

## The Warped Gateway

The gentle sounds of the new day wake up the lonely unshaven man who sleeps on a solitary park bench. A fresh cool breeze tousles the park dweller's filthy and unkempt mop of hair. His ragged and threadbare WWE logo t-shirt swallows his emaciated body whole. Sallow cheeks cling to bone while skeletal arms and legs seem ready to come apart at the seams. Torn jeans stay on his hips by virtue of an abused leather belt. Once sturdy boots let in the moisture from the freshly rain soaked ground. In short if he ever had anything to steal, this hunched over prematurely gray figure doesn't have anything anymore.

Slowly but surely, he gets up from the bench and steps over the form of his seeing eye dog with weakened legs. He adjusts the blacked-out sunglasses that cover his damaged eyes and reaches down to wake up his dog. Hacking coughs seize him, and he falls onto the stone path that runs past his bench. For several moments he is paralyzed by the pain that wracks his body with every breath he takes. When the coughing subsides, he barely has the strength to move much less stand up. Somehow, he manages to move a couple of inches before simply laying still on the ground. A couple of licks to his face and a familiar whine which he cannot seem to place fills him with a burst of adrenaline. He quickly pushes himself onto his hands and knees and rises to his feet. As quickly as his adrenaline burst appears it dissipates leaving him feeling weaker than he felt a moment ago. Happy barking tells him that his golden retriever seeing eye dog is still with him.

Happy barks suddenly become angry growls. Loud hissing becomes mixed with pained yips. Deafening silence takes hold several moments later. Joyful barking is heard once again

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after a moment of silence. A head rubbing against a clothed leg begs to be given attention. More frequent barking reacts to the love being shown.

After a moment of paying attention to his vision he pulls a leather leash out of his pocket. The man fastens the leash onto the dog's valuable collar with a practiced hand. A cool breeze stings his cheek as it flies past his face. His hands start to tremble as suddenly he's back in the desert. Explosions boom around him as shrapnel flies through the air. Screams rend the night making his ears ring. Comrades in arms fall spraying blood into the air. Fire engulfs him and everything goes dark. When he comes to, he is seated on a hard surface. He flails around for his dog needing to be protected, but he seems to be alone abandoned of all hope or shield. A strange soft hand grabs his and squeezes it. "Who's there?" The sensation vanishes instantly and in a moment is forgotten.

"Are you ok, sir? I saw that you were on the ground, screaming, rolling around, and thrashing. I waited for a lull and I carried you to this bench. I called for help as soon as I found you. Is there anyone that I can call for you?" The woman who speaks wears clothes that are finely made as if by a custom tailor. She is adorned with jewelry that could probably both clothe and feed this homeless man for years. If one looks closely one might see the light stream around her and wrap itself about her like a robe. It is the look in her eyes that destroys this wondrous vision. Deep within soulless depths is a mixture of raw unmediated fear and a deep-seated disgust.

The man hugs himself to ward away the cold which defies the warmth of the day and tears into him. He hears rustling wind and smells the scent of a summer day, but she seems to

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lack a presence. "Thank you. I have no one whom you should call." His light southern Texan twang causes pain to stab at the inside of his skull. This man's throat is like the sands where his eyes were destroyed. Raw grating dryness makes his voice into little more than a wind like whisper. "How can I thank you? Most people ignore me. Why did you stop?" Tears of confusion roll down his face.

"You don't have to thank me. Someone who wears the badges of service to this country deserves more than just a moment of time. You and all those who are like you are sacrifices to strange gods. Wealth is the religion, government, and king in this place. There exists no sacred thing that will not be used as a means of control. Disdain for the uniqueness of a few is a disease that everyone seems so desperate to cure. I ramble on and bother you with things that you already know. I stopped because of these ideas. You suffer because of them. This is something that I would like to remedy. In order for me to help you, you will have to make a rather unorthodox deal with me."

His breathing quickens and he balls his fists. "Listen lady, I don't know what kind of sick game this is, but I'm not interested. Leave me the hell alone!" His shouting rings in his ears. Loud bells make a burning pain swallow him whole for a moment. He shakes his head and expects to hear nothing, but the sounds of the park.

"I understand your anger and skepticism. Hell, if I were you, I would not be nearly as polite to someone who made such fake sounding promises. I assure you I'm not a grifter whose goal is to steal from you. Take my card. If I'm lying to you go to the police. Have me arrested.

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This is no game. If you give me a chance, I can change your life." She silently takes a business card from the left-hand pocket of her power suit and places it into the man's waiting hand.

Nimble fingers run across the raised ridges that help him see. "Ms. Lil Devlin what kind of offer can a life insurance broker make me? " He places the card in the right pocket of his jeans. He is coiled with a violent tension that looks to escape at the slightest provocation. For several moments anger of a more righteous variety than he is used to feeling fills his veins with fire. No magic spell dispelled the heavy blanket which usually keeps everyone far away from him.

"What would you say if I told you that for a small favor, I could free you from having to live without dignity?"

"I would tell you where you can go."

Lil chuckles filling the air with a sound that seems slightly unnatural and yet not completely abnormal. "I have always said that compared to some of the things that life can throw at you, hell is practically a picnic. Though I would be the first to admit that liars who manipulate and destroy innocent people deserve torment. Personally, I believe that a Tartarus is more fitting for those who earn their punishments than any other conception of damnation." Cruelty is carved subtly into her face even as she smiles. A predator seems to lurk behind the wide grin that she wears.

"Stop with your philosophy lesson. Tell me how you can help or just leave."

"This deal to help you is an exchange of sorts. I will give you something that will immediately change your life. In return all that you will have to give me is a reminder of what

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you were.” She pulls a non - decorative pair of glasses made of a mixture of brass and gold from the right-hand pocket of her power suit. There does not seem to be anything out of the ordinary about them. These glasses are so unremarkable that they must certainly be the result of a truly depraved mind. The early morning light reflects brightly off the crystal lenses and solid frame. "Take these."

He stretches out his right hand with his calloused palm facing up. The sweat that runs down his face chills him. His body is wracked by intermittent tremors. Deep breaths steady him enough to keep his hand from shaking wildly.

She steps forward and carefully places the glasses in his hand. Ms. Devlin wastes no time in taking several steps back. “Try them on.”

He reaches up and takes off the sunglasses that conceal the least of his many war scars. For a moment his vacant gaze almost seems to react to the urging look in the woman's eyes. He slides the glasses onto his face and instantly painful light and images assault eyes. He cries out clutching his head and falling to the ground. Vision blinds him now in ways that deny him the ability to do anything more than whimper. Colors spin around him as nausea takes a firm hold. He turns his head to the side and heaves. Hot and putrid bile spills from him. His throat burns. Lil's face looms above his as the pain that is scalding his skull dulls. Shadows dance before him as he squeezes his eyes shut. Finally, after a few moments he feels something lukewarm touch his chapped lips. He rights himself and grabs water bottle. Remembering a former life, he takes a couple of small sips. Now feeling a little better he slowly opens his eyes. She is the first sight that he sees. Her royal blue power suit seems strange to him though he can't say why. A mirth

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might be present in her gray eyes though he is uncertain. However, if it is there, a sense of worry seems to overpower everything else that he can perceive.

“I told you that I want to change your life. I think that this qualifies. There is no trick or con here. It is time for you to keep to your part of the exchange. I think that this will be more than a fair trade. I want your sunglasses. Do we have a deal? If not, I will have to take those back.”

Words escape him and he energetically nods his head in assent. No words of thanks come to his lips. His thoughts are a jumble. Even if he could speak what words can describe the raw emotion which claws at his innards in an attempt to be free?

She bends down without saying another word. Ms. Devlin takes the fallen glasses in her hand and straightens up. She quickly places them in the right-hand pocket of her power suit. In a smooth motion she turns and strolls away as if this day is just a day like any other. Though her steps are not quick she is soon gone from sight.

Now alone the man for whom the whole world is different takes a deep breath and stands up. He dusts himself off and strangely enough begins to walk through the park marveling at the wonders that everyone takes for granted. Trees and paths seem to be too beautiful to be real. However, despite these sights he soon stops dead in his tracks. He hears the roar of caroling cannons. Two worlds seem to fuse into one. He is in the middle of a vicious battle and yet in a wooded place. Before him, broken corpses are strewn about. He sees a cannonball is rapidly approaching him. It passed over him and strikes soldiers standing behind him spraying him with blood and viscera. He watches a farm boy blown to pieces mere feet from where he stands. He is

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frozen. Mysteriously, unable to do anything. He struggles to get free, to help, or even to scream, but he cannot do anything at all. His legs fail him. Finally, after an eternity of slaughter he can move. Before him is nothing but a dead and lonely field. He totally is alone. The cannons are gone, and shattered earth is whole. The blood and corpses are gone. He runs about looking for someone, anyone at all. He becomes crazed. He starts to scream, and they grow louder the longer that they go unanswered. When his breath runs out, he stops. Fear sets in. He grabs his glasses and rips them from his face. He throws them aside not caring where they land. As soon as they leave his face darkness consumes him. His body slumps down onto the ground and he is left totally alone with his thoughts. The warmth of the day seeps into his bones as he lays upon the grass and falls into a deep and fitful sleep.

## Chapter 1

### THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR

A sharp antiseptic smell tears into the man as he begins to rise from the darkness of sleep. The beeps and whirring of machines banish the dreamless senselessness from which he flies away. Heavily starched sheets attempt to flay him alive. Eyelids fly open, but do not see the surely Spartan surroundings that might once have felt normal to him. Voices float around whispering things that remain just beyond understanding. In an instant he is filled with panic.

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Jolts of fear set his every nerve into overdrive driving him to act. He jerks upright and thrashes as though to escape from chains that bind him in place. Soft hands immediately hold him down. A commanding voice shatters the spell that drives his madness.

“Calm down sir. You’ll tear out your intravenous line.” The demands made by this lilting Mancunian accent seem to weave silk chains that cool off his hysteria. “You were found passed out in Central Park. A jogger found you and called an ambulance. You are in Mount Sinai Hospital.”

“I can’t pay. Let me go.” Time seems slower when he attempts to get off the bed. He makes sluggish yet deliberate movements designed to render him invisible to the predator that holds him prisoner. The firm hold of his jailer robs him of his strength. He lays back frozen by the gorgon’s gaze. Words fail him as the steady rhythm of his heart melds with the breathing of his captor. Hypnotic beats draw him back into the warm crushing embrace of images that are swirling sands that form for just a moment before splitting apart and reforming. Dozens appear and vanish faster than thought. Some scenes linger momentarily. A smiling woman with short hair reaches out but is violently torn away leaving a void. Masked forms holding guns at their shoulders squeeze the triggers. They explode into shrapnel like shards of sandstone. Twisting and undulating walls of white-hot sand bury his body as it floats in shadow. He rises through the darkness. His body burns when he wakes up.

“Sir can you hear me?”

The drowning ocean that runs off his body in streams puts out the fire and shocks his body into clarity. “Yes.”



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“My name is Dr. Clark. I have been treating you for severe malnutrition, dehydration, and the Flu. You are lucky that someone brought you in for treatment. If you do what we say and avoid the kind of behavior that you displayed toward Nurse Sterling, then we will have you on your way relatively quickly. However, if you give us a hard time you will be sedated!” The music produced by a long-lived New York spirit stokes a frigid flame transforms the man before Dr. Clark’s eyes.

A rigidity not unlike the restraints of death freezes the man for a single moment. When that moment passes the restraints fall away. A vein on his neck pulses in tune with a rapidly increasing heartbeat. “ I told the nurse that I don’t have money insurance. She refused to listen. I want to leave. I’ll sue this place for unlawful imprisonment if you keep me here!” Weakness seems to gather into a weapon that pins him to his bed.

Defiance pulls back and launches itself as a wall of arrows at the superficially stoic doctor. It shatters against the pearl shield that he wields. The fragments strike the ground and build a stockade topped images that hold the doctor back. He draws himself to his full height and arms himself with a spiked mace that has seen much battle. “ Marine you will show respect to a superior officer!” His words take the shape of boa constrictors of untainted steel which fly on venom filled wings. It strikes the line of pickets and shatters. The venom evaporates into a cloud which is caught between the shield of pearl and the stockade line. This poison struggles to finds a host. When it finds none, it vanishes.

Before a stillness born of many years spent training to obey immobilizes the still obstinate man who sees what he wants he fires a burning barb. “You’re out of uniform Sarge. Put

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yourself on report and report to the stockade.” In silence his barb becomes thousands of needles that stab even without penetrating flesh. They encircle and take the shape of a twisted two headed beast that seeks to bring down all that stand before it. A snarling maw and razor teeth prepare to exploit the vulnerability of mortals.

Dr. Clark becomes unyielding stone run through with veins of steel. “Listen to me. I have seen hundreds like you. There are marines so broken that all that they can do is wait for life to leave them behind. They come back changed. Their families recognize them, but they don’t recognize themselves. Cities are shattered because enough is not done. Is that you? Did you go to the sandbox, raid, and then decide that your sacrifice would mean nothing? Now you fight, but is that only when it is time to run? You seen quite intent on doing what the enemy could not. Go ahead and quit if that is really want. The man who found you made sure that I can help those who want it. Those glasses you dropped mean nothing to you, but I’m sure that they will matter to someone else.”

Rage momentarily transforms him into a wraith whose only goal is to lash out at all those that surround it. It rises and dwarfs the room. No sooner does it rise then a grip of steel arrests this monster’s movement. Fissures and cracks spider-web across this creature as its outer shell falls away. A fragile cowering form descends to the corner of the room furthest from the bed where the man silently lies. The man furrows his brow. “What do mean that he made sure that those who want can be helped? Do you think that I don’t want help? There is no helping me!” Hot tears pour down his face.

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“Keep your voice down. Rest now. You have strained yourself far too much. If you need anything there is a nurse call button remote to your right.”

Footsteps echo and fade into the darkness. “Doc, what happened to my glasses?” Silence responds to his shouted question. A pounding in his skull tears at him. The silence compounds the oppressive power which is knocking him around like debris caught in a windstorm. With surprising speed his hand shoots out to the right. Pain flashes across his arm. He grits his teeth and fumbles with the braille covered remote. Words float before him as he reads the instructions. Impatience grabs his hand and repeatedly pushes the call button.

Rapidly approaching steps coat the room with a vibrating coat of sound. “Is everything alright?”

“Nurse Sterling is it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Where are the glasses that were found with me? How do I go about checking myself out?”

“They are in a bin underneath the table with the rest of your personal effects. You will get them back when you are released. I cannot in good conscience check you out. Until you recover fully you are not going anywhere.” A wall as high as the newly erected battlements of a lord’s palace springs up. Wary defenders stare down from the heights with weapons held at the ready. The gates are barred by massive unornamented doors of reinforced steel. A bar of unyielding stone holds the doors shut.

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“I keep telling you that I can’t pay. You’re not running a charity here. I don’t want to stay, and you can’t afford to keep me here.” In a moonless darkness a figure drags a heavy barrel to the base of the wall.

“I can’t let you go on your own. You are not well. You are right that this is not a charity. However, even if someone had not paid for your care it would be criminally negligent to discharge you in this condition.” The barrel turns to dust. Arrows rain down on the besieger pinning them in place.

“I’ll sign whatever release form you want. I don’t want to spend another minute here. Let me go or I’ll find someone who’ll sue this place for everything that it’s worth.” Massive siege towers covered in soaked and cured hides quickly roll up to the walls to aid their trapped colleague.

“Understand that if you leave it will be against the medical advice of both your doctor and nurse. This is not a decision to be made lightly. Are you certain that this is what you want to do? If you are willing, there are people to whom you can talk before making this decision.” Pillars of ice instantly form around the towers and the vast armies that follow them.

“I don’t want no damn shrinks. People like them and like you took everything from me. I want out of here damn you! Do you think that I don’t know what I want? Get me the forms. Now!” The ice fractures and explodes outward. Flames set the walls aflame and immolate the defenders on the ramparts. Stone glows bright and melt into a molten lake. The man lets out several dry hacks. Tears form in his eyes. He blinks them away. He does not hear any footsteps. “Are you going or not? Well?”

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Defenders who survive the wall flee deeper into the city to regroup. Retreating footsteps signal mighty hammer blows that shatter the fetters that hold him down. Legions fall as they retreat into the innermost keep at the city center. They move silently as though they are no more than a breeze running across an empty plain.

An image forms before his eyes. Waves of sound take the form of a straight-backed figure that fractures and reforms as it speaks. A musical voice of indeterminable origin peals through the air. *“The ocular trauma was too severe, and it took too long for you to get proper treatment.”* *“\*What are you telling me doc?\*”* *“You have to be prepared for the possibility that you won’t ever see again. Life will move on for you soldier. You are being discharged in several weeks time. You will be home with your family in a little more months’ time. Soon all of this will be a bad dream.”* *“\*I want to serve my country you can’t do this to me! You can’t make me into a coward! I will not run from the enemy!\*”* *“Major keep your voice down. You are a highly decorated ranger who was wounded in the service of his country. Who do you think is making you into a coward?”* *“\*Lieutenant save your lies! We both know that they win if I leave even one of them breathing!\*”* *“All due respect Major, what are you saying? How can you belittle your sacrifice and those of others by saying these things? I have known your like for years sir. It never gets easier to watch guilt turn warriors into their own enemies.”* A wave of sound obliterates the image. His hands fly up and create porous shields that do little to protect him.

“I have the paperwork right here sir. The form is written in braille. In your current condition in the best-case scenario you are only a threat to yourself. It is very possible that you could end up hurting someone. You could end up hurting yourself further, possibly dying, or suffering immense pain. This verifies that you have been warned of the things that you risk by

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leaving against the medical advice of your doctor. It also states that you have been informed of the benefits of staying and that you release the hospital from any responsibility for any consequences that result from your leaving. If you stay, we can provide you additional treatment as necessary, as well as give you the opportunity to have follow up appointments. Furthermore, we can provide you with psychiatric assistance should you desire it. You also would have had access to a new program set up several months ago when you first arrived. All your medical needs in this hospital would be covered by a fund created specifically for veterans. Finally, we can do additional testing for conditions that may not be automatically obvious. These are the benefits that you are surrendering by choosing to sign this document. Do you understand everything that I have told you?" The fleeing populace turns as one and pull weapons from the air.

"Yes." The legions freeze where they are and hold tools of war at the ready. "Get on with it! Give me the damn papers so that I can be on my way!" Lightning sets the sky on fire. Heavy winds land hammer blows against the civilian forces arrayed in undisciplined lines against the hardened veterans. A second sound rushes through the air. The faintest hint of rosewater invades his pores and temporarily mesmerizes the trained warriors. After a moment the power is broken, and they roar in unison. "What is this you lying..." A sharp razor blade cuts his response in half.

"Sir do not use that tone. You want me to release you then there needs to be a witness. P.A. Madhavi is going to sign this form as a witness that you have been informed of the risks and benefits involved in what you are about to do." A shout which shakes the earth and disorients the

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other army meets their roar in single combat. Neither din gives ground and both sides are at an impasse.

A neighboring army stands shoulder to shoulder just beyond the reach of either of the combatants. They wield quills instead of swords and scrolls instead of shields. “I really must get back to my rounds Nurse Sterling. I will sign as a witness that he was warned, but I’m needed in intensive care.” Rhythmic melodies fill the room before falling silent. Rustling paper changes hands. A click unlike that of an empty gun is followed by the sound of a saw shearing through chain links. The saw is handed off and a retreat sounds through the room.

His accursed jailers approaching steps turn him to stone. Blood stops and veins are sapphire dams. An ivory writ of freedom is placed into his open right hand. He sees with his left-hand sweet images of warnings that mean nothing to him. When his vision is over the torch that will give him freedom from the darkness is placed in his hand. It burns across the page as several names appear. “What’s the date?”

“Today is the 8th of October.”

The dams of blood burst as an earthquake pummels it with earthen fists. “I’ve been trapped for four months? How dare you!” Thunder and crashing waves grab the two armies and throw them aside. “I did not give you permission to treat me!” Lightning carves the date into the page. He holds the paper out with violently trembling hands.

Silence takes the pen and form. Nurse Sterling walks around the bed to the uniformly dull and mind-numbing table that occupies every single room and sets down the page. She pockets the pen making vanish with the pockets of her mint scrubs. A blank look bursts into her eyes as

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she goes rigid. Her body turns and she exits the room with a mechanical sort of stride. In moments she returns to curses and screaming that rebounds off of her cold shell. In her hands she carries sterile gauze pads, gloves, an absorbent pad, and medical tape. She places them on top of the clipboard. Wordlessly, she makes her way to the bathroom and fills the room with a purifying river. A short eternity passes before the waters disappear. Now that the cleansing is over she returns to the healing prison and dons her gauntlets. Robotic training takes hold of hold of her. Flying hands shut down the I.V. and set the deliverer of curses free.

“Get me my clothes! I’ll tell you what you can do with this bandage of yours!” He swings at her, but his blow misses her wildly. Soreness stretches the man’s skin painfully as he pulls himself up by the sides of the bed. One of his handholds falls away leaving his arm momentarily hanging over a shadowed precipice. His flesh goes cold when quickly turns so that he is about to slide into the monstrous den that looms nearby. A hissing is heard rising up from the depths. Something stirs as this warrior clad in paper armor steps down and falls. Powerful hands arrest his fall. He thrashes about as he approaches the cliff and returns to his original position. Stillness strikes him as the force which his mind curses vanishes.

“Stay where you are. I will give you your things and help you leave.” Deafening hissing fills the room and shakes the walls. An iron chest scrapes against the floors drowning out the serpent’s words. Almost as if of its own accord the lid opens to reveal the worn Four pairs of glinting violet eyes stare at the twisted and scratched up sunglasses that are stored in the bin’s heart. She lifts them up and her nose crinkles. Her face is marred and aged as she gazes at it. Middle aged skin becomes hopelessly wrinkled. Her eyes are sunken into their sockets. She practically tosses them into the man’s lap. Unnatural restraints force her to put them gently on



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the bed next to him. When it touches the bed she appears to be completely normal. “I put your glasses on the bed to your right.”

His hands fly to the right and hover over the glasses. They tremble slightly as they descend. The touch of the metal frame is not cold or even room temperature. Waves of warmth flow through his fingertips. He grabs hold of the frame with both hands and raises them from where it sits on the sheet. It shakes in his hands. “Help me put them on. Please.” Ice flows from his mouth as he speaks. A firm grip takes his hands and guides the glasses to his face. He pulls away and the grip dissipates. Before he puts them on he squeezes his eyes shut. Slowly, he draws the glasses closer until they are in place. “Where are my clothes?” Silence slaps him in the face. His eyelids crack open a millimeter at a time. He squints at the vacant field that lies in front of him.

Massive intricately carved slabs of shattered stone and the burnt out husks of chariots are scattered throughout blackened oceans of grain. Storms of dust and ash dance through the air as the sky darkens. Stiff heated winds create figures with many shifting faces. Thick sticky air suffocates the world. Fallen pillars and vacant mud brick huts dot the road leading into this debris garden. In the distance a stone fortress looms over the landscape. High walls keep the outside world at bay. Sentries are on watch. Their weapons stand ready to strike down any who dares to approach without permission.

Sweat pours down the man’s neck and soaks him as his eyes go wide. He looks down at himself. His eyes widen further as he sees that he is wearing a thin hospital gown that billows in the wind. Hot rain begins to fall as he scrambles off of his hospital bed. Mud and dust grab his

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feet and cling tightly. As he stares at his surroundings he stumbles. The man flails about for a moment before he hits the ground hard. Air rushes from his lungs while his body is encased in a heavy earthen cast.

Lightning flashes through the sky and strikes the field setting it aflame. Walls of fire run upon the wind and consume all in its path. Waves of heat cause mud to bubble and stone to crack. Creatures of smoke stalk through the advancing inferno.

The man's daze shatters as a fire ignites inside of him. He pulls himself free of his cast and lurches to his feet. Gasping breath explodes from his chest as he races toward the road. His heart threatens to tear itself apart. Rapids of blood surge through his veins. He looks back and sees rabid stallions pursuing him.

These monstrous horses that are the steeds for giants foam at the mouth and their scarlet teeth are bared. Beside them run hounds and wolves whose eyes consume all life. Their howls and baying cries call down a response of booming thunder which grows louder and louder. Beneath their feet the earth dies.

His feet bleed profusely and grow worse as hidden stones cut him to ribbons. The thunder, baying, and the howls deafen him. He sways in the wind struggling to stay on his feet. Colors blend together as his vision swims. Earth becomes burning cobblestone beneath his feet and he is jolted awake. Suddenly, a chariot is rushing down the road beside him. Before it can pull away he slows and leaps into the carriage. His hands grab ahold of the front wall of the carriage to keep himself from pitching onto the road. For the first time in a very long time he closes his eyes and begins to pray. Before he is able to open them again two odd things happen.

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He is thrown from this racing chariot which stops as though there is nothing to fear. Then muffled steps are heard the moment before he is once again trapped in an impenetrable darkness.