

## 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 pains that rip at 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 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.

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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 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

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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. 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

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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 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."

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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 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.”

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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 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

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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's nostrils and pores 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. 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."

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“I can’t pay. Let me go.” Time seems slower when he attempts to get off the bed. He moves sluggishly in a manner that appears deliberate and exaggerated. He hopes to render himself invisible to the predator that holds him prisoner. His tender flesh is torn as he slowly slides across the barbed slab that he rests on. 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.”

“My name is Dr. Alexander 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.



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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 any money or 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 find 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 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

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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 seem 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.

"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.

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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.

“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

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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?”

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

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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 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

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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 trick 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 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

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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. “You trapped me here 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 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 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

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slide into the monstrous den that looms nearby. A hissing is heard rising 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 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.



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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 his hospital bed. Mud and dust grab his 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 revealed. Beside them run hounds and wolves whose eyes consume all life. Their howls

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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 can open them again two odd things happen. 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 the being to whom the steps belong disappears.

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### Chapter 2

#### Fortress of Iron

His groans fill the room with a music that echoes forever. He opens his eyes and sees nothing but a damp darkness. Vague shapes move at the edges of his vision. Cold knives stab him violently and repeatedly. They dull the pain that wraps around him and runs up and down his body. A scaled creature circles him. It rubs against his arms and legs sending violent shudders through him. Voices that whisper for him to sleep tie him down with heavy weights. Intoxicating scents slow his thoughts.

A menacing shadow looms over the traveler. It draws strength from its surroundings. This form grows in strength with every passing moment. In moments it is a mountain whose heights are shrouded in shifting clouds. A strange blade appears from the earth. It rises into the air of its own accord. Double razor edges cut the shadowed flesh from onyx bones. An ocean of ebony blood forms a wave which washes over the man.

The wave melts the weights that squeeze the air from his lungs. He roars with a strength that shocks him to his feet. His head spins as he fumbles around for a way to escape. Horses snort somewhere in the darkness. Damp and pungent smells suddenly assault his nostrils and drive him into a frenzy. A village appears before him. Several donkeys bray nearby. Explosions rip the air apart. Screams ring out around him. In a flash, it's gone, and he sees the vague outline of a door several yards ahead.

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A flickering light floats underneath the door and through almost imperceptible gaps between itself and the jamb. It outlines a sturdy construction whose form lacks any visible ornamentation of any kind. The man stumbles over the bones of the beast that the shadow transformed into a poor feast for carrion. Jewels shimmer by his feet as he steps near enough to the horses to take in their scent. He moves so quickly that he fails to react to the lack of reaction on the part of the horses. If he could see their faces, he might marvel at the way their nostrils flair, but they show no other reaction to his presence. His body is an explosive blur moving through the darkness. This man stops dead in his tracks no more than an inch away from the door. Living stone is a fluid river that creeps up his feet beginning to encase them.

Sweat pours down his face. In a moment of desperation that reaches deep within his nearly depleted reserves of strength he pulls himself free from the rock. While his body pulses with waves of energy that claws at his innards remains, he pushes on the door. An odd feeling comes over him as silent hinges pull the door outward drowning him in thick stagnant air. Choking and gasping he steps out of the room and into a massive courtyard of stone laid out over packed earth. Euphoria cloaks him in thick clouds. His legs move aimlessly in circles and he spins in the warm downpour. Sizzling water rips away a large chunk of the haze that clings to him. Eyes wide and terror gripping his body he twists in all directions.

Eyes from atop the fortress's lichen covered high outer walls and towers bore deep into him without ever seeming to come to rest on him. Dozens of soldiers armored from head to toe in strange coats of sapphire infused armor face inward as though expecting a to attack come from within the citadel of this fortress. These coats of mail, greaves, helms, and spiked gauntlets emit faint auras that absorb all the heat from the air. Frost coats the wall around them. Several of them

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grip silvery blades that curve so sharply that the fabric of reality seems to unravel as soon as it touches their edges. Impossible things appear and disappear faster than the sentries can track. Sentries with bodies like mature cedars hold heavy bows of ruby tinged iron at the ready. The others wield an assortment of wicked double-edged weapons. They primarily wield steel axes and spears that are tinted emerald. Death stares callously out from the depths of these soldiers.

Confusion runs him through with a barbed poisoned lance. His mouth hangs open and his body tenses. For a few moments his breathing races. Numbness makes him forget his own name. He waits for a cry to go out and rouse all the defenders. When nothing happens, he abruptly transforms into a half-forgotten echo from long ago. Wide eyes narrow to slits. Several deep breaths strangle the life out of his racing breaths and pounding heart. All the tension gathers and falls into a box which sinks into a bottomless rift in the ground. As he silently moves across the bailey toward the gate of the central keep several hacking coughs rattle him. His body remains intact as the sentinels atop the fortifications stir as much as an ancient mountain might.

Armor-less navy colored warriors carrying little more than sharpened staves roam the outer walls and towers of the inner keep. Rough scraps of poorly spun hemp cloth cling to their waists and in certain cases to their chests. They pause their meaningless watches every couple of minutes to gaze at the positions atop the outer walls. Their practiced and drilled steps betray many levels of skill and statuses that their uniforms vehemently deny.

He nods as his steps fall into synchronization with the inner guards. Crisp movements that lack a single wasted motion quickly carry him into the shadow of the keep wall. His feet stop almost as though they have minds of their own.

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The intricately carved gates of the central keep sit on the other side of a narrow wooden rope bridge whose taut ropes are anchored by stakes of steel. This chokepoint made of oak spans across a thirty-yard-wide and forty-foot-deep moat that runs from wall to wall. It is filled with tightly packed rows of five-foot-high and wide iron spikes that seamlessly rise from smooth stone. Shells made up of razor curved blades encase the spikes entirely. Broken bones, fractured skulls, and ragged clothes are scattered among the stakes which are coated in dried blood. Light feet wearing a suit of flowing steel plate bypass an indistinct figure who blocks the straightest way across the bridge. They carry the man around this form whose arms are held wide as though to stop the whole world's movements.

Quick steps cause his head to spin. He grabs onto the ropes tightly and for just a moment he pauses. His eyes snap shut. A collection of stone and metal structures spring up in his mind's eye. He silently stares at starving figures that are strung up by their skeletal arms. Sweat runs down his neck as a collection of infernos are stoked by broken skin and free flowing blood. Many explosions tear away the vision and forces his eyes open.

Drums crash and cries float through the air. The warriors atop the walls and towers of both the inner and outer citadels come to life. Bows and spears turn to face the attackers of the outer walls. Silence meets the violent music. The defenders impassively fire upon the approaching troops. Dozens of geese fletched heavy steel arrows turn unarmored masses of men, women, and children into sieves. Ladder carriers fall in mounds. Clouds of vicious carrion descend and circle. A few ladders break through the rain of arrows and lean against the wall. Spears and axes turn attackers to stone and toss them from the walls.

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The screams bring tears to his eyes. Flashes of the ocean fly in front of him. He forces himself to ignore the bodies that are floating in the surf. Figures huddle in the beside him surf as shots ring out. Blood stained sand clings to his exposed feet as he bolts across the bridge. Armor formed by perspiration weighs him down. No sooner does he reach the other side of the bridge then the doors of the central citadel crashes open. A horde runs out and surges around him without ever making any sort of contact with his body. Behind them he sees a rear guard led by a woman in gilded plate and brandishing two double bladed battle axes. Her eyes rake across the scene in front of her and she sneers in a way that makes his blood run cold. However, despite the frost in his veins he shouts at her. "Look at me damn you! Where am I?" That hateful gaze that causes his flesh to begin turning blue appears to slow and stop on him for a moment. He blinks and she ignores him.

She lets out a cry and her soldiers form a column which swiftly charges across the bridge. The clattering of armored feet gives way to a crash and cries of alarm. Crashes melt into each other as heavy wooden rams assault the gates. From the surrounding outbuildings soldiers bearing swords, spears, and axes burst into the courtyard. They take their positions facing the stables and the entrance to the fortress that lies beyond. The gilded commander stands at their front and orders them without saying a word. These troops form lines that bristle with unnatural power. Stone freezes beneath their feet. Swords bend space and seem to possess wills that are independent of their wielders. Spears cry out for blood in a tone which causes the mightiest predator to flee. From the axes comes a song which calls death upon whole regions. Hail slams into the earth bringing devastation. A blight consumes all life.

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He flees through the fortress's open doors with his hands clutched over his ears. A vast entrance hall sprawls out before him. Once wondrous tiles of rose, amethyst, emerald, and sapphire shift and fall to dust underneath his steps. Massive filth encrusted marble pillars crumble before his eyes. His feet carry him through the entrance hall and after that everything is a blur. Rotting and shattered furnishings fly by as he struggles to escape blood curdling the echoes that ring out behind him. Some force compels him to keep moving through a labyrinth of grungy dimly lit hallways. It is as if he is the last sane living being in all of the world. Even in the depths of the keep the sounds that chase him still ring out.

No one can be seen in the halls and passageway of this structure other than this fleeing figure. His steps grow more frenzied as the songs of battle grow closer. Suddenly, he stops dead in his tracks as though a wall blocks his path. Before him a sparse sprawling chamber unfolds. Sputtering torches line the walls sending out sickly light that bathes most of the room in deep shadows. At the center of the room a slouching grizzled man with a furrowed brow wearing splendid robes of rich forest green and gold sits on a roughhewn throne. His shoulders are bent under an invisible weight. The thin golden circlet that rests on his head does not appear to be gold, but rather a dull dead iron. A tall straight-backed figure in ebony plate embedded with bright emeralds stands across a large empty circular table from the ruler.

A man-sized gap seems to open in the unseen wall that holds the traveler back. He instinctively leaps forward into the room. Neither of the men react to his breathing and footsteps which combine together and echo loudly in the otherwise quiet room. Without even thinking he walks inward several feet and then moves off to the side. He can see what is happening and he



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hopes that he won't be seen. When the silence is broken, he takes up a defensive stance which overtakes him from the depths of a former life.

"Why is this happening nephew? Didn't you follow the commands that I gave you?" The air is filled with a tired deep bass voice. While rising slowly from his throne the speaker drops his hand to rest on the sword that rests at his hip. He flinches when the other man's gauntleted hand slams into the table breaking off a section of the thick wood.

"You pretend not to understand why there is a slaughter going on outside! However, you know exactly why this is happening! It is happening for the same reason that you sit here cowering while what remains of your personal guard stand above dumbly and impotently! Sit coward!" His charcoal irises glimmer with mirth as he watches how the king stumbles back and sinks down onto the throne. "The cities burned and all that you were concerned with was consolidating your power over this court! You had your scholar make for weapons of power to drive away any threats to you! Instead of defending the realm you defend yourself! The roads are filled with the dead and dying because you did nothing to help them! This castle will fall because of you." His voice falls into a near whisper which still echoes as though he is in a cavern.

The king's face flushes. He rises once more and draws his sword. Despite the darkness the blade glows with and exudes a nearly blinding inner light. "You are wrong. Everything that I did was to prepare this kingdom for greatness! I will go to the people and put an end to the death that your men are unleashing upon my subjects!" His body undergoes a transformation. Some of the worry lines around his eyes vanish. A rigidity born of nobility takes hold of him. Raw strength surges into him. In an instant straightens to his full height and he heaves off the burden

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that bends his shoulders. His chin rises ever so slightly, and his eyes attempt to wash away everyone that stands before him.

“Yes, uncle I am wrong. You have not alienated the people because of your arrogance. Whatever I have accused you of must be fabricated my lord.” The armored man falls into a mock bow. He quickly straightens up and takes a step back. “I do your bidding lord uncle but know that if I have to choose between you and the people, I will always choose those to whom I am sworn. You have sworn to serve yourself. If you ever were selfless those days are long over.

“That you are still alive is a miracle. You are wasting my time. Once this has been dealt with, I will decide your fate.” He circles around the table using long yet dignified strides. Stillness holds him tightly when he stands shoulder to shoulder with his nephew. His height which once towered over his nephew and cowed him in his youth is now his equal. “Secure my quarters and family. Summon members of my personal guard to go with you. Arm them properly this time. Go!”

He turns away wordlessly and begins to walk toward a door at the side of the chamber. After a few steps he cocks his head to the side and pauses in mid-step. A sigh escapes his lips as he pivots his body so that it faces the doorway. “I hear them coming my lord. As a favor to the man that you may once have been, I shall see to the protection of true innocents. Goodbye.” As soon as the words leave him, he turns back toward the side door and breaks into a sprint. The heavy echoing steps that are heard as he crosses over the stone floor encase the room in mighty tremors. Wasting little time, he grabs the door handle as soon as he reaches it and rips the door open. Seemingly by some act of magic he vanishes as soon as he passes over the threshold.

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The king's face empties of blood and he staggers backwards. Shouts and ancient Gaelic curses ring out and grab him by the throat. Like a marionette whose strings are violently cut to shreds he tumbles to the ground. His crown flies off of his head and rolls toward the door before coming to an abrupt stop. He rolls on the ground whimpering. "I am innocent. My enemies hold me back. I did all that I could to help you. There is nothing more that I could have done to protect you."

The man breaks free from the trance just as the first torch lit figures burst into the chamber. All around him men, women, and children whose flesh and rags are covered in blood, dust, sweat, and mud chant in unison. "Take him to the walls! Make him bleed as we have bled! Take his eyes! He is already blind!" Over and over this chorus rings out. Each time the chant grows louder and more forceful. From a side door a dozen of the painted men and women from this keep's walls carrying only their fire hardened staves run into the room and form a line in front of the fallen king. They brace themselves and level their weapons at the approaching crowd.

The traveler races forward in a flash. Something ancient and powerful springs to life within him. He pays no mind to the crown which edges away from him as he approaches. Lightning arcs and races through his body while he runs to the middle of the chamber. His eyebrow cocks for just a moment when he pirouettes to face the mob and places his back to the spears. "Stop! Enough of this! Stop the killing! Stop it now!"

These words bounce wildly around the room, but no one reacts to them. The crowd ripples like a wave. Shouting which becomes the moan of a tortured specter emerges from the heart of the wave. A bound young woman in once rich and ornate robes is roughly pushed from

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hand to hand. When she reaches the front of this sea she falls to her knees. An emaciated man with thin hair and few teeth who is well past his prime places a blade taken from the outer walls against the back of her neck. “Milord here is your Lady of the Ocean of blood! Watch your butcher be put down by her own weapon!” He raises the blade overhead with both hands. Sweat drips down his brow. An elderly woman steps forward from the crowd and catches his hand mid-swing. She shakes her head at him, and he lowers his sword.

“Why can I understand you? Why can’t you hear me?” He grits his teeth when there is no response. An iron barbed whip beats him down and reasserts the control of the old steel blooded creature. His eyes lock onto the prisoner whose body seems frozen. Stepping forward with quick steps he reaches out to her. Suddenly, his body jerks back. No amount of steeling prepares him for the way that he skids across the floor. In an instant he flies forward. Gasping he comes to a stop trapped between the armies. Paralysis grips him so tightly that each breath burns him.

“She must be made to suffer as we suffered. My sons and daughters starved and were torn apart by marauders. My husband was murdered by you when you demanded that we aid you in your quest for a cup. We needed him to tend the fields, but instead he came to you with the stories that we have heard. You strung him up and beat him to death. Did you find your cup?” She spits at the bound woman and then delivers a blow to her back with the gnarled cane that she carries. The woman yelps and tries to escape. Another blow rewards her for attempt to crawl to freedom.

The trapped prisoner opens his mouth to speak, but only a croak flies out. He struggles to break free. His body does not move at all despite the way that he fights against the forces that

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hold him still. Every bone in his body screams as hammers crash against them. Tears race down his cheeks. A heavy blanket descends and drains him of his strength.

“Enough!” The crowd trembles for a moment as the king rises. He holds his sword over his head and pushes his way through his bodyguards. Predatory eyes gaze at the assembled rabble. His mouth opens to speak again, but all that comes out is a pained cry. Blood spills down his brow from where a thrown stone wounds him. Shock drops him to his knees. A stillness born of death fixes the entire chamber in place. Misshapen beings with dozens mangled limbs sprouting from their bodies and lifeless eyes burst from the air at the corners of the room. They leap forward and cover several strides in a single movement. No one seems to see them as they converge on the crowd from all directions. Each one grabs hold of several of the members of the crowd and begin their feeding frenzy. At that moment the chains of inhibition that hold everyone down disintegrate. Rocks, arrows, and spears fly through the air.

All around the trapped warrior broken bodies fall. As the crowd scatters he feels the forces that paralyze him slacken. He begins to hyperventilate and break the haze that keeps him from seeing or thinking clearly. Before his eyes the king cuts down children who strike at him with sticks. “Stop! Don’t do this!” His words harmlessly bounce off the blood-stained monarch. Painful images tear at his eyes. Slaughter overwhelms him as it fills the room with the stench of viscera and torn flesh. Flaring his nostrils as his head begins to spin, he tries to escape.

He gathers himself calling the winds to grant him unnatural speed. In a burst of power, he flies toward a door set into a distant corner of the room. His eyes are slammed shut to block out the horrific scenes that are playing out. Fires rage in his skull as he slams into the icy stone of

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one of the walls. The jarring shock that shakes his teeth and rattles his bones forces him to step back and lower his head. Metal and crystal slides like water down his face.

This man's agony seems to expand outward to encompass his entire body. Impossibly loud screaming grows worse by the moment ripping his eyes open. An abyss is all that he sees though he can feel the glasses teetering on the tip of his nose. Suddenly, the screams are gone, and the dampness of the room is replaced by a mild warmth. He takes the glasses off and folds them. His body shakes rapidly, and he nearly falls over his own feet.

"Stop right there!" The traveler hears a heavily accented voice ring out. His heart rushes and his movements speed up. A muted miniature explosion caresses his ears and a whip of wind cuts through the air past his face. He sways and freezes in place. Strong hands pull his arms behind his back and enclose them in metal shackles. Without so much as a word he stumbles forward into all-encompassing shadow.

## Chapter 3

### Lunar Visions

"Do you know where you are sir?" A strongly accented voice fills the small room seemingly echoing off of the walls as though they are spoken into a deep well or cave. All of the shadows in this dimly lit room cling like a second skin to the solid squat uniformed man who asks this question. His chestnut colored eyes cut through the prisoner skinning him thoroughly revealing bleached bone and pulsing blood vessels. The questioner is a solidly hewn ebony statue standing erect across the bare metal table from the bound man.

"No. I don't know where I am. Why don't you just tell me? I doubt that you actually care about my answer." The bound prisoner is coiled with a tension so great that no mortal being is capable of replicating it. His venomous fangs seek flesh to tear into and blood to corrupt with the concentrated essence of death. Sparks erupt and fly through the air when these fangs uselessly strike invisible armor. Metal clinks as he heaves in an attempt to shatter the handcuffs that tie him to the table. He strains and pulls with veins popping out in his forehead, but the links do not break. After a moment of intense effort, he stops, stills, and uselessly takes several deep calming breaths.

"You are trespassing on her majesty's property. This is the base for her majesty's 9th Welsh armored corp. Who are you?" This voice distinctively floats through the air and panels the

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room with velvet. A granite gaze causes stone to spring from the ground. Thought spins stone into a featureless rock box.

"Two liars speak. You want to know who I am? When it mattered, my name was Thomas Sanchez. Choke on that meaningless piece of information!" The lilting voice that coats the walls does not change him. Walls of cold unfeeling steel keep fires burning within him and repel all outside forces. He waits for screaming voices to split him in two or for grasping hands to spill his blood.

Instead of the sounds of a violent chorus the air vibrates, and a door opens. Footsteps rise and fall leaving Thomas alone. Thomas shudders as Max considers the sword which is about to fall. Simon pounds at the box with gauntlet shielded fists to little effect. Whispering enters Adam's ears and the two presences from before return. "Mr. Sanchez the American embassy in London has been notified of your presence. They're sending someone to fetch you. You don't need to say anything else. However, cooperation will get you far when you are charged. Private, remove this man's restraints." As though compelled by a hidden power the squat uniformed man quickly circles the table. Thomas spasms in what seems like death's throes as the freezing spikes that penetrate his body are torn free. Rivulets of blood stream down his arms and Simon strikes out against his prison furiously when at last the shackles vanish.

"What do you want to know? You won't believe anything that I have to say." He rubs his wrists and smears the blood. Unknowingly he paints himself and creates a crimson sheen. Settling in his chair he is petrified even the flow of ichor through his veins slows to no more than a crawl. His body does not stir when a pair of footsteps move toward the door and silently exit the room.



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"Before I ask you anymore questions, is there anything that I can get for you?"

"No."

Thomas lets out a hacking cough as Adam lifts an intricate spiked club and swings it at the reverberating song. Each attempted blow rattles his arms and sprinkles the room with crimson speckles. One by one his strikes fail to make contact with their target. Thomas shakes in his seat. After a moment of increasingly violent coughs he goes still. "Are you alright Mr. Sanchez?" There is an almost alien vein that runs through the heart of these words. It shifts and flows in random and unexpected ways.

"Yes."

The vein that rushes through the soldier's spoken words transforms itself into mountain that looms over the whole of the world. It rises into the air blocking out the sky and casting a shadow that spans the oceans. "How did you get onto this base?" From atop the crag these words boom as the question of an ancient god demanding truth from blasphemous worshipers. Simon still lashes out at his prison and Max sits stoic faced observing all and saying nothing at all. Adam holds the club limply in his hands. Thomas now straight-backed furrows his brow, opens his mouth, closes it again, and clears his throat.

"I warn you that you will not believe me. By the end of this the only things that you will want to do are lock me up and force pills down my throat. Four months ago, is when my appearance here became possible. I woke up in the early morning hours that morning and was ready to face this cursed world. There was nothing and no one for me in this world though I continued to pretend that people care about me. I fell and must have hit my head. I had trouble standing up. A woman found me on the ground and helped me find a place to sit. She pretended

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to give a damn about me and called jailers to haul me away. She made me promises that told me that she wanted something. Despite my best attempts to get rid of her she took the only thing of value that I had left. In exchange she gave me her card and the glasses that I was wearing when I was caught." His breathing deepens and fills the room. A trickle of sweat runs down his face. Poorly suppressed chills quickly run down his spine.

On the other side of the table silence meets silence in pitched battle. The soldier does not react to the pause that creates a gaping bottomless abyss. It has no point where one can ford the maw of the beast the moves below. Battle breaks and silence ends what seems like mere moments after it began.

"I put them on, and they turned back time. I could see everything and anything at all. She left me alone with my eyes and the world. I began to marvel at everything that I saw. As I surveyed my surroundings, I saw a bloody battle raging in front of me. My feet refused to move as cannons roared and musket shots tore up the earth around me. I seemed to be wearing some kind of uniform though my lack of movement stopped me from examining it. I couldn't move or even scream. I thought that I was going to die. Strangely I survived and the battlefield disappeared before my eyes. The uniform went away at the same time as the battle. I ran as soon as my feet would move. Screaming and yelling I ran until I must have stumbled over a buried rock. I pitched forward and the glasses came off of my face. I fell to the ground and blacked out." Tears mingle with sweat on his face.

The two sides approach cautiously weapons raised at the ready. Across the chasm they glare defiantly at each other, but they make no sound. Stones crash down from the mountain top as it shifts with a life all of its own. Both armies remain unharmed as the rocks fall harmlessly

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around them. Craters riddle the ground and chips of stone explode outward as each boulder strikes the land. Suddenly, winds whip the stones out of the way and a competing voice rings out with ever growing religious fervor.

"When I woke up today, I was in a diseased hospital bed. Before I fought them to let me leave, they told me that I had been comatose for four months. I wasted no time in making the doctor and the nurse that were "taking care of me" aware that I had no intention of staying in the hospital. They swore that they would do anything that they had to do to prevent me from leaving their care. In response to this I swore that I would have them fired and the hospital shut down if they continued to hold me there against my will. Finally, I wore them down and the nurse agreed to set me free. I signed my way to freedom, and she returned the glasses to me. I put them on and suddenly the hospital was gone. In an instant I was all alone in an empty lot in the middle of a field. My prison bed and this hideous uniform traveled with me to this strange place. It was a place clearly destroyed by a horrific war." He lapses into silence again and stares into the empty skies. Screaming gales push him toward the edge of the high platform upon which he stands.

Adam lets out a bellowing cry. He gazes down in disdain as he shouts his challenge. Simon breathing is labored. His blows grow mightier as time passes. Dust streams down the walls. The silent units ignore Adam's heretical cries and Simon's drumming. Frozen rain tears open the skies and throws knives at the soldiers who are in a standoff. Broken daggers of light fly through the darkness and reveal glistening jagged razors moving about near the surface of the chasm.

Ash falls through his fingers and surrounds him. Warmth holds him tightly. He swallows, shakes his head, and resumes his tale. "Broken pillars inscribed with words in a weird language

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were scattered throughout the field. For some reason there were parts of shattered chariots laying on the ground around my bed. They seemed majestic as compared to the ruins that lay destroyed on the edges of the field. Scarred brick homes that were falling apart sat by the road that led to the place that my bed appeared. I saw a large walled compound in the distance looming over this landscape. The grain in the field seemed to smell like it was rotten and decayed. The sky opened up without any sort of warning and it began to pour. I scrambled off the bed and something hit me hard. I fell to the ground and all of the air was knocked out of me. Suddenly, a blindingly bright lightning bolt flashed and set the field on fire. Clouds of smoke made it hard for me to breathe.” He turns his head to the right and lets out a quick series of wheezing coughs. His face scrunches up and several tears fall from his eyes. The ash grows thick around him wherever a tear happens to land. After a moment he turns so that he is facing forward once again.

Something with glinting opal teeth that otherwise repels light climbs from the mouth of the earth. A constantly shifting clawed hand throws hundreds of warriors aside. Several dozen shout as bones splinter and blood bursts from their broken bodies. Dozens of others vanish down this beast’s ravenous gullet. Some stumble as they flee. These individuals stumble and pitch headlong into the endless pit. Into eternal mists they fall. Beams cast by the daggers in the sky split over the creature’s flesh as it turns its maw away from the mountain and toward the place from which Adam’s chanting flows. It produces a cry of equal to thousands of exploding stones which reverberates through the air and shakes the earth. Each step creates cracks and fissures that topples the beast back into the pit. An echoing roar erupts from its jaws as it falls back into the shadows.

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“It was impossibly hot as the flames spread. The heat must have played tricks with my eyes. I swore that I saw packs of rabid dogs, wolves, and horses made from fire appear from the walls of the inferno. They immediately circled me on three sides and began advancing on me. I know what I saw. This three-sided box of foaming mouths and predatory teeth was very real. Adrenaline rushed through me and at that moment I jumped to my feet. My teeth were on edge as I began to run as fast as my feet would carry me.” His breathing grows quick and labored. He quickly turns his head off to the side and dry heaves several times.

Thomas tries to wave off the voice that floats through the air. It attempts to take his hand and lead him away from the table. He goes still. He plants his feet and chases the voice away with an unwavering gaze. Words gather as clouds that take on lives of their own. They swarm and buzz with furious energy. These swarms fly about in nonsensical patterns. Invisible walls prevent the clouds from spreading out beyond the thirty-foot space that they occupy. They bounce back and forth rapidly until suddenly they stop and fade away. Max is shocked by what is unfolding before him. His silk suit clings to him. A twitch dominates his right eye. The gold Rolex on his wrist rusts in an instant. Crystal cracks and the band collapses in a cloud of dust. Moth eaten holes appear in his clothes. Max wordlessly stumbles back into a chair.

“The fire and creatures drove me through the field and toward the road. It breathed down my neck. A couple of times I felt as if I was going to start burning! I heard terrible screams that could only be the sound of those who could not escape this blaze. This awful song pushed me faster than I thought was possible. By some miracle my feet missed all of the field’s half buried hidden stones. Once I arrived at the road it was cool underneath my exposed feet. My breath came out in gasps as I ran toward the distant fortress. Beside me a single chariot fled from the

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spreading fire. A richly dressed man stood in the back whipping his robust horses forward. He pulled tightly on the reins and stopped his horse's dead in their tracks when he noticed me running beside him. His right hand extended. He quickly motioned for me to climb into the cabin and join him. In my panic I nearly pushed him out as I scrambled into the back of the chariot. A sudden flick of the reins sent the thoroughbreds racing up the cobblestone path. My body lurched sideways when the chariot burst forward. Waves of pain shot up my side as I struck the chariot wall."

Thomas grabs his left side as his face transforms into a horribly contorted screaming mask. He whispers weakly through his contorted visage. The words fly skyward distorted and mangled beyond Thomas's understanding. An arrow of sound carried into the distance by a fleeting form enters a different realm. It vanishes in a flash as though it had never appeared. A silvery bow with a drawstring of steel is cast into the midst of the supplicants who stand frozen at the foot of the divine mountain. It falls fast and sinks into the ground. In moments no trace of it remains. Adam roars out an echoing cry. He sways as though he is praying for his life. Flickering lights create an aura which suffuses the air around him. Simon watches heavy slabs of stone shear off of the wall of his prison. They shatter around him without ever reducing the box that shuts out the outside world. Low voices hiss in his ears. Promises force him to his knees via a series of violent tremors. For a short while Thomas is paralyzed by the pain. Despite his mask he continues his tale.

"We raced down the road toward the fortress that I had seen from the field. Killers with dead eyes and thousand-mile stares patrolled the walls. They ignored us completely as we rode into arrow shot of the walls. My companion glanced up, but otherwise failed to react to this

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castle located at no clearly strategic point. Our chariot slowed and then stopped as heavy wooden drawbridge slowly lowered across the deep earthen ramparts that surround this outpost and let us cross. The imposing gates of almost soot colored steel remained sealed until moments before we would have slammed into them. Behind us the gates swung closed without any kind of visible help. In front of us two paths curved off of the one that we were using. A thick barred gate blocks us from passing straight into the heart of the keep. For reasons that I don't understand the driver slackened his hold on the reins and let them trot in whichever direction they desired. As soon as they felt this slack they slowed slightly and turned down the path on the left."

Thomas pauses for a moment and cocks his head slightly to the right. His expression does not change. Adam bathes in the ferocity of his screams. Around him oppressive silence is tenuously held at bay. Simon luxuriates in the ocean of words that produces a warmth that turns the walls a cheerful cherry red. It is an embracing and stifling heat.

"Our path was a narrow one that ran between the outer and inner walls. It seemed just barely large enough for us to pass through. At random intervals overhead guards patrol walkways that connect the walls. For what seemed like an eternity we crawled our way through this passage's many random twists and turns. Finally, we stopped at a massive polished wooden door which was fronted by a space that seemed large enough to fit two more chariots of equal size alongside ours. My companion exited the chariot and circled around and stopped an arm's length the door. A pungent smell came from some unknown source beyond the polished wood. I wrinkled my nose at the smell of what I now suspect were unwashed filth covered horses. He began to deliver a deliberate and complex series of knocks. Silence and echo combined. After a minute or two he stopped, and the door opened inward. Several burly soldiers slowly pulled the

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doors open. Together we entered what appeared to be the stables portion of this fortress. Four of the guards pushed the door shut and trapped us in darkness. It seemed strange that the horses and chariot were left outside, but I did not stop to question it. Considering what ended up happening perhaps I should have said something. However, instead of taking time to think I reacted on instinct alone. The humidity and smell that filled this room spurred me to follow the shadow of my savior. Snorting horses shuffled around to my right. His quick steps were matched by my own and in moments we arrived at a set of doors leading from the stables to the inside of the fortress. No light filtered in from the other side. A ring of keys jingled for several seconds before one of them turned in the lock and one of the doors slid outward to reveal a massive courtyard of pressed earth.”

The sound of hurried steps slapping against concrete and a door thrown open with a bang startles Thomas. He stops his story and goes absolutely still. Two pearl ovals float through the air seemingly on their own. They are followed by a large open translucent bottle filled with water. These objects hover and descend so that they sit on the table in front of him. The commanding voice flies from a lookout which overlooks the whole of this frontier. “There are two Paracetamol tablets and a cup of water on the table in front of you. Take them you look like you need something to take the edge off of the pain.”

"What is this?" He gestures blindly at the table with his left hand.

"You requested a painkiller. I had the sergeant get you a mild sedative and water."

"Why are you wasting my time? I asked for a real sedative and booze. Take this away and get me something real."



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"I cannot authorize the release of something real as you call it. This is the best that I can do for you."

"Please take it away."

Thomas's grimace becomes a gaping pit oozing with corruption of the most distorting sort. Adam's voice grows raspy and aged until at last he is silent. The pedestal that he stands on begins to crack at the edges. Max is lost in a deep trance like state which turns him into little more than an empty shell. No one moves to comply with Thomas's request.

"Leave those things if you must, but don't expect me to thank you for them. There were many strange and unsettling things about this place. Firstly, the courtyard that spread out before me was well worn and yet not a soul could be seen other than myself, my guide, and the guards. Secondly, as I followed my companion, I noticed that the guards who patrolled the walls faced both inward and outward. It felt and looked like some kind of elaborate prison. Thirdly, the only sounds that I heard were the movements of metal armor against stone. It was as if someone had turned off all of the sound. Finally, I saw that the soldiers who stood atop the walls of the inner keep had sapphire skin. Suddenly, shouting from outside the fortress walls shattered the quiet. Atop the walls the soldiers sprang into motion. Men wielding bows began firing arrows at targets that began to scream and cry out. When he heard the cries, my savior broke into a run making for a rope bridge that crossed over a wide and deep moat protected by rushing currents. I followed him as quickly as I could. Everything was a blur as I struggled to keep up with his panic induced pace. The bridge swayed dangerously under us when we hurried across it. Several times I almost tripped and fell over the side into the fast-moving water. If miracles do exist, one allowed me to keep my footing. Sweat poured down my face and blinded me."

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Thomas's voice dies. He lets out a hacking cough which rattles him in his seat. His hands reach out in front of him and feel around blindly. The cool goblet rises to his lips and he drinks deeply. Water cascades into the open void. Innumerable streams fall until finally the glass explodes in his hands. Seemingly unharmed Thomas opens his maw ever wider.

"I very nearly slammed into my new friend when without warning he stopped at the far side of the moat. Fortunately, I was able to stop dead in my tracks a step behind him. A small heavily armed unit of soldiers stood between him and the open gates of the castle. They had their weapons drawn and pointed toward us. However, with only a look he got them to lower their weapons. When we walked forward, they split their line to let us pass. We ran inside the open gates and headed up some stairs that stood just inside the entrance. After a short time of racing down so many hallways that I lost count we entered what looked to me to be the throne room. Several men stood hunched over a table in the middle of the room. A guy wearing a silver crown on his head and expensive looking clothes sat on a golden throne facing the assembled men. This group looked up and turned when they heard our footsteps and our heavy panting. Wordlessly my associate walked over to them, leans in, and whispered into the ear of the nearest man. Oddly this man turns to the man on his right and repeats the message that he just heard. Like a chain reaction the news rapidly spread around the table from person to person. It was as if I ceased to exist. None of them paid any kind of attention to me once my associate spoke to them."

"Can I offer you more water?" The voice of Thomas's audience fills up the empty air. He takes in a couple of harsh breaths.

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“No. They turned their backs on me and left me standing where I was awkwardly. I had no idea how I should proceed. If I stepped forward to join the conversation that was quickly becoming animated, I worried that they would grow angry and punish me. However, if I stood still and did nothing that might also make a case for my execution. While I was frozen by uncertainty their animated whispers rose to a shouting match between my friend and one of the men standing across the table from him. Their words swallowed each other. Nothing that they said made any sense. My head throbbed as I was assaulted by this bellowing and slamming of hands against the table. How long this went on I can't say. An eternity passed by until the men stopped yelling. The king was standing and glaring at the men who looked to be his advisers. His eyes briefly met mine and I saw something bestial hiding in them. He raised his arm and points at me as though he was accusing me of committing a crime. 'Take him.' Echoing emotionless words forced me back several steps. Before I could even turn to make my escape two of the men who had said nothing at all grabbed my arms. Pain rushed through me as I began to thrash and struggle against them. A tremendous roar like water escaping a burst dam came from the hall behind me. When they heard this those, who tried to drag me away let go of me and drew their swords. Around me everyone including the king were running about in panic. It took me a minute to realize what was happening and as a result I continued to struggle. Marble slid under my feet as I skidded across the floor. Almost immediately, the glasses slid down my nose and everything went dark. Immediately, the ground became rough under my feet and I began to run. That is when you stopped me. Now you know my story.”

Thick silence sucks all of the air and sound from the room. No one moves. Everyone is lost in thought. Simon shivers, but ceases his struggles. His eyes close. Max's eyes focus on a

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point in the distance. He furrows his brow. Adam falls through the air without making a sound. A rift opens beneath him and he descends in silence. Thomas is unchanged. Finally, the spell is shattered into a thousand jagged shards. “That is how you got here?”

“Yes. I told you that you would think that I was crazy. It looks like I was right. You wasted my time. We are done talking. I have nothing more to say to you.”

“That’s your choice to make Mr. Sanchez. Do what you have to do. If those glasses are capable of what you say that they are then you might have a defense against the charge of trespassing. Let me be honest with you. I have no interest in seeing you arrested and punished. You are the only one who can give me something to use as an argument on your behalf. There are many strange things in the world. These glasses might be one of them.”

“Why are you mocking me?” His expression does not change. Tremors run through his voice.

“I am not sir. Give me proof to use on your behalf and I will do everything in my power to help you.” Simon falls into a deep sleep. Adam is lost to the depths of the pit which closed after he was gone from sight. Max fades away in his seat.

“If there is a god and you lie to me may you be eternally damned to the worst torments that its mind can devise. What kind of proof do you want?”

“Put on the glasses and then take them off again. If you disappear then you are telling the truth. I can tell my superiors that your trespassing was an accident. They may drop the charges.”

“Why would I come back? What makes you think that I won’t run away?”

His interrogator shrugs and the walls surrounding Simon come crashing down. “If you are an innocent man you will not run. Slowly lift up and stretch out your right hand.” The glasses

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rise off of the table. It hovers several inches above his right hand. He slowly raises his hand and unclenches his fist. They float down to meet his open palm. Almost involuntarily his hand slams shut over the metal and crystal.

“Are you ready?” He blinks rapidly and takes a deep breath to slow the rapids rushing through his body.

“Yes.” Thomas brings the glasses up to eye level and opens them with slick and shaking hands. He holds his breath and slides them centimeter by centimeter toward his face. Electricity runs up and down his spine when the cool metal touches his nose. His body burns with a powerful sense of euphoria and he forces himself to suppress the expression that his mind and spirit wear. Instantly, he slams his eyes shut and lets out a breath. After several moments, he slowly opens his eyes to reveal the same thick unchanging darkness that he always sees. With frozen hands Thomas removes his eyewear. Nothing changes.

“What did you do?”

“If that is all, tell me sir how is it that you really got here.”