tables, tossing them at Jonas, each one bursting into a black cloud as they are hit by Jonas’ relentless firing.

Holstering his weapons, Jonas darts down the red-oak bar, kicking beer mugs to the floor, and jumps into a dragon-kick. Like a bolt of lightning, Jonas surges down at Sephiroth.

Reflecting Jonas’ kick with his right forearm, Sephiroth grabs Jonas’ throat with a tiger’s paw grip, squeezing with crushing might. He uppercuts Jonas in the stomach and jabs him in the face with his gauntleted fist. Jonas’ nose gushes blood.

Clutching Jonas’ hair, Sephiroth’s eyes flare as his steel armor burns crimson.

Eyes clamped shut, jaw locked, Jonas strains furiously, struggling to reverse the explosive and deadly energy flow. He then twists Sephiroth's wrist from his throat as he pulls his knees up and kicks off Sephiroth's chest into a backflip. Jonas hits the floor and zips forward, throwing a flurry of punches, kicks, elbows, and knees, which Sephiroth blocks and reflects.

The patrons of the saloon stare in awe at their demonstration of superhuman strength and agility, their movements appearing only as streaks of light, their bodies a blur, the sound of their every block and contact a thunderclap. The saloon trembles with their every strike.

Sephiroth parries Jonas' attack and counters with a two-fisted punch, hitting Jonas in the chest with enough force to throw him over the bar, smashing into shelves of liquor bottles.

Dripping in alcohol, his vision a haze, Jonas climbs onto the bar.

Sephiroth slaps his armored palm down on the other end. There is a loud crackle and the bar pulses crimson.

The bar detonates as Jonas attempts to leap away, igniting his alcohol doused coat and sending him head over heels crashing through a wooden table.

Jonas rolls to his feet still ablaze and wobbles for just a moment before regaining his equanimity. He and his leather trench are unharmed by the orange flames, which extinguish as the alcohol burns away.

Jonas cocks an eyebrow. "Now was that entirely necessary, or are you *compensating* for something?"

Sephiroth grabs the closest rickety table, kicks the legs off and heaves it at Jonas like a crimson glowing Frisbee.

Leaping straight up, Jonas hops off the spinning table, using the resulting explosion to propel himself towards Sephiroth, fist drawn in a classic Superman pose.

With an abrupt sidestep, Sephiroth seizes Jonas' outstretched arm and jabs him in the ribs with his gauntleted fist. If not for Jonas' body armor, his ribs would have snapped.

Spinning around, Sephiroth swings Jonas into the air and then uppercuts him in the abdomen as he jerks Jonas downward. Sephiroth then heaves Jonas up again and releases him into the air. As Jonas falls, Sephiroth lunges forward, firing a fierce punch into his chest.

Smashing through multiple tables, Jonas comes to rest a few tables from the stage. He wheezes, "It must be *minuscule*."

Jonas' lungs scream for oxygen as he forces himself to his feet. Before he can draw his weapons, Sephiroth's armored fist bashes him in the back of the skull. How did he get behind me?

As Jonas falls forward, he manages to pull a pistol and spins around firing as his back hits the floor.

With a smiling sneer, Sephiroth reflects each shot with his armored gauntlet, the wooden walls bursting from the ricocheted bullets.

Tossing her feathered headpiece aside, Aliya runs and jumps from the stage, arms stretched forward, in an attempt to grab a hold of Sephiroth while his back is turned. No!

Sephiroth twirls around and grabs hold of her corset with his glowing gauntlet and flings her at Jonas.

Jonas holsters his weapon, and in one liquid movement, he leaps up and catches Aliya by her pulsing dress, spinning her around hard enough to rip her out of the gown, and tosses the dress into the air. The gown hits the ceiling and explodes.

Besides her black boots, Aliya's left wearing nothing more than a lacy purple bra and cheeky panties. Jonas can't help from losing himself for a moment as he gazes wide-eyed at her sexy athletic physique.

Sephiroth whistles a catcall from the exit of the saloon. He isn't whistling at Aliya. All the patrons of the bar, who only a moment ago were watching in amazement, now hold MP5K submachine guns pointed at Jonas and Aliya.

The vulture lands upon Sephiroth's shoulder and snickers. Damn that ugly bird.

"Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night." Sephiroth gives a slight bow. "Until our paths cross again." And he steps backward out the exit.

Jonas raises his hands in surrender. It's not over yet.

He closes his eyes in concentration and snaps his fingers. The magazines of the patron's MP5Ks drop to the floor as Jonas opens his eyes and gives Aliya a nod.

Aliya winks and retractable heel and toe spikes extend from her boots. She rolls across Jonas' back into a butterfly-kick, spiking a woman in the neck, who explodes into a black cloud. Aliya drops and spins into a three-sixty sweep-kick, tripping five men, leaps up and throws a three-sixty spin-kick, slashing four men's throats, who all burst into black mist.

Another man eager for punishment reaches for her from behind.

Aliya springs into a backflip, landing on his shoulders, and pinches his head between her boots. In the blink of an eye, she swings her arms and upper-body for momentum before twisting her legs and breaking his neck. She lands on her feet amongst the ensuing black haze, her fists drawn in a crouching pose.

A burly man swings his gun at her.

Aliya grips his swinging wrist with her left hand and twists it, disarming him, while thrusting her right elbow into his eye, and follows it with a lightning quick standing spin-kick, her heel hitting his temple so hard his neck snaps, leaving only black mist.

Another man grabs her from behind in a bear hug.

With a grunt of effort, she throws her leg straight up in the air, her knee striking her chest, burying a toe spike in his forehead, creating yet another cloud.

Four men spring at Jonas.

He ducks and dodges their punches, then grabs two of them by the back of the neck and slams their foreheads together. They burst into clouds. The other two, he grabs by the wrists and spins around, tearing their arms out of their sockets, and knocking down everyone around him, before tossing one into the left balcony and one into the right, smashing into others who are reloading their weapons.

Jonas pulls his guns, switching from semi-auto to automatic with a flick of his thumbs, and holds them out at his sides. In a flash of firing bullets and spinning barrels, he swings his arms together until they cross, shredding the wooden railing and walls as he tears through all the patrons upon the balconies about to fire down at him, leaving only a black mist that flows down over the remaining patrons below, all of which will have reloaded their weapons in the next three seconds. There's too many.

"Aliya, fetal now!"

She drops to the floor and ducks her head between her legs.

Jonas tears off his trench and flings it over her, then blinks and every candle goes out, casting the saloon into complete darkness. Jonas jumps, inverts the gravity around himself, flips backward to reorient, and then lands on the ceiling.

Firing down at the men one after the next, they are unaware of the origin of the shots and so they fire blind, inadvertently shooting each other. Within seconds, every one of them has vanished.

Jonas front-flips off the ceiling, correcting his inverted gravity, and as his boots hit the floor all the candles relight.

Aliya hands him his trench amongst the fog of exploded patrons. “Why did Sephiroth attack?”

“There’s no time.” He slips on his coat. “I’ll explain how he spotted you later.”

“Me?” Aliya balks. “Of course nothing is ever *your* fault.”

“One of my shots wasn’t reflected by Sephiroth’s coat.” Jonas pulls up the left sleeve of his trench to access the watch-sized computer embedded on the underside of his wrist.

Aliya flares her violet eyes with frustration. “*And?*”

He loves making her work for it. “It was absorbed.” He presses his thumb to the circle touch-screen and it fans outward, tripling in size to display a larger image. “Lock track,” is his voiced command. A moment later. “I’ve got a location. Let’s go.”

They pace out of the saloon into a dark post-apocalyptic wasteland. The deformed steel beams of ruined structures shoot up from shattered concrete and broken asphalt, like cruel claws of a demonic legion reaching out from Hades. It is in no way the Old West.

Pressing an on-screen icon, a black and purple circular vortex, four feet in diameter, opens before them in the air. Jonas presses once more and the translucent holo-screen fans closed. He jerks his arm covering over it with his sleeve.

Aliya’s now wearing Dragon Skin body armor, a Desert Eagle pistol holstered on her right thigh, and her hair, now deep-purple, is pulled into a ponytail, her former disguise evaporated.

At six-foot-six, Jonas is a head taller. He looks down at her. “Beauty before wisdom.”

Aliya rolls her eyes and then leaps into a front-flip, entering the portal feet first. Reorienting during the slide is difficult, and landing on your face upon exiting the portal is always less than gratifying.

Jonas leaps feet first in after her, and as he does so, in his peripheral vision, he notices several black wraithlike creatures moving towards them in the deadly ruins. What the hell? A pack of neuro-vampires? He quivers at the thought and is happy to have escaped without having to stave off those morbid nightmares.

Black and purple swirl around them in a vivid display of visual jubilation as they slide through the nexus like a wormhole through space. Thirty seconds later, they reach another night sky in another world.

A spiked twenty-foot-tall iron gate and an endless stone wall bristled with black roses, the vines like barbed wire, surrounds the perimeter, impeding their entrance. Beyond the gate lays a daunting vista. A blackened brick path winding upward through an impenetrable forest, leading to a black stone castle, overgrown with blood-red ivy. The fortified stronghold seems to have grown out of the jagged rock of the mound it rests upon.

Jonas and Aliya glance at each other, then in unison throw a spinning back-kick to the gate. It doesn’t budge.

Grabbing the bars of the gate, electricity sparking wildly, Jonas closes his eyes in concentration. With intense exertion, he bends the iron rods apart enough to slip through. As soon as he releases them, they reform as if never touched.

Aliya takes a running start and jump-flips over the spiked gate. The spikes extend in a piercing attempt, but Aliya catches the points with the tips of her fingers, gracefully performing a front-split handstand for a moment, before flipping forward and landing upon the path.

They are greeted by the faint but ominous howl of wolves, and a fixed lunar eclipse, a blood moon, which hangs low over the citadel. A pyramidal ziggurat of towers and turrets spiraling into the gloom of a magnificent conglomerate of baroque and gothic architecture.

“Looks downright cozy.” Jonas wiggles his eyebrows with a roguish grin. “Wanna see if there are any vacancies?”

Aliya gives him a sideways glance. “What did you have in mi—” She yelps as her feet are pulled out from under her. Grasping desperately for something to hold on to, she is dragged backward toward the stone wall. Shit!

Jonas jumps twenty feet into the air, and from within his trench he pulls out and activates two four-foot-long cyan plasma-rapiers, slashing the rose veins reaching up for him, the same thorny vines coiling around Aliya and pinning her to the wall, digging into her skin and poisoning her. Her flesh is hardening into solid bark. I’ve only got a minute before I’ve lost her!

Plasma-rapiers twirling, Jonas leaps to her aid while slashing through an onslaught of swirling and darting living vines.

Forcing his rapiers along the wall in a wide arc, Jonas burns through the vines and scares the stone. He deactivates his rapiers, and tucking them away, catches Aliya in his arms as she falls free. In a few great bounds, he carries her out of reach of the vines.

Her mouth crusted over with tree bark, her wide violet eyes beg for his aid as her skin shifts from feather soft to wooden stiff.

Jonas calls forth, “Elysian!” And there is a bright burst of spiraling pink glitters of light above his right shoulder.

Ascending from the rapture of light is a six-inch-tall faerie, her skin a luminescent pink, with long locks of fuchsia hair that reaches to her knees, shimmering blue eyes, sparkling pink wings of light that flutter upon her naked back, and boisterous breasts garnished with red rose petals that are also sewn into scanty panties.

With a squeaky voice, Elysian greets, “At your service, Master.”

Jonas nods towards Aliya. “Give her a kiss.”

“Do I have to?” Elysian pouts with her hands on her hips.

He narrows his eyes. “*Now.*”

Elysian scowls at him, then flutters forward and pecks Aliya’s upper lip. A pink energy shimmers over Aliya’s body and the bark reverts to flesh.

Jonas drops Aliya to her feet. Before either one of them can speak, Elysian points and squeaks. “Master!”

A gargantuan seven-headed dragon, wearing armored flesh of black diamond scales, bellows flames from its fanged mouths as it climbs over the moonlit castle. It spreads its taloned wings, casting the stone citadel into fleeting darkness, before heaving itself into the night sky. Great Leviathan!

Aliya steps back. “Should we retreat and wait for the other angels?”

“There aren’t gonna be any reinforcements, otherwise they would already have arrived. I have got to find Sephiroth. I can handle this if you can hold its attention long enough.”

“Hold its attention?” She blinks in bewilderment. “What exactly do you suggest?”

“Another can-can maybe?” Jonas smirks and darts down the path.

Archangel Michael, twelve-foot-tall and carved from bloodstone, holds a bejeweled broadsword above his head at the center of a fountain of blood. It bisects the twisting three-mile path, midway between the gate and the citadel.

As Jonas approaches the stone statue, the fire Drake swoops down, spewing a rolling inferno from each of its seven mouths.

Jonas leaps from the path, fire splashing over his back, and rolls into the undergrowth of the forest. He jumps up, readying himself for another firestorm, and the sky ignites. Aliya has fired off a cluster bomb of flares, winning the attention of the dragon.

Jonas races the few remaining yards to the large fountain and discovers what he had thought to be blood is red wine. Leaping onto the Archangel's wide shoulders, Jonas easily pulls the sword free. This has gotta be the key.

Gunshots turn Jonas' attention toward Aliya, who is shooting as the fire Drake tucks its massive wings to dive at her.

"Elysian," Jonas commands, "return the dragon's focus to me. Quick!"

"Yes, Master." A tiny bow carved from black ironwood materializes within her hands and a quiver of arrows upon her back. Releasing a single arrow, it pierces the sky like a laser beam and strikes the brute's hindquarters. An explosion of pink burning light ensues.

Mid-dive, the gargantuan dragon lets out an irritated roar and swoops around, reversing its course.

Jonas leaps from Archangel Michael's shoulders and walks forward with certainty, blade in hand, as the dragon barrels down at him with an expeditious pace.

Blackened brick shatters and a cloud of dust whirls into the air as the beast punches down. Swinging back its seven heads, it inhales a deep breath, before thrusting its heads forward and discharging a scorching bellow, the flames of all seven converging on Jonas.

Leaning forward, Jonas holds out the broadsword, reflecting the blaze. Flames curl all around him but refuse to touch him.

With a guttural snarl, the dragon lowers its seven heads to Jonas, and a putrid searing mist washes over him.

Jonas gazes into the emerald eyes of the dragon's center head for a moment, smiles and front-flips onto its crown. Running down its long neck and jagged back, he drags the blade behind him, tearing into its rigid hide. A green mist pours from its wound and spirals back through it, mending the lesion as swiftly as it is torn open. Jonas leaps from its spiked tail and rolls to his feet, as Aliya fires a rocket from a shoulder-held launcher. The detonation is deafening but causes no damage.

With a powerful beat of its wings, the dragon turns and lifts into the air. At the center of its massive chest, a single scale is missing from its underbelly. Why make it so obvious?

"Elysian, guide my sword." As the dragon prepares to release another scorching bellow of flames, Jonas takes a step back and lunges the broadsword. It follows a spiraling pink ribbon of energy through the air and pierces the dragon's underbelly.

With a final colossal roar, the Leviathan crashes down beside the path, bricks breaking and popping into the air from the force of its fall. The dragon utters a death rattle and rolls onto its back like a dead insect.

Jonas marches over, scales its massive underside, clutches the hilt of the sword and tugs it from its bleeding belly as Aliya arrives, stepping over one of the dragon's heads while eyeing it as if it might snap at her.

He hops down beside her, and gloats, “Calculated precision is more powerful than brute strength.”

She affords him a deadpan look and a crack of sarcasm. “I’ll be sure to don my cheerleader outfit later and perform a congratulating cheer.”

“Not necessary.” He grins. “It’s already happening in my head.”

She huffs, “Don’t you had a white rabbit to catch?”

“Yeah,” he nods. “Stop thrusting your pom poms and swaying your melons. We gotta move.”

Aliya snorts. “Swaying? How big are my tits in your imagination?” She throws up her palms before he can reply. “Actually, I don’t wanna know.”

Carrying the Archangel’s broadsword over his shoulder, Jonas jogs the rest of the path, scanning the forest edge as he goes, Aliya following close behind.

The path leads to a huge erect drawbridge and a fifty-foot-wide moat surrounding the fortress.

Aliya pulls her Desert Eagle pistol, and with a purposeful blink, it morphs into a grappling hook gun. “I can handle this one. You just stand there and look pretty.”

She aims and fires the hook at the watchtower to the right of the drawbridge. She holds her free hand out to Jonas. “Sword, please.”

“If you drop it in the moat,” he threatens, “you’re going swimming.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” she scoffs, “just hand it over already.”

He does and she tucks it through the rear of her belt, jumps and retracts the line of her grappling hook, boots skimming the water.

Barracudas leap from the dark water, scales shimmering in the moonlight, and snap at her feet as she swings across.

Scaling the outer wall, she climbs onto the archer’s embattlement atop, alongside the watchtower. A moment later, there comes the sound of two quick slashes to iron chains, and the colossal drawbridge comes crashing down.

Jonas jogs along the huge wooden bridge as Aliya jumps from the wall, and he catches her in his arms.

Aliya grins with pride. “Whaddya think about that?”

“That I could totally pinch your butt and toss you in that moat.” Jonas drops her on her feet and takes the broadsword from her.

An immense armored iron gate impedes their entry into the outer bailey. There will be no bending of *these* bars.

Jonas discovers a stone door in the wall to the right, which the drawbridge had been hiding. He wedges the tip of the sword between the stone and pries it open. A blinding white light surges from behind the door.

Jonas looks over his shoulder at Aliya. “Everything out here seems quiet for the moment, but I need you to guard this access in case anyone tries exiting this way.”

“*Fine*,” Aliya groans. “Assign me guard duty so you can go play.”

“Do *not* leave this bridge.”

“Guard duty,” she sulks. “I got it. Get in there.”

Stepping through the doorway, Jonas’ eyes refocus to the daylight of the new world within. He lets the broadsword fall to the ground, knowing it is useless against the pack of velociraptors that surround him.

\* \* \*

Alone in the moonlight, Aliya paces the colossal bridge, wondering what exciting surprises awaited Jonas after the door had sealed. I'm positive I'm missing out.

For about a year now, she has been by his side as little more than an observer as he hunted Sephiroth. Investigating one dead end lead after the next. She is restless for action. Bored at playing a neophyte. But it's required so as to hide her true reason for their partnering. Worst of all, and against all reason, she has found herself completely infatuated with him. Lusting after him even. Jonas invades her thoughts and dreams, day and night. She attempts to feign annoyance at his charming charisma but is unable to keep it up for too long. If she gives into her passionate longing for him, it will only serve to multiply the emotional pain she will endure when the time comes to fulfill her true task. Her confliction between duty and desire grows more potent each day.

Her line of thought is broken by the howling cries of wolves, which seem to have grown much closer. Perhaps I'll have a little excitement of my own. She leaves the bridge and strolls along the winding path to investigate. I won't go far. Jonas will never know I left.

A few minutes later, she stops and grips her pistol.

Narrowed eyes shine blue in the moonlight. Pointed gray ears stand erect. Black lips curl, exposing sharp canines. The white fur of its chest and belly, along with the rest of its bulgy dark gray coat, is bristled in anger. Its bushy tail is pointed straight out, ready to attack. The timber wolf is joined by another and another, each slinking out of the wood until she is facing a pack of eleven snarling wolves.

A strange grunting noise comes up behind her. Aliya turns around slow, so as not to further agitate the already pissed off wolves before her.

A dark-skinned naked man, tall and bestial, is frothing at the mouth. He gawks at her with hungry orange eyes and her blood goes cold.

\* \* \*

The nine six-foot-tall velociraptors snarl, bearing their sharp, curved teeth, and thud their sickle-shaped retractable toe-claws upon the ground. If they all attack at once, there's no way I'll survive. They will tear me apart.

The velociraptors chirp and sway their long tails as if readying to pounce on him.

Jonas begins to sweat as he ever so gradually reaches for his plasma rapiers hidden within his trench.

The pack looks to one another as if to signal their group attack. Shit! They all kick dirt and bark, but then they turn and run off in different directions.

Sephiroth's idea of a joke. Guess these raptors never read Michael Crichton.

Jonas lets out a sign of relief and takes in his surroundings.

The aurora of a new day is rising over the primeval terrain of luxuriant and diversified life. Rolling green hills spotted with various exotic fruit trees, Japanese tree lilac, redvein enkianthus, ruby spice, and countless others lead to a distant forest thick with bamboo. The morning sky is painted with every shade of blue and purple visible to the human eye, and speckled with numerous birds. Three moons are placed consecutively in the great beyond.

No, the first is the moon. The following two are Venus and Mercury. Planetary aliment?

Jonas peers over his shoulder at the end of a rainbow. Well, it won't be hard to find the exit.

Jogging forward a distance, Jonas notices an ivory pteranodon circling above. Doubling his visual magnification, he spies Sephiroth resting against a fruit-bearing tree similar to a weeping willow. His head is bowed and his eyes closed. The tree's shadow looms over him like a mysterious veil. The succulent scent on the air and the symphonic concordance of the various animals and birds seem to cause Sephiroth a beatific peace.

Drawing a pistol, Jonas jogs over the rolling hills and approaches Sephiroth with caution. "You have created such a beautiful lie." Off to his left is a small herd of woolly mammoth, drinking from a brook that runs out from the wood. "It's a little primordial for my taste, however."

Sephiroth doesn't bother to look up. "You left Chloe's replacement outside? Better make this quick, or she will be *buried* in the necropolis alongside her."

"Your view is askew," Jonas replies, ignoring a painful memory and Sephiroth's threat. At the edge of the forest to his right, purple pandas mirthfully feed upon bamboo shoots. "The animals here do not belong in this place or time."

Sephiroth waves away his criticism with a gesture, and the branches of the tree sway. "Nature's first green is gold, her hardest hue to hold. Her early leaf's a flower; but only so an hour. Then leaf subsides to leaf. So Eden sank to grief, so dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay."

Jonas pretends not to notice the tree's sudden movement, although it gives him a cold shiver. Sephiroth knew I hit him with a tracer. He lured me here on purpose.

Sephiroth opens his eyes, smoldering globes behind white hair. "Legend...religious *mythology* says Satan was a cherub whose responsibility was guarding over Eden." He holds his palm out. "Apparently, he desired much more." A bough of the tree arches over and drops an apple-sized blue fuzzy produce into his open hand. "Welcome to my garden, the land before sin. Would you like a piece of fruit?"

"My stomach doesn't agree with the forbidden." Jonas levels his weapon at Sephiroth's shadowed face.

"How can you deny yourself such freedom?" Sephiroth takes a large bite and closes his eyes to savor the flavor.

Jonas catches a tantalizing whiff of a vanilla-strawberry-like aroma. The sweet scent causes an undeniable yearning to experience its taste. "How can you speak of freedom, when you are enslaved?"

Sephiroth looks up with a wrathful sting in his voice. "Within this world, I am a slave to no one."

"You have created your shackles with this world, and only you can break those bonds."

"You speak as if the binds of your world aren't asphyxiating the populace into slavery." Sephiroth laughs lightly. "The validity of your quarrel is superfluous."

Jonas retorts, "1 John 5:19; 'We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil-'"

Sephiroth interjects. "Matthew 4:1-4; 'Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.''" "This taunt was a temptation of the flesh. Would you agree, Legend?"

“Your point?”

“John 2:1-11 speaks of Jesus’ wedding to Mary Magdalene, where he performed his first miracle. What difference is there between stones to bread or water to wine?” Sephiroth places a quieting finger to his lips and shakes his head. “There is no use in quoting scripture. The contradictions are abundant. (See the Appendix for examples.)

“Religions seized the mind, propagating inadequacy and inferiority while portraying esoteric knowledge as evil. Its prohibition was indeed a blessing.”

Jonas ignores his twisted blasphemy and drives right to the point. “Tell me who your source is. Join *me* and allied we can defeat him.”

“Even synergistically, our nebulous powers are negligible against his supremacy.”

And that is all I needed to know.

Jonas squeezes the trigger. As the bullet leaves the chamber it morphs into a blue-morpho butterfly and flutters away. How has he gained such power?

The fruit in Sephiroth’s hand changes into a pistol. “Try mine.” He tosses it to Jonas, but as he catches it, both his pistol and Sephiroth’s morph into a white dove and ascend into the blue. “Your efforts are futile. The one you seek is an almighty of your world, just as I am within this world. And it is with that power that I will create a true Zion.”

“Your premonitions are forewarned *false* prophesies. No amount of cunning will ever subvert my faith.”

“Blind faith is for the mindless. This chat has ended.”

And therefore it’s time to take you down.

Jonas becomes a blur of light as he darts forward.

The pteranodon circling above tucks its wings and dives. With a horrible shriek, it rips through the silent blue sky. As it reaches Jonas its scream becomes a growl and it morphs into a saber-toothed tiger, its fur arctic-blue besmeared with sinister-black stripes, its matching icy-blue eyes yearning for blood.

The tiger’s savage roar stops Jonas dead in his tracks.

Sephiroth walks forward and climbs upon the saber’s back. “Please stay and enjoy the company of my Cherubim.” With one hand he grabs a hold of the flesh of the saber’s neck, the other arm he wraps under its neckline.

“By Cherubim you mean Satanicha?”

Sephiroth’s majestic beast gives a feral snarl, before turning around and carrying him swiftly into the forest. The bamboo grass, a hundred-foot-tall and impenetrable, parts, creating a clear path for him to escape, and as he passes through, the bamboo closes the path behind him.

Jonas rushes after him and plunges into the living forest. I’ve gotta get to him before he slips out a backdoor. Rapiers in hand, he cuts through the dense terrain, the bamboo fighting him all the way. Before he makes it a hundred yards, a zap of electricity crackles loudly.

What appears to be an eight-foot-tall demon, emerges above him. A flying knee-strike hits Jonas in the chest with a sledgehammer force, and his rapiers fly from his hands and deactivate as he slams to the ground. Another zap of electricity and the demon vanishes.

\* \* \*

The pack of eleven timber wolves snarl and bark as they surround Aliya. The naked man howls as coarse black fur sprouts from his thick skin, a duel tail jets from his backside, and his jaw

crackles loud as it elongates into a snout. Werewolf! Way more of a challenge than I was hoping for.

Now that Jonas is away, at least I may expose my proper form. Stretching her hands out in front of her, Aliya commands aloud, "Transcendence."

A violet mandalic sigil flashes before her, stretches around her forming an alchemic circle, brightens and spins about as she transcends. She pulls her hands apart, creating a lightning staff of an opalescent metal holding a rainbow moonstone. Her bodysuit withdraws into Brazilian-cut white silk panties and strapless bra, her boots into purple moccasin. An open violet velvet cloak, set with amethyst runes of power along the hem, materializes upon her back. Her ears grow pointed and her skin becomes a radiant white like reflected moonlight on freshly fallen snow. Aliya has become an Elvin Mage aglow with thaumaturgic magick.

Casting her opalescent staff towards the howling man beast, she commands aloud, "By Selene the Greek moon goddess, I bind you to your human form!"

Struck by a spiraling white flame, the shifting man falls to the ground and rolls about in an angry struggle, but continues to alter. He's too far into the change!

Thrusting her staff, lightning surges from its moonstone, striking the werewolf as he attempts to stand. His transmutation complete, he barks and in response, the ravenous wolves bound at Aliya.

She thumps the blackened brick path with the base of her staff. "Gaia's Protective Aura!"

A purplish transparent bubble envelopes her, muting the angry barks of the wolves that bounce off it onto their backs.

Grabbing the closest wolf by its hind legs, the werewolf heaves it into the air and rips into its stomach with his razor teeth, the wolf yelping and whining. The werewolf spits a mouthful of bloody guts upon Aliya's bubble. The thick viscera boils and smokes until the bubble bursts. The werewolf tosses the dying wolf aside and leaps at Aliya with a ferocious roar.

Aliya shoves her staff into his wide mouth as he forces her to the ground. The stone cracks and breaks under her from the force of his takedown. Her vision blurs and her ears ring from the slamming of her head. Her arms strain as she struggles against the berserk werewolf. Gnashing his teeth, he attempts to bite through her metal staff, but cannot. So he thrashes his head about, ripping the staff from her grip, and it comes to rest a few feet away.

Pinning her shoulders with his front paws, the werewolf barks and howls in triumph. Aliya cringes as his foaming saliva spatters across her face, into her mouth and eyes. His hot breath stinks of raw meat and burst intestines. Ew!

Aliya takes advantage of his delay to kill her, with a yank of his tongue and a punch in the snout, followed by a double kick in the chest that flips him backward. She kips-up and dives for her staff as the wolves attack her.

They tug at her cloak but its magick fabric will not tear. The werewolf barks and leaps atop of her as the wolves manage to pull her cloak partially off. He chomps down on her shoulder, piercing muscle and bone.

Screaming in pain, Aliya grasps her staff with her opposite hand and holds it to the night sky. "Divine Fury!"

Vast pillars of white lightning strike down from the heavens, and the werewolf and his timber wolves are electrified and thrown flailing through the air.

Pulling her velvet cloak back on, Aliya escapes into the dark wood.

The trees are intertwined and the large roots weaved together. The forest floor is dense with twisted brush and bathed in a ghoulish mist. The tree trunks are drenched with oily colored

flowers and a moist black moss, which seems to bleed in the beams of moonlight that strike through the treetops. The feel of evil permeates throughout the woodland.

With the wolf-man behind me, there's only one way I can go. There's gotta be another way out.

Aliya moves in deeper, over slimy tree roots and through abnormally large and viscous spider-webs, using her staff as a walking stick and its shining crystal as a guiding light.

Dammit, Jonas, how could you leave me out here alone?

\* \* \*

As Jonas kips-up to his feet, there is another zap of electricity. A stone heel smashes his forehead, slamming him back to the ground. Jonas' vision blurs and the bamboo seems to spin around him.

He closes his eyes, waiting for the head pain and spinning to subside. A loud zap accompanies a sternum-cracking force on his chest that knocks the wind out of him. Jonas grinds his teeth in pain and opens his eyes.

Standing on his chest, the stone-like demon stares down at him with glassy onyx eyes, full of jaundiced hatred, and wings that span twelve feet.

Jonas wheezes with a sarcastic expression. "So what do I call you?"

"I am the Gargoyle Lord of Tartarus." His harsh voice reverberates like an echo in a deep cavern as if it were traveling from a satanic underworld. "I move freely through its pits of darkness."

"And I thought the *truly* ugly gargoyles only appeared at night. Anyhow, you're about to be a pile of rubble."

Tartarus laughs as he wraps his forked tail tight around Jonas' neck, and then flaps his wings, lifting Jonas into the air by the throat.

Jonas' eyes bulge and gagging sounds utter from his widely stretched mouth. He grips a hold of Tartarus' tail, painfully squeezing his fingers between the stone tail and his throat. Jonas jounces his legs forward, kicking Tartarus in the stomach.

Tartarus unravels his tail, but Jonas holds his firm grip and yanks Tartarus downward. Just before Tartarus would have hit the ground, he zaps away.

Jonas lands on his feet, massaging his throat as he scans for the demon's reappearance.

Hearing a zap behind him, Jonas spins around and is met with Tartarus' right foot to the side of his face, followed by a fierce left hook to his opposite cheek, twisting his neck and sending him spinning into bamboo and to the forest floor.

Jonas rolls over, dodging a series of axe-kicks aimed for stomping his skull, then kips-up while pulling his remaining pistol.

Tartarus zaps beside him, swiping his weapon and jabbing him in the face, slamming Jonas back to the ground. Jonas is then smacked in the head with his crumbled pistol.

Zap! A brutal front-kick to the ribs throws Jonas into the air. Zap! A double upward-elbow to the stomach sends him higher. Zap! A backflip double knee to the chest shoots him even higher. Zap! A two-fisted uppercut to the gut throws him above the bamboo. Zap! A spinning back-kick to the face flings Jonas across the bamboo tops. Zap! A bicycle-kick strikes his back.

A cloud of dirt is thrown into the air as Jonas plows into the ground face first with a crushing force. Zap! A stone hand grips Jonas' neck and lifts him off the ground. With his other hand, Tartarus pinches Jonas' arms behind his back, while using his tail to lock Jonas' legs in place.

“Now that you have been judged by the Dark Lord, your punishment will be executed by the Lord of Light.”

Jonas opens his swollen eyes to see a twelve-foot-tall Nephilim, naked but for a loincloth, marching toward him, radiating orange with solar energy. Looking into his eyes is as painful as staring into the sun.

“I am Resheph.” He holds his fists at his sides as crackling red plasma streaks down his arms growing brighter. “Prepare yourself for a pulsar.”

Jonas spits a mouthful of blood. “Thanks for the warning.”

Resheph claps his arms and a boiling bolt of plasma surges from his massive fists.

Jonas closes his eyes to focus and zaps behind Resheph. He pulls Resheph into a headlock as Tartarus is struck by the plasma blast and bursts into a black mist.

Resheph grunts as he breaks the headlock by smashing his bald head backward into Jonas’ forehead, blurring Jonas’ vision. Before Jonas can recover, Resheph spins around and slams the knuckles of his fists together. An orb of orange and red electricity explodes outward from Resheph.

Jonas is electrocuted and burned as he is thrown through the air, smashing through bamboo until he hits the ground. *Damn*, that hurt. He rolls over, his trench charred and smoking. One of his plasma-rapiers is in reach. He grabs it and conceals it in his sleeve. He coughs and pretends to be unable to stand, falling on his side.

Resheph moves toward him wearing a victorious smile as he swings his arms at his sides, red plasma heating up along his entire body. “The essence of Amen-Ra will consume—”

Jonas zaps behind Resheph, the hilt of his rapier pressed to the back of his gleaming skull. “Amen to you too.” He ignites his rapier and cyan plasma bursts from between Resheph’s eyes and he explodes into a black cloud.

Jonas extinguishes his rapier as Elysian flutters to his side, leaving a pink sparkling trail in her wake. “Thanks for the teleport clone. How about one of your sweet kisses?”

Elysian giggles. “Always *my* pleasure.” And she gives his bottom lip a soft seductive lick.

A pink energy shimmers over him, healing his wounds and restoring his trench. “Your tender loving care always makes me feel like a new man.”

Elysian blushes. “I bet you say that to all the woodland faeries.”

Jonas grins. “You know my heart beats only for you.”

He stands erect as he notices a large puddle of water lying before him become agitated. What new hell is this? He steps back as Elysian hides within his trench.

Winter rain spirals upward from the rippling puddle and then funnels inward on itself as it turns from slush into an expanding cyclone of snow. Snow becomes hail, which solidifies into the solid yet flexible form of a man of ice, seven-foot-tall with icy-blue eyes.

The icy figure speaks with a country twang, his breath a cold mist. “At least my bunkmate had the courtesy to give me a reach around when *he* screwed me.”

Jonas’ eyes go wide, matching the voice to his sculpted face. Keith Walker is alive!

“You have a look of dreadful recognition upon your face.”

“Walker,” Jonas exclaims, “I thought you were dead.”

“The man you knew has passed.” His voice loses the twang and gains great depth. “I am known as Ninurta.”

“I was under the impression you were going for the green tights and hood look.”

Ninurta sneers and thick, ice spikes protrude from his shoulders, down his arms, and from the knuckles of his clenched fists. “How sad it is that your soul has faded away along with the

rest of your transhumanism society. Their minds so polluted with propaganda that they blindly follow the corporate media and commercialize cults orchestrated by the plutocracy, like perfect little soldiers marching away their wasted and meaningless lives.

Ninurta spits his words like acid. “Their world crumbles around them, and they do *nothing*. Their rulers continue to feed the war machine while ignoring the thousands that starve to death each day. No real effort has ever been made by those in control to bring longstanding positive change. Why? Because fascism can only endure in conditions of perpetual warfare.

“I tire of asking when will the soporific masses open their eyes and see that their profiteering gluttony of a system is *obliterating* everything. If a cold slap is what they require to awaken from their evil innocence, then that is what I will deliver.”

“Since when has terrorism ever done anything further than scare the masses into surrendering their freedoms and inciting more war?”

“They surrender mere illusions, for that is the truth of their remaining freedoms.” Ninurta points to the beautiful forest all around them with an open palm. “There are those who see the world as it is and ask why. And then there are those who dream of things that never were and ask why not.”

“Who was it that was obsessed with possessing the Spear of Destiny?” Jonas rests his chin on his fist for just a second. “That’s right, it was *Hitler*. With your destructive ways, they will never be anything more than *dreams*.”

“It’s only after you’ve lost everything, that you’re free to do anything.”

“So where is this grand ark that may save the *chosen* from your great deluge?”

“Can you not see *we* are the anointed blessed with the abilities to be saviors?”

“Everyone everywhere who has ever lived is equal in the eyes of God. Our praise to him can never be any greater than any another’s.”

“God does not need our praise. God requires nothing of anyone or anything in the universe.” Ninurta spreads his arms wide. “God *is* the universe.”

“You mean created.” Jonas corrects.

“Created from himself, and therefore *is* the universe and all that it encompasses, meaning, of course, we are all God.”

“You speak as blasphemously as Sephiroth, believing you’re a god!”

“Jesus was tried and executed as a blasphemer.”

“Inflicting terror on the innocent is an act of cowardice!”

Ice spreads outward from Ninurta’s feet upon the ground and under Jonas’ feet until the two of them are standing on opposite ends of a circular ice rink. “The *traitor* amongst us has the audacity—”

Jonas interrupts with a grin. “So, the cowboy thing wasn’t doing it for you anymore?”

“I retired my stallion and hung up my lasso and six-shooters for a greater power.”

“And how much did that cost...only your soul?”

“*You* tore my soul from me when you threw me into the netherworld with those devils. And for what? Some twisted idea of patriotism? You have been *deceived* and in turn have become a deceiver yourself. It is your regime that is the terrorist, not us Cherubim, or our growing legion of disciples. And even after your treachery, we offer you forgiveness, and yet you continue to stand against us.

“So now you will feel my frozen hand of death!”

Jonas ignites his plasma rapier and raises a skeptic eyebrow. “And I had hoped we were gonna make snow angels.”

Ninurta flexes his biceps with a grinning sneer and huge ice stalagmites sprout from the circle of ice.

Jonas leaps into a backflip, landing outside the edge of the deadly ice rink. Well, this is gonna be a reunion to write home about.

Ninurta falls forward, shifting into water and splashing over the ice stalagmites.

Jonas throws his hands out at his sides. “Where you’d go? I was just about—”

Water erupts from the ice rink right before him, forming into Ninurta in an instant. An icy foot kicks the rapier from Jonas’ outstretched hand, and a jagged, frozen fist strikes him across the cheek.

Jonas hits the ground hard, rolls over and reaches for his fallen rapier, but it’s smashed by an ice comet before he can grasp it.

Deep slashes across his cheek, incurred by Ninurta’s jagged fist, begin to frost over. “Elysian!”

She springs from his trench, fires an arrow into Ninurta’s chest and vanishes. The arrow bursts, but causes no damage.

The frigid infection spreading over his face reverses, and Jonas rises from the ground. He shrugs off his trench, then moves into an offensive stance, his fists up to his elbows shifting into ice. “Now that I got my gloves, we can do this proper.”

Ninurta lunges with a straight punch. Jonas blocks with his left arm and counters with a right jab to Ninurta’s face, then spins on his left leg, kicking a high roundhouse. Ninurta ducks and Jonas follows into a sweep. Ninurta jumps over his sweep and fires a comet with a palm thrust. The jagged ice hits Jonas in the chest with the force of a rocket-propelled grenade, throwing him backward twenty feet, bashing through bamboo.

With a swift series of palm thrusts, Ninurta fires off ten comets.

Jonas shatters each one of his comets mid-air with counter comets. Ice shards fly in all directions, piercing bamboo. Jonas then charges forward firing more ice comets as he runs.

Ninurta waves his hands forward, projecting a stream of slush, which solidifies into a thick wall of ice to shield himself from Jonas’ ice projectiles.

Choosing to keep his stolen ability of teleportation a secret until it can be used most effectively, Jonas leaps over the ice wall into a dragon-kick, rather than teleport, and kicks Ninurta in the chest, throwing him to the ground.

The moment Ninurta hits the ground, he rolls backward and leaps to his feet, then fires another series of comets.

Ducking and dodging, Jonas returns fire. Realizing he is not making any progress, he simply turns and runs.

A short distance away, a huge Himalayan cedar, amongst a small clearing in the tall bamboo, bursts into green flames, tossing Jonas to the ground.

The blaze is scourging, though the fire does not consume the tree, and neither does it produce smoke.

Jonas stands and the flames leap from the cedar to the bamboo, surrounding Jonas in a ring of fire, laughing loudly as they do so.

The green flames then jump from the bamboo and swirl around Jonas, singeing his face and melting his icy fists.

The flames form into a man ablaze with green fire. Kevin Woo, once known as the Akuma Ronin, former head of the Neo-Bushido. How are Walker and Woo both alive?!

“I have to admit the screeching laughter makes a good entrance, but if you really wanna wow your audience, you should try singing *Light My Fire* by The Doors. Now that would make for a suitable entry.” With a look of mock intrigue, Jonas questions, “So what’s with the showy display of fire? Do I look like Moses to you?”

“Moses carried a sapphire staff passed down from the first man, not a useless shield with the markings of tyranny.”

“What happened to the way of the samurai, and that ‘national independence through personal independence’ slogan you were always spouting?”

“I have risen to a new level of enlightenment, where I have abandoned Tao Magick for the greater Ming Fire.” White flames spiral around him in a reflection of angry excitement. “A man who can’t hold true to his beliefs is never more than pathetic. So I ask, where was the honor in your betrayal?”

“Depending upon whose perspective you take, *you* are the betrayer.”

“*You* should have committed seppuku for your dishonor. *You* cast me into Hades, and now for your sins, I will banish you into eternal destruction, for I have become *Gehenna!*”

Jonas throws up his hands in petition. “No please, save the pyrotechnics. Really, I don’t find them all that impressive.”

Gehenna explodes in rage and green fireballs shot out in all directions.

Jonas drops to his knees and throws his arms up to shield himself. Maybe I shouldn’t have pissed him off.

Gehenna ignores the minute irritation of one of Elysian’s arrows bursting in his thigh and releases a stream of swirling green flames from his palms held together at the wrists.

Jonas rolls into a somersault, dodging the flames, and bounds to his feet thrusting ice comets. Then springs over Gehenna, firing more ice projectiles as he flips through the air, and lands in the branches of the huge Himalayan cedar.

Pulling his fists apart, Jonas crafts a double-pointed staff of ice as Gehenna leaps into the tree after him. Jabbing and thrusting his ice spear, Jonas chases Gehenna around the tree, bouncing from branch to branch, climbing higher and higher.

Gehenna ducks under a thrust of Jonas’ ice staff and grabs a hold of it, then, swinging from a tree limb with one hand, he kicks Jonas in the chest.

Jonas is thrown backward out of the tree, but twists around mid-fall like a cat, and lands on his feet. He then backflips to dodge his staff, which strikes the ground where he had landed.

Expelling a hailstorm of comets into the lower trunk of the cedar, Jonas hacks through the wood, forcing Gehenna to jump down as the cedar comes crashing to the ground.

Pulling the staff from the soil, Jonas darts forward in a flash, leaps a butterfly-kick into a butterfly-twist, the staff slicing through the air at Gehenna, who jumps back into a handspring, dodging his attack.

Jonas twirls the staff around his neck into a wide swing aimed at Gehenna’s fiery head, and Gehenna ducks while thrusting a ball of flames.

Green fire splashes over Jonas’ chest as an ice comet smashes into his lower back, signaling Ninurta’s presence.

Jonas drops and rolls on the ground to extinguish himself, then stumbles to his feet while holding his aching back. He throws his fists out at his sides, his right arm expanding with ice, his left arm bursting into green flame. “This will not be the first time I took you both down at once.”

Ninurta holds his hand out toward Gehenna and fires a continuous stream of water. Gehenna mirrors him with a stream of fire, creating a steam cloud that leaves Jonas sweating and blinded. Shit, I can't teleport if I can't see!

He hears them slink off in opposite directions. He moves backward, crouched with eyes closed, ready to defend or strike at any moment. Damn, I wish I had thermal vision!

A flush of cold air washes over Jonas' face and he jumps back in reflex. A flash of heat swashes his back and he spins around as a scorching fist swings at him. He throws a roundhouse kick, his heel smashing against Gehenna's fiery skull, just as an ice comet shatters against his back. Dammit!

Jonas hits the ground and tumbles back to his feet as a fiery fist comes out of the mist at him from the left, and a frozen fist from the right. Jonas ducks right then left, leaps backward onto his hands and throws a handspring kick. Both his feet make contact and Jonas hears Ninurta and Gehenna hit the ground.

The tepid haze is beginning to dissipate. I've gotta end this now.

Spotting Ninurta moving toward him in the thinning fog, Jonas crouches, pulling his fiery fist down, and then jumps up and simultaneously teleports, striking Ninurta in the chin with a flaming uppercut so fierce that Ninurta's head bursts into a snowy mist before his body bursts into a black cloud.

Gehenna charges at Jonas from behind. Jonas shifts his fiery fist to ice, and runs it over his right arm down to his hand, forming a thick frozen pike. He then spins around into a leaping punch, piercing Gehenna's heart.

As the black cloud that ensues fades away, Jonas shifts his arms back to flesh. "Elysian, can you give me—"

There is a soft tickle in his ears. He realizes it is a lullaby, though it is spoken in... Twilight language?

Giving into to an incredible urge, he walks toward the source of the song. The tickle spreads over his body, intensifying into a deep massage.

He stops and closes his eyes. The pain of his injuries vanish. It feels like a dozen elven masseuses are stroking and kneading every inch of his body. Their little fondling hands turn to hundreds of tingling kisses, which mature into a licking and sucking of his thickening manhood. The euphonious sensation reaches into the deepest depths of his mind, bringing him to the cusp of physical and mental orgasm!

Then it twists into labyrinthitis-like vertigo. Jonas opens his mouth wide to bawl in terrible pain, but cannot. His mind is disassociating from his body.

\* \* \*

A candle's flame of hope lights up within Aliya's heart as she comes across a rocky stream. It's only two feet wide, but it cuts through the dense forest. Her purple moccasins splash as she runs upon the wet stones. Finally, I can place a little distance between myself and the damn pack of wolves!

And of course, it is in that moment that the werewolf howls somewhere close behind her, and the wolves rush in at her from both sides of the stream, blowing out her candle's small flame.

"Newton's Law Inverted!" Aliya spins around, her staff pointed out, the moonstone emanating a purple wave of energy.

The wolves lose their grip of the undergrowth, and float about, barking in confusion. That'll hold them for awhile. The werewolf, behind the pack, scurries up a tree, dodging the wave of her anti-gravity spell.

The small stream widens into a creek. Time to summon a lift.

Aliya thrusts her staff forward as she runs atop the widening creek, her moccasins never breaking the surface of the water. "Phantasy Mustang of Deliverance!"

A winged horse of pearl white, with violet eyes and matching horn, alchemizes from a rupture of white light. Bounding onto her back, Aliya grips her reins and she takes off in haste. Her Pegasus neighs in annoyance, forced to keep her grand wings folded, until an opening in the forest canapé can be found.

They soon leave the creek, upon finding a dry path.

The tear in Aliya's shoulder throbs with every heartbeat, each a bit heavier than the last. The lycanthropy infection ripping at her insides like venom through her veins, the poison twisting her stomach, blurring her vision, and destabilizing her mind.

Strange grunting seems to come from the trees. Auditory hallucinations?

Aliya holds as tightly as she can manage the reins with her left hand, and her staff with her right. The strange grunting in the trees, like mating wild boar, grows louder and more excited. What the hell is that?

Four three-foot-tall gray-skinned creatures, bubbling infected flesh, oozing olive-green, rancid tattered clothing, moldy and blood stained, leap from the trees at her squealing. Their putrid smell causes her to gag.

The first catches hold of the tail of her Pegasus, but falls, disappearing into the undergrowth. The second catches the reins and holds fast. The third lands upon Aliya's back and yanks at her hair. The fourth, Aliya strikes with her glowing staff and it's trampled underfoot with a shriek.

The goblin on her back babbles in some ungodly tongue and wrenches cruelly at her hair, causing her to slip from her saddle. The goblin gripping the reins manages to climb up her Pegasus as she struggles against goblin behind her. The climbing goblin squeals in delight and smacks her hard across the face, pushing her off the saddle completely.

She scarcely hangs on, her feet locked around the neck of her Pegasus and the reins held tight in her left hand. The lycanthropy in her blood burns her tensing muscles, causing them to spasm.

One goblin kicks at her feet, attempting to knock her to the ground, while the other jerks the reins, attempting to force her Pegasus off the path into a tree.

Her Pegasus neighs in fright as it wavers toward the surrounding forest. Brush scrapes across Aliya's face, slashing her cheek.

She thrusts her staff towards the blood moon. "Lunar Baptism!"

The rainbow moonstone at the head of her opalescent staff pulses with a brilliant white light, casting a heavenly halo over Aliya and her Pegasus. The thick flesh of the goblins begins to burn as if by acid. Foul beasts!

They both leap away, squealing like forked pigs as they disappear into the dark wood.

Aliya pulls herself up onto the saddle as a small clearing comes into view. Finally, an entrance to the sky!

She whispers into her Pegasus's ear. "Freedom awaits us ahead."

Her Pegasus neighs and charges forward with a celestial swiftness.

As they reach the clearing, the open sky in sight, the timber wolves break from the wood, surrounding them on all sides. Her Pegasus bounds into the air and spreads her beautiful wings for flight.

The wolves leap at her, clamping their teeth into her wings, and tearing her from the sky. No! No! No! They broke my anti-gravity spell swifter than I thought possible!

Aliya dives from her Pegasus's back over the wolves, hits the ground and rolls to her feet. She runs into the forest. Her Pegasus screams as she is torn apart. I'm sorry my beautiful mustang.

Aliya grows weaker with every passing moment, tripping and falling again and again in the fog, with only the werewolf's howls to direct her away. Sliding down a rocky hill, at last, she has found the forest's end. Thank Gaia!

Aliya slows to a brisk walk, passing an old white oak with the word 'Purgatory' carved deep into its trunk. It is barely visible in the thick mist as she enters a decrepit graveyard. There is no fence that she can see in the fog and darkness, but there is also no grass, bushes or trees, only dirt and ancient gravestones, the engraved names long ago eroded away, leaving no memories of the deceased below. With her every step, maggots and worms bleed from the soft, moist soil, like so many starved piranhas to a hung of floating beef. Ew!

The werewolf, leading his barking pack, breaks from the forest behind her. They race down the rocky hill but halt with angry growls at the periphery of the foggy cemetery. They do not enter but instead surround the burial ground, the wolves whining in frustration as they pace the border.

Exhausted, Aliya bends over placing her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. The lycanthropy infection rips at her muscles and tears at her mind. Every heartbeat brings her closer to bestial insanity. Her gums throbbing, she strokes them with her tongue and realizes her teeth had grown larger, sharp and pointed. Shit!

Leaves of the forest trees rustle as a cold breeze flows down into the graveyard. The eerie sound of the wind is like a crying moan of the departed. A haunting chill burrows into the marrow of her bones. The fog twirls in little twisters all around her and begins to take hazy forms. Misty hands reach out for her as weeping faces take shape, as though the fog were a medium for the damned.

Her throat restricts and she has trouble swallowing. Unsure if it is the lycanthropy or if she is being choked by the unholy mist, she steps back in fear. Something from within the fog, something more than a restless spirit, something corporeal, clutches her ankle.

Aliya struggles against it, using her staff for balance, kicking her leg furiously. The haze clears a bit from her thrashing. What has taken a death grip of her ankle, is a bony hand with rotting flesh clinging to it.

She screams and another rotting hand lurches from the soil, grasping her other ankle tight. The angry discarnate, visible in the fog, have somehow conjured their corpses from the grave.

\* \* \*

With adamant mental will and the aid of Elysian squeaking in his ear to direct him through, Jonas manages to escape the mental labyrinth and realign his mind with his body. His eyes pop open with more anger directed at himself for so easily being hypnotized, than at the hypnotist.

A tan-skinned woman, appearing about eighteen-years-old at most, garlanded with vines like green snakes, sits upon the low branch of a huluppu tree. A small fig leaf conceals her feminine flower, and her long scarlet hair, which matches her intense eyes, hide her naked breasts.

Hopping down from the limb, she strolls toward him with a walk as enchanting as her angelic voice. She coos, “You are *much* cuter than the last one he sent.”

“And you would be the sycophantic psychotic Eva?”

“Not quite. I am the first wife, Lilith.”

“Well, Lilith, I’ve gotten a little turned around here. You think you could point me in the direction of Sephiroth?”

“Sure, but wouldn’t you rather stay and play with me?”

The erotic demoness pulls in a deep breath and Jonas pulls back his fist in reaction. Before Jonas’ fist reaches Lilith, she opens her mouth, unhinging her jaw like a snake about to swallow its prey, and lets out her breath in the form of a pulverizing banshee cry that throws Jonas through the air at the speed of sound.

He smashes through bamboo as he flies a mile through the jungle. A great redwood tree at the center of the garden ends his flight and snaps his lower spine as he slams into it.

Jonas lays on the ground, his eyes, ears and nose bleeding, his body scraped and bruised, his mind spinning dizzy. He moans, “Elysian, hit me with another sweet kiss. Elysian?”

She lay at his side, wings and neck broken. He scopes her up and gives her a gentle kiss, causing her little body to vanish.

I’ve gotta heal myself.

Closing his eyes, Jonas breathes deep, focusing his mind to mend himself.

Once he has pulled himself together, he grabs a broken chunk of bamboo and teleports his way back to Lilith.

He zaps behind her, reaches around her and shoves the bamboo into her open mouth.

With a short muffled shout, the bamboo explodes into splinters.

Jonas bursts into the flames of Gehenna as Lilith spins around and lets out a screech that extinguishes his flames while smacking him into the huluppu with enough force to embed him in the trunk.

Her chest rising, Lilith breathes deep to blast him again, but Jonas zaps forward punching a frosty fist into her widening mouth. He smirks and her eyes bulge in horror as the blood running to her brain begins to freeze.

Lilith’s shin rams between Jonas legs’, and with a silent cry of pain he falls to his knees.

Lilith drops onto her knees and lets out a scream so incredibly loud it hits an inaudible pitch, and Jonas is cast into the sky.

\* \* \*

Too drained by the lycanthropy to hold her Elvin form, Aliya shifts back into her human appearance and morphs her staff into an XM8 carbine.

She fires the assault rifle at the wrists of the two rotting hands clutching her ankles. The bones splinter and shatter. She kicks off the remains and leaps onto the gravestone behind her, chest heaving as she gasps for air.

The stone begins to wobble as more dead hands reach up through the dirt and fog, pulling and pushing. Shit!

The gravestone falls and she jumps to another. Aliya fires her carbine at the wrenching arms of the undead as they topple each stone, while she leaps from one stone to the next until she runs out of standing gravestones.

Four hands grab a hold of her boots and yank her waist deep into the soft soil with a single powerful tug. Closing her eyes for a second, her carbine changes into a grappling hook gun. She fires at the oak tree, catching hold of a large branch. Before she can squeeze the trigger to retract the line, there's a frenzied growl and the taut line slackens. The wolves have bitten the line in two.

A second tug buries her up to her chest and Aliya twists her body around to grab a hold of a fallen tombstone, halting her descent into the necropolis. The tugging on her ankles and legs stop. Yet before she can free herself of the moist grave, a corpse bursts from the ground and begins strangling her. Its eyes are deep red, completely bloodshot. Its bottom lip has been chewed off, baring black teeth, cracked and broken. And its withered skin is a sickly yellow.

Letting go of the headstone, she punches the zombie in the face. Its head twists in an unnatural angle as its neck snaps, but the undead man continues choking her. Grabbing the grappling hook gun, she begins beating the revenant in the face with it.

Another corpse springs from the ground, grabbing her shoulders from behind. It bites her ear with a famished groan and tears it from her scalp.

Aliya utters an agonizing screech and drops the grappling hook gun. She thumbs her embedded wrist computer and it fans outward. She presses a preset com-link icon, and with her last breath of air, she screams as the undead pull her into the earth. "Jonas!"

\* \* \*

Jonas flies out the exit through the rainbow, landing hard on the drawbridge. His ears ring like a grenade has gone off in his eardrums. The world around him is mute and out of focus.

He rolls over and stares up at the blurred blood moon as he waits for his mind to refocus. Lilith's scream has a strange vertigo effect. Finally, he regains composure and rises to his feet.

His embedded wrist computer pulses red for his attention. He thumbs the circle touch-screen and it fans outward, tripling in size to display Aliya shouting, though he cannot hear her scream due to his busted eardrums. "Locate Aliya," is his voiced command, and her direction and distance are displayed. He presses the exit icon and the translucent holo-screen fans closed.

Doubling, and then quadrupling his visual magnification, Jonas spots a pack of wolves running about in the far distance, right about where Aliya should be.

Jonas zaps into a dark graveyard, thick with fog, just as the tips of Aliya's fingers disappear into the soil.

He dives onto the ground and plunges his hand into the dirt, grabs her wrist and struggles to pull her up, but is pulled in with her, his arm sinking in up to his shoulder.

Jonas concentrates all his strength, and then yanks so hard that Aliya shoots up out of the earth and into the air. She hits the ground and rolls over, coughing hard until she vomits a stomach full of maggots and worms. She reeks of death.

Aliya stands up on shaky legs. He reads her muddy lips since he can barely hear her. "You think you could get Tinker Bell to hit me with another kiss."

"Sorry, but she's returned to Neverland. Your pain endurance is extremely high for a neophyte."

Aliya spits dirt and maggots, ignoring his comment. “How did you get passed the wolves?”

“Sephiroth’s Cherubim taught me a few tricks, including line-of-sight teleportation.”

Aliya attempts to wipe the mud from her mouth with her dirty hands. “Can you teleport us out of here?”

“I can zap myself around, but I haven’t figured out how to transport other people yet.” Jonas shuts his eyes for a moment and a half-sphere-shaped gadget materializes in his hand. He places it on the ground, flat side down.

“What is that?”

“It fires primary seismic waves.” Jonas closes his eyes again, healing his busted eardrums a little. Blinded by the thick mist, his hearing will be extremely important. “It will raise those from beyond the grave.”

A horrid moaning comes from all around them.

Aliya places a healing bandage over her bleeding scalp where an ear used to reside. “I tried shooting them but it didn’t have much effect.”

“You must have been using the wrong weapon.” Jonas blinks and a semi-auto lever-action Bone-Jack shotgun appears in each hand. He hands one to Aliya. “Didn’t you ever play Resident Evil when you were young?”

“No,” she shakes her head. “I always chose fantasy rather than horror.”

Before Jonas can reply, she fires her shotgun, and the head of a zombie, reaching out from the thick mist, bursts from his rotting body.

Jonas spins around and leans against Aliya’s back. He fires point blank at a revenant that lurches at him from the fog, tearing its half rotten head from its shoulders.

A dragger, a zombie with no legs, grips Jonas’ right ankle and goes for his calf with its teeth. Jonas kicks it back with his left foot and splatters its brains with a shotgun blast.

Another zombie grabs his shotgun from his left and goes for his face with its broken teeth. Jonas elbows it in the forehead, then side-kicks it in the stomach, forcing it back. The zombie still gripping his shotgun, Jonas manages to shoot it in the neck, its head hitting the ground before its body does.

A pair of cold hands clutches his throat as he turns back to lean against Aliya. Jonas jerks his head back as the revenant chomps at his face. Jonas raises his shotgun and slams the butt down on its head, again and again. It moans louder but doesn’t release its choke hold on Jonas, so he forces the shotgun butt into its gaping mouth and shoves hard. The zombie loses its grip and falls back. Before it hits the dirt Jonas blows its head off.

The hoard stops attacking. Their horrid moaning becomes guttural groans, and there is the sickening sound of breaking bones coming from the cloaking mist. Shit!

Jonas looks back at Aliya. “You were bitten by one?”

“No, I chewed off my own ear out of boredom.”

“Well, these are not your typical Romero zombies.”

“Slow, stupid, and hungry, but somehow *not* typical?”

“I’ve seen this before.” Jonas explains, “They’re using your DNA to mutate into something worse.”

Aliya turned towards Jonas, fear in her eyes. “Like what?”

The groans become shrill shrieks. And then there is movement all around them, coming closer.

On intuition alone, Jonas shoves Aliya aside as elongated webbed fingers bearing razor claws gash at his chest, tearing through his body armor and digging painfully into his flesh. Jonas leaps back as huge jaws, lined with rows of sharp fangs, crunch down where his head had been. He fires three rounds and the mutated zombie utters a death weep.

Claws gash his back, throwing him to the ground. Jonas rolls and jumps to his feet. He dodges slashing claws, then front-flips over the monstrosity, just missing thick black spines that protrude from swollen lumps along its backbone. He fires a shotgun blast mid-flip into the back of its skull.

Aliya screams as she crashes into Jonas, clawed and bleeding. She has lost her shotgun.

Jonas points to the fiend on the ground, the top of its head blown off, its skin fleshly scales oozing green mucus. "Under it now!"

She crawls under the corpse without argument. He hopes its defecated stench will cover the scent of Aliya's blood. If nothing else, he won't have to worry about mistakenly shooting her in the dense fog.

A fiend charges from his right, slashing and biting. He twists and drops to his knees under the slashing of its claws, and blasts upward into its throat. Jonas rolls out of the way of its crumbling body and leaps up to meet another fiend with a blast to the side of its head, then spins and fires wildly into the fog. There's too many!

"Aliya, get on top of that shit pile and when I say jump, you jump as high as you can."

Jonas drops his shotgun and falls to his hands and knees and closes his eyes.

Ice spreads from his hands over his body. He strains his mind in concentration. Ice stretches outward from him along the ground, covering the necropolis. He hears fiends slipping and falling on the ice all around him, furious to reach him. I hope this works.

Jonas shouts, "Aliya, jump!" as he repeats Ninurta's death rink maneuver. Ice spikes fire up from the ground, spearing the fiends. Jonas can only hold the icicles for but a moment before retracting them, but finally the dead remain dead.

"Nice one." Aliya takes his hand and pulls him to his feet. "But what do we do about the werewolf?"

Jonas picks up his shotgun. "I hope you're taking notes."

He winks at her and his shotgun morphs into a long-barreled revolver. He blows her a kiss and a single silver bullet appears in his other hand. She gives him her 'oh please' look in reply. Jonas flips the cylinder out, drops the silver shot into a chamber, flips the cylinder back with a jerk of his wrist, and fires into the fog without ever taking his eyes off Aliya. The werewolf yelps and collapses.

"Now tell me how much you love my Kung Fu."

"Alright, Master Ryu, what about the timber wolves?"

"Simple. Now that I've killed the werewolf, I've become the alpha wolf."

Jonas walks to the edge of the cemetery where the werewolf has fallen. The timber wolves have gathered around its dead body, whimpering. Jonas looks each wolf in the eyes, one after the next. They immediately run off into the forest, tail between their legs.

Jonas looks back at Aliya. "Are you done playing around now? We need to get out of here."

"You're the great alpha wolf. Lead on." She points. "There is a trail that way."

"Alright, but don't let me catch you sniffing my ass." He begins to jog ahead.

Aliya follows. "Don't kid yourself. You will never catch me anywhere near your dirty ass."

“It wouldn’t be so dirty if I didn’t have to pull your ass out of the mud.” Jonas looks back over his shoulder, with a cocky smile. “Although I have to admit, vomiting orc is a good look for you.”

“Thanks, it’s actually called mauled and buried alive. You should try it some time, really.”

He looks back again to retort and notices the blood moon, hanging low over the citadel, is darkening at its center. The darkness is a budding spiral. It soon consumes the entire moon and continues to grow. An abyss that will devour this entire world.

Jonas picks up the pace. “Guess Sephiroth has tired of this home.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because there is a black hole chasing us.”

Aliya glances back. “Holy shit!”

The trail is just ahead. “Seeing as though you can’t match my speed, you take the lead so I don’t have to worry about losing you. Go, go, go!” Jonas slaps her ass as she passes him, knowing it will piss her off, her anger causing her to run harder.

The brown fur on her hands and the orange in her eyes mean she may be running on all fours in a few moments. He may be forced to knock her out and carry her. This just keeps getting better.

When Jonas calculates they are halfway through the forest, a choir of strange grunting and squeals erupts from both sides of the trail. What now?

Aliya looks back at him, and shouts, “Goblins!”

“Do *not* stop. Keep running.”

Jonas clenches his fists and they ignite. He prays this forest does not react the same as the bamboo forest. He splashes the forest floor with green flames. The underbrush explodes into a wildfire. The mischievous grunts turn to tormented screams. Let’s hope we can stay ahead of the blaze.

When they break from the forest, the castle towers, brick by brick, are being sucked into the darkness. They charge down the winding path, side by side. By the time they pass the fountain, the fortress is gone. The burning trees of the forest begin to uproot and then vanish.

Jonas grips Aliya’s furry wrist and pulls her along, forcing her to run faster. When the exit is in reach, the path is evaporating only a few steps behind them. No time for bending bars.

He releases Aliya to thumb his wrist computer. “Portal home.”

A black and purple circular vortex opens up outside the iron gate. His right hand frosts over and he thrusts out his palm, spraying the gate’s lock with ice. Jonas leaps into a dragon-kick and smashes the brittle lock, flinging the gate open. He throws his arms around Aliya, gripping her tight, just as the abyss reaches the perimeter, and he jumps into the portal.

They slide through the nexus until the swirling black and purple evaporate into a spatial void of white light, where a constant hue with no horizon stretches as far as the eye can see. They land on the springy ground together, Aliya laying atop him.

She gives him a coy grin. “Could you do me a favor, and leave out the part about rescuing me?”

Jonas shakes his head in disbelief. “Of this monumental failure, that’s what you’re worried about?”

She blushes, pink showing through the smeared mud on her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Jonas, but—”

He strokes her fuzzy chin. “You should trim that beard.”

Before she can reply, he closes his eyes and unplugs the data-cable connecting the neural interface on the back of his head, below the occipital protuberance, to his cream-colored IO Shades. He combs his fingers through his vibrant-indigo hair. The natural chaotic spikes falling into place as realization sets in.

Two years of hunting and I let him escape. Now that he knows I'm on the chase he will never reappear. God help me, I'm gonna need a holy miracle.

This is the end of the free preview.

The full novel is available for purchase at most major eBook retailers.

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