

Prologue

I shake myself awake as the chirping of birds attacks me violently and steals away my freedom. A cool breeze makes me shiver as it attempts to clean my uncut and unwashed mane of hair. My ragged and threadbare WWE logo t-shirt swallows my body and does not protect it from the air of what can only be another awful morning. The skin of my cheeks cling to bone extra tightly this morning. Stiffness and pain wrack my arms and legs and they seem ready to fall off my body and disappear. Torn jeans stay on my hips only because I use an abused leather belt that I can't even use to beat away the birds that are torturing me. Once sturdy boots make sure that my feet are not protected in any way. If I have ever had anything to steal, I ask that a god find it so that I can give it up to cure myself of my awful curses.

At an almost glacial pace, I get up from my bench and step over the form of his seeing eye dog with weakened legs. I adjust the blacked-out sunglasses that cover my damaged eyes and reach down to wake my friend up. Hacking coughs seize me, and I fall onto the stone path that runs past the bench. For several moments the agony paralyzes me. Every breath is the most insidious sort of torture. When the coughing subsides, I barely have the strength to move, much less stand up. Somehow, I am able to move a couple of inches before simply lying still. A couple of licks to my face and a familiar whine which I cannot seem to place fills me with a burst of adrenaline. Unsteadily I get to my feet. As quickly as my adrenaline burst appears it dissipates leaving me an empty shadow. Happy barking tells me that I have not been abandoned again.

I hear what sounds like happy barks which quickly become angry growls. Somewhere nearby there is a deafening hissing sound which freezes me in place. Pained yips like those of a

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wounded dog that I knew long ago combine with the voice of the snake. This sound forces me to clutch my ears. A terrifying silence takes hold of my home several moments later. Strangely, I find the silent empty air to be an almost pleasurable experience. Suddenly, it shatters beneath the blows of joyful barking and leaves me feeling disgusted. A head rubs against my leg and begs for attention. My right leg lashes out in satisfying anger, but instead of chasing the awful creature away I fall to the ground.

After a moment of paying attention to nothing in particular I pull a leather leash out of my pocket. I fasten the leash onto the dog's valuable collar with spasming hands. A lukewarm breeze stings as it flies past my face. Suddenly, I am back in the desert. Explosions boom around me. Shrapnel flies through the air. Screams rend the night making my ears ring. Comrades fall spraying blood into the air. Fire engulfs me and everything goes dark. When I come to, I am seated on a hard surface. I flail around for my shield, but I seem to be alone. It appears that anything that I might have used to protect myself is gone. A strange soft hand grabs mine and squeezes it.

“Who’s there?”

I bark this question and the sensation vanishes.

“Are you ok sir?”

“I saw you thrashing and screaming in pain on the ground. As soon as I was able to, I carried you to this bench. I called for an ambulance. Is there anyone that I can call for you?”

I can vaguely remember the images that flew through my mind when I heard her speak. Her clothes are finely made as if by a master tailor. She is adorned with jewelry that could

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probably both clothe and feed me for years. If one looks closely one might see the daylight 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 hatred and a deep-seated disgust.

I hug myself tightly to try and chase away a darkness which suddenly fills me. The rustling wind and smells of the scent of a summer day surround me. When I try to locate her, I can't. Ordinarily I can sense someone through the sounds that they make or the way that they smell, but she seems to lack so much as a definite scent. All of this is so strange that I don't know what I should do or think. Thanks form on my lips.

"Don't thank me for what I just did. Someone who wears the badges of service to this country deserves more than a moment of my time."

I ignore her. Somewhere deep inside me something wakes up. It is a light sleeper and when it rises there is only a plywood wall to hold it back. My eyes move to the approximate location of her voice. If only I could destroy her with my gaze so that I could go back to hating and being hated I would do so.

"Why did you stop? What do you want from me?"

"I stopped because 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

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stopped because you suffer. 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.”

My southern Texan twang causes chainsaws of pain to cut at the inside of my skull. It brings images to mind that I immediately dismiss. Hazy shapes linger in my mind for several moments before scattering like smoke in a gusting wind. I take many shallow breaths as my breathing quickens. My voice gathers and flies out as a shout that rings in my ears.

"Listen lady, I don't know what kind of sick game this is, but I'm not interested. Leave me the hell alone!"

"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, have me arrested. This is no game. 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 puts it in my hand. I think that her ebony hair seems to flow in the breeze like some kind of petroleum wig. An unnatural stillness prevents her from moving at all. Beneath the sun her tanned flesh seems to warp and shift from moment to moment.

A burning pain swallows me whole for a moment. I shake my head and expect to hear nothing but the sounds of the park. Instead, I actually hear her breathing. My nimble fingers run across the raised ridges that help me see. Immediately, I put the card in one of my pockets. All of my muscles are coiled with a violent tension. For several moments anger of a more righteous

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variety than I am used to feeling fills me with fire. No magic spell removes the prison walls which usually keeps everyone far away from me.

"Ms. Lil Devlin, what kind of offer can a life insurance broker make me?"

"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. Cruelty is carved subtly into her face even as she smiles. A predator seems to lurk behind the wide grin that she wears. 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. 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.

"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."

"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. Take these and make a better future for yourself."

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I stretch out my right hand with my calloused palm facing up. Streams of sweat run down my face and dips me in what feels like a frozen pool. My body shakes randomly. Deep breaths steady me enough to keep my hand somewhat steady. A mixture of murderous anger and the slightest glint of a future share the place where my soul once lived.

She carefully places the glasses in my hand. Ms. Devlin takes several steps back. Her eyes rove this way. That gaze I imagine sees both everything and nothing at the same time. Strangely, her pupils become almost reptilian in nature. Scales shine.

“Try them on.”

I reach up, take off, and set aside the sunglasses that conceal my burden and act as my sole friend. For a moment I can almost see the woman's eyes begging me to agree to her deal. My shaking hands manage to find my face and put the glasses against my face. Instantly, painful lights and images attack my eyes. Vision blinds me and denies me the ability to do anything more than whimper. Bright colors spin around me and I quickly become nauseous. As a scream claws its way out of my body I clutch my head and fall to my knees. Fire burns my throat before I turn my head to the side and spill my guts. The blurry shape of Lil's face looms above me as the pain that is ripping at my skull dulls. Shadows dance before me while I squeeze my eyes shut. Finally, after a few moments I feel something lukewarm touch my chapped lips. A kind of madness takes control of me. It makes me grab the water bottle which is pressed up against my mouth. After taking a few quick sips that almost make me choke I stop and think for the first time in a long time. Pictures that both make my blood race and at the same time bring all kinds of curses to my mind appear. Two laughing and playing young children approach me. Scenes of

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picnics and a dozen other events dance in front of me too quickly for me to track. These quickly explode into nothingness. Now that I feel a little better, I slowly open my eyes. Ms. Devlin is the first thing that I see. Her royal blue power suit seems strange to me though I can't say why. There might be some joy present in her gray eyes though I am not sure. All that I do know is that her exact features seem to escape my ability to remember unless I specifically only focus on them.

“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.”

I energetically nod my head. My thoughts are a mess. There are no words that can describe the raw emotion which are now clawing at my mind in an attempt to be free. Someone caring about me feels like a hammer tapping away at my skull and at the very same time soothes away my pain. Everything is a confusing smog. It steals my ability to remember the fact that I exist.

Ms. Devlin takes the man's fallen sunglasses from the bench. She places them in the right-hand pocket of her suit. In a smooth motion she turns and strolls away. Though her steps are not quick she is soon gone from sight. All signs of her are lost. The sun appears to be a bit brighter and slightly warmer.

Now that I'm alone I can't even bring myself to take a deep breath. Everything is so dreamlike that I'm shaking both inside and out. If I do anything at all I'm worried that this will end up being a lie like everything else in my life. Finally, I dust myself off, stand, and begin

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to walk through the park. The trees and paths around seem to be too beautiful to be real. Emerald appears more vibrant than I remember it ever being. However, I soon stop dead in my tracks. I hear the roar of singing cannons before I see them. Two worlds seem to fuse into one a couple of steps ahead. I am in the middle of a vicious battle and yet I'm still in the park. Before me, broken bloated corpses are spread over the ground. My eyes bug out as cannonballs rapidly approach. They pass over me, curve away. and rip apart several soldiers standing behind me. Boiling blood and internal organs paint my body. A boy who can be no more than eleven is blown to pieces. No words can describe the paralysis that practically stops my heart. All of my muscles scream as I struggle.

I struggle to help the dying or even to scream, but I cannot do anything at all. Finally, after an eternity of slaughter I'm free. Before me is a dead and lonely field. I'm alone. The cannons are gone, and shattered earth is whole. The blood and corpses are gone. Fire burns through my feet as I run about looking for anyone at all. A tortured scream erupts from my lips as mania sets in. It grows louder and louder. When my breath runs out, I stop. Fear sets in. Frantic hands grab the glasses and rip them off. With a heave I throw them away. As soon as they leave my face everything is gone. My body slumps down onto the ground. The warmth of the day seeps into my bones as I lay upon the grass and fall into a deep and fitful sleep.

Chapter 1

Through the Open Door

A sharp smell tears into my nostrils and pores as I begin to wake from a sleep whose beginning, I don't remember. Everything is hazy. Immediately it becomes hard for me to think or breathe. I jerk upright and thrash as though I can destroy the chains that hold. My eyelids fly open and I see nothing. Scratchy and sharpened sheets attempt to cut the skin from my skeleton. Strange voices float around me. They whisper things that remain just beyond my understanding. Every second that the messages attack me makes my struggles stronger. Soft hands immediately press my body down. A commanding voice smacks me across my face. I pause.

“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 feels as though it is some kind of quicksand that traps me deeper and deeper when I attempt to get off of the rack that I am strapped to. My every move feels exaggerated and dramatic. I slow down even more in the hope that I will just disappear or become invisible to the monsters that are holding me against my will. Pieces of my skin and meat feel as though they are carving off of my body while I slide across this barbed slab. Suddenly, my jailer’s grip steals away all of my strength. Almost as though someone is controlling my mind I stretch out and go still like a corpse. Words fail me. The steady rhythm of my heart seems to match the breathing of my captor. These hypnotic beats draw me into the crushing embrace of swirling sands images that haunt my nightmares. They form in front of me for just a moment before splitting apart and reforming. Dozens appear and vanish faster than I can think. Some scenes last longer and these are the ones which make me silently scream. A smiling woman with short hair reaches out to me, but is violently torn away leaving a void. Masked forms holding guns at their shoulders point them in my direction and squeeze the triggers. They explode into shrapnel like shards right before I am torn apart by their bullets. Twisting waves of white-hot sand bury my body. It is hard to say how long my burial lasts, but in a flash an ice-cold ocean washes away my grave and shocks me awake.

“Sir, can you hear me?”

“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

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what we say then we will have you on your way relatively quickly. However, if you give us a hard time you will be sedated!”

These words stoke a frigid flame which transforms Dr. Clark. His skin crystalizes, shatters, and reforms into a battle-scarred warlord. He appears capable of crushing mountains to dust and stopping the hearts of all who oppose him. Untamed strength pours off of him and bends the world around him.

A rigidity not unlike the hold of death freezes me for a moment. After that the chains that hold me down fall away. A vein on my neck pulses in tune with my rapidly increasing heartbeat. Sweat pours from every inch of my skin. I have no control over my words. Demons speak through me in much the way that they might if demonic possession were real.

“I told the nurse that I don’t have any money or insurance. I want to leave. I’ll sue this place for unlawful imprisonment if you keep me here!”

Weakness gathers into a weapon that pins me. My defiance launches itself at the superficially stoic doctor. It shatters against the pearl shield that he wields. The fragments strike the ground and build a palisade that holds 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 that fly on venom filled wings. It strikes the line of pickets and is dust. The venom evaporates into a cloud which is caught between the shield and the picket line. This poison struggles to find a host. When it finds none, it vanishes.

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I want to hurt this man for what he is putting me through. He thinks that he is better than me. What gives him the right to order me around? If he thinks that he's my commander then we'll see how he likes the rules of engagement.

"You're out of uniform Sarge. Put yourself on report and report to the stockade."

A stillness born of many years spent training to obey immobilizes him. The barb becomes a hail of thousands of needles that stab even without penetrating flesh. They encircle and take the shape of a twisted two headed beast. A snarling maw and razor teeth prepare to exploit the vulnerability of mortals. Dr. Clark is an 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. Is that you? Did you go to the sandbox, raid, and then decide that your sacrifice would mean nothing? You seem quite intent on doing what the enemy could not. Go ahead and quit if that is what you 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 me into a wraith. I rise and dwarf the room. No sooner do I rise then a grip of steel arrests my movement. Fissures and cracks spider-web across me as my outer shell falls away. A fragile cowering form descends to the corner of the room furthest from the bed where I lay. Hot tears pour down my face.

He judges me and acts as though he knows who I am! How long will he continue to lie to me? Fire reaches up and expands as though it wants to escape me. At the same time that rivers of

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sweat pour off me a dam explodes within me. Something that I did not know before comes in place of the hate that I so badly want to set loose on this monster. An overwhelming deadness rips away all of my emotions. If I would die right now, I would be better off.

“What do you mean that he made sure that those who want can get help? Do you think that I don’t want help? There is no helping me.”

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

“Doc, what happened to my glasses?”

I hear footsteps echo and fade into the darkness. Silence responds to my shouted question. A chorus of hammers pounds on my skull. The quiet increases the strength of the blows which are knocking me around like garbage caught in a windstorm. Familiar silences combined with an almost final stillness remind me of open fields that my mother told me about. My hand shoots out to the right at a speed that shocks me. Jagged pain flashes across my arm. As I fumble with the braille covered remote that my captor gave me, I grit my teeth. Words float before me as I pass my fingers over the instructions. Frustration and impatience both grab my hand and convince me to push the call button quickly and repeatedly.

Rapidly approaching steps coat the room with vibrating sheets of sound. The air shimmers as though every invisible molecule is a miniature prism caught in a beam of light. Another dimension seems to open up and deposit its inhabitants into this pseudo-prison. Creatures that belong in nightmares appear. Horrible things with dozens of foaming serpentine heads on the bodies of emaciated dogs line the walls. Bared fangs and roars reminiscent of

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wounded predators fill every inch of space. A presence that could demand the obedience of a raging volcano enters and chokes off the calls of these beasts.

“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.”

A wall as high as the newly erected battlements of a lord's palace springs up and traps the demons. This instantly smothers their rage and reduces them to nightmares in the dreams of nightmares. Cautious defenders stare down 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. In a moonless darkness a figure drags a heavy barrel to the base of the wall. It rests in the shadows. The barrel turns to dust. Arrows rain down on the besieger and the remains of his precious cargo.

“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.”

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“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.”

“I’ll sign whatever release form you want. I don’t want to spend another minute here. Let me go or I’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. The sapper races away as shielded warriors roar. Flaming arrows bounce off of the platforms as soldiers push them into place. Troops bearing maces, axes, swords, and spears rush from where they hide and engage the troops atop the walls.

“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?”

Pillars of thick mirror like ice instantly form around the towers and the vast armies that follow them. Dozens of armored forms stop in mid-motion as frost causes their weapons to splinter in mid swing. Even the breathing of the defenders drops until it is imperceptible. The whole landscape as far as any human eye is capable of seeing is trapped beneath the frozen hand of a vengeful god.

“I want out of here damn you! Do you think that I don’t know what I want? Get me the forms. Now!”

Suddenly, the ice fractures and explodes outward. Flames set the walls alight and immolate the defenders on the ramparts. Stones glow bright and melt into a molten lake. A burnt

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orange glow fills the sky and illuminates the entire world. Thick clouds of smoke rise over the landscape. The demonic creatures that were trapped in the fortress flood the land. They tear the tallest mountains up by their roots.

I start to let out hacking coughs which makes me tear up. While my throat burns, I blink away the signs of my weakness. A terrible fire builds up in me. My prison begins to burn. Heat scorches every inch of skin that it can reach. Horrible lights grab me. Not even a scream comes out when I try to speak. Each of my thoughts melt away before I can use them to restore my sanity.

“Are you going or not? Well?”

Any defenders who survive the burning wall flee deeper into the city. Legions fall as they retreat into the innermost keep. They move silently as though they are no more than a breeze running across an empty plain. Screeching noises follow all who run to safety. All around them fire consumes the walls.

Suddenly, a horrible image forms before my eyes. It is so real that for just a second I want to reach out and strangle the life out of it. Waves of sound take the form of a straight-back figure that breaks apart and reforms in front of me as it speaks. A musical voice of indeterminable origin peals like a bell through the air around me.

“The ocular trauma was too severe, and it took too long for you to get proper treatment.”

“What are you telling me doc?”

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“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. 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 kind for years sir. It never gets easier to watch guilt turn warriors into their own enemies.”

A wave of sound appears and strikes us. My hands fly up and create porous shields that do little to protect him. I grit my teeth and seem to become a block of granite. Meanwhile, the flames take on an awful life of their own. The more that they consume the more terrible their forms become. It is as though an ocean of living nightmares born of fire is sweeping the city’s form into oblivion.

“I have the paperwork right here sir. The form is written in braille. In your current condition you are only a threat to yourself. This is the best-case scenario. If you are not careful it is very possible that you could end up hurting someone. If you don’t give yourself time to heal you could die. This verifies that you have been warned of the things that you risk by leaving

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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 unit and pulls many awesome weapons from the air. Their bodies crackle with a power that twists and bends the growing flames. Threads of silver energy encircle them and crack like a whip which beats back any fire that strays too close to them. Crowns of diamond push back the monsters that are surging inward from all of the corners of the realm.

"Yes."

These amateur legions freeze where they are and hold their tools of war at the ready. Lightning sets the sky on fire. Heavy winds land hammer blows against the civilian forces arrayed against the hardened veterans. A second sound rushes through the air. The faintest hint of rosewater invades their pores and temporarily mesmerizes the untrained warriors.

"Get on with it! Give me the damn papers so that I can be on my way!"

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After a moment the power is broken, and they roar in unison. Hate filled scaled beings of cursed flesh push against the powers that shoves them back to their dens. Each and every moment that the inferno rages increases their might. They become taller than mountains. Their heads disturb the lakes of smoke that flow above the ruined land.

“What is this trick you lying...”

A sharp razor blade cuts my response in half. My words are tied into knots and then buried in a deep hole which appears and then vanishes just as quickly. Curses drop from the broken daggers that make up these creatures’ mouths and ineffectually spill acid on the defenders. Their clawed hands wither when they reach for the human army.

“Sir, do not use that tone. You want me to release you? 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.”

An uncountable armored band stands shoulder to shoulder outside of the ring of violence beyond the reach of either army. They wield quills instead of swords and scrolls instead of shields. Parchment covered in alien scripts covers them in the place of steel plates or scales. Calm determination flows off of them as they march into the vanishing city. Geysers shatter the earth as they burst forth at this odd group’s command. The hissing of mile high steam plumes drowns the world out.

Rhythmic melodies suddenly fill the room before falling silent. Rustling paper changes hands. A click like that of an empty gun is followed by the sound of a saw shearing through

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chain links. The saw is handed off and a retreat sounds. It lifts the fortress and the war taking place within and turns to dust all that once existed there.

My accursed jailer's approach turns me to stone. The blood stops in my veins. The ivory key to my freedom is placed into my open right hand. I see with my left-hand images of warning that mean nothing to me. When this vision is over the torch that will give me freedom from the darkness is placed in my hand. It burns across the page as I write several names that used to mean something to someone.

"What's the date?"

"Today is the 8th of October."

The dams holding back my blood burst as an earthquake pummels it with earthen fists. In that one moment I am angrier than I have ever been in my life. Terrible images whisper to me and beg my hands to make them real.

"Why does everyone abuse me? Is it my fault that I am now a coward? You trapped me here for four months? How dare you! I did not give you permission to treat me! You will regret this!"

Lightning carves the date into the page. I hold the paper out with violently trembling hands. My dishonor rips my soul apart leaving the monster behind. This quiet once again wakes up something bestial. This thing that was born in a wilderness is who I am. It is the reason why people hate me.

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Silence takes the pen and form. Nurse Sterling circles me hungrily. 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 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!”

At that moment I swing at her, but my blow misses her badly. Soreness stretches my skin painfully as I pull myself up by the sides of the bed. One of my handholds falls away leaving my arm momentarily hanging over a shadowed cliff that I can almost see. My body goes cold when I turn quickly. I feel like I am about to slide into the monstrous den that opens up nearby. There is a loud hissing from the depths. Something moves as a warrior wearing paper armor steps into the room out of thin air and falls into the opened pit. As I thrash about a clawed hand stops me.

“Stay where you are. I will give you your things and help you leave.”

A deafening din 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 2 worn pairs of glinting violet eyes. They 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 wrinkled. Serpentine eyes are sunken into their

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sockets. In her haste she tries to throw the glasses. Unnatural restraints force her to put them gently on the bed. When it leaves her hand all is as it was.

“I put your glasses on the bed to your right.”

My hands fly to the right and hover over the place that my hallucinogen sits. They tremble slightly as they descend toward my portal to damnation. The touch of the metal frame is not cold or even room temperature on my skin. It is oddly pleasant. Waves of warmth flow through my fingertips. I grab hold of the frame with both hands and raise them from where it sits on the sheet.

“Help me put them on. Please.”

Ice flows from my mouth as I speak. A firm grip guides the glasses to my face. I pull away and the hold is gone. I squeeze my eyelids shut. Slowly, I draw the glasses closer until they are in place.

“Where are my clothes?”

Silence slaps me. Though my head does not fly to the side I flinch. My eyelids crack open a millimeter at a time. I squint at the vacant field that lies dead before me. Everything is quiet as if the whole world has been murdered.

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 as the sky darkens. Stiff heated winds create figures with many shifting faces. Thick sticky air buries everything. Fallen pillars and vacant mud brick huts dot the road leading here. In the distance a

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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.

Sweat pours down my neck and soaks me. I look down at himself and my eyes widen when I see that I am wearing a thin hospital gown that blows in the wind. Hot rain begins to fall as I scramble off of the hospital bed. Mud and dust grab my feet in a death grip. As I stare at my surroundings, I cannot help but take a stumbling step forward. My arms flail around for a moment before I hit the ground hard. Air rushes from my lungs while my body is encased in a heavy cast of stone, mud, and dirt.

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

My daze shatters as an inferno ignites within me. I pull myself free of my cast and I lurch to my feet. Gasping breath explodes from my chest as I race toward the road. While my heart threatens to tear itself apart, rapids of blood surge through my veins. When I look back, I see rabid horses chasing after me.

These monstrous horses are giant foaming steeds. They foam at the mouth and their scarlet teeth drip blood for all to see. Beside them run hounds and wolves. Their howls and baying cries call down a response of booming thunder which grows louder and louder. Beneath their feet the earth dies.

My feet bleed heavily and grow worse as hidden stones cut me to ribbons. The thunder, baying, and howls deafen me. I sway in the wind and struggle to stay on my feet. Colors blend

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together as my vision swims. Earth becomes burning cobblestone beneath my feet. This jolts me awake. What looks like a chariot from some old movie is rushing down the road beside me. Before it can pull away, I slow and try leaps into it. Sweat covered and weak hands grab a hold of the front of the carriage. It is nothing short of a miracle that I do not fall. For the first time in a very long time I close my eyes and begin to pray. Though my life has been the work of a wrathful god I call any merciful being to rescue me now. Before I can stop praying and open my eyes again two odd things happen. Everything tilts and I am thrown from this racing chariot which stops as though there is nothing to fear. Then I immediately hear more muffled steps. A heavy darkness swaddles me in its grasp while the steps and my savior who I had not seen vanish.

Chapter 2

Fortress of Iron

My groans fill the room with a twisted music that echoes forever. When I open my eyes, I see nothing but a heavy damp darkn claustrophobic coffin. Vague shapes move at the edges of my vision. I feel cold knives stabbing me violently and repeatedly. They make me both feel pain that is too awful to be real while at the same time dulling a phantom pain that wraps around me. If I strain hard enough, I can just see a scaled creature circle me. It rubs against my arms and legs sending violent shudders shooting through me. After a short time, soothing voices that whisper for me to sleep tie me down with heavy weights. Intoxicating scents slow my thoughts to a snail's pace.

A menacing shadow looms over me. 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

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accord. Double razor edges cut the shadowed flesh from onyx bones. An ocean of ebony blood forms a wave which bathes me.

For no good reason the weights that squeeze the air from my lungs melt. At the first sign of freedom I let out a roar and stand. My head spins as I fumble around for any way out. Horses snort somewhere in the darkness of this jail. Damp and pungent smells suddenly assault me. They drive me into a frenzy. Heavy sheets of sweat pour off of me. A mud brick village appears before me. Several donkeys bray a few feet away. To my right and left explosions rip the air apart. Screams ring out, shaking me wildly. In a flash, it's gone, and I see the vague outline of a door several yards ahead.

A flickering light floats underneath the door and through almost imperceptible gaps between itself and the jamb. I stumble over the bones of the beast that the shadow transformed into a poor feast for carrion. Jewels shimmer by my feet as he steps near enough to the horses to take in their scent. My nerves fail me and I barely notice that the horses don't react to me. All that I am is an explosive blur moving through the darkness. Living stone is a fluid river that creeps up on my feet beginning to encase them.

Sweat pours quickly down my face. In a moment of desperation that reaches deep within my depleted reserves of strength I pull myself free from these new shackles. Waves of energy that claws at my innards in a way that makes death seem preferable, but my desire to escape remains. I push on the door with everything that is left in me. An odd almost pleasant feeling comes over me as silent hinges pull the door outward. Thick unmoving air empties my lungs. Choking and gasping I step out into a massive courtyard of stone. A euphoria more powerful

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than any drug that I have ever known cloaks me in heavy clouds. My legs move aimlessly in circles and I spin in the warm downpour. Sizzling water tears away a large chunk of the haze that clings to me. Terror grips me as I twist in all directions.

Eyes from atop the fortress's lichen encrusted high outer walls and towers almost bore deep into me. None actually seem to see my dancing. Dozens of soldiers armored from head to toe in strange coats of sapphire infused metal face inward as though expecting an attack to come from within. 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 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. The others wield an assortment of wicked double-edged weapons. Death stares callously out from the depths of these soldiers.

Confusion runs through me like a barbed poisoned spear. My mouth hangs open and I become tense up. For a few moments my breathing races faster than light. Numbness makes me forget my own cursed name. I am waiting for a guard to spot and stop my suffering. When nothing happens, I transform into a half-forgotten shade from long ago. Instantly, my wide eyes are two slits. Several deep breaths strangle the life out of my pounding heart. The tension gathers in one place at the corner of my eye and falls into a box which sinks into a bottomless rift. As I silently move across the castle grounds toward the gate of the central fortification several hacking coughs rattle my body. The sentinels atop the fortifications stir as much as an ancient mountain might.

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A armor-less navy 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 hidden skill.

Oddly, my steps fall into synchronization with the guards that stand on the inner walls. Crisp movements that lack a single wasted motion quickly to the inner fortress. I spit out a bit of blood as my loud coughs send shudders down my spine. My feet stop almost as though they have minds of their own. Memories that shred my brain and set me on fire explode in front of me.

The intricately carved gates of the central keep sit on the other side of a narrow wooden rope bridge anchored by stakes of steel. This chokepoint 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 of poisoned curved blades encase the spikes entirely. Broken bones, fractured skulls, and ragged clothes are scattered among the stakes.

My eyes snap shut. A collection of stone and metal structures spring up in my mind. I silently stare at the starving figures who are strung up by their skeletal arms. Sweat runs down my neck. Every cell in my body burns. Many explosions tear away this vision and force my eyes open. Without thinking I rush forward which makes my head spin. With a grunt I rush forward and grab onto the ropes of the ladder that lead to the fortress tightly.

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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 pearl fletched heavy steel arrows turn unarmored masses into sieves. Ladder carriers fall in mounds. Clouds of vicious carrion descend. 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.

The horrific screaming that fills the air brings tears to my eyes. Flashes of the ocean fly out of nowhere. I force myself to ignore the shattered bodies that are floating in the surf. Figures huddle beside me as thunder claps like shots ring out. Bloodied sand clings to my exposed feet as I bolt forward across the rope bridge. Armor of beaten perspiration weighs me down. No sooner do I reach the other side of the bridge then two things happen. First, the doors of the central citadel crash open. Second, a horde runs out and surges around me without ever making any contact with my body. Behind them I see 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 my blood run cold. However, despite the frost in my veins I raise my throat in defiance and shout 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. 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.

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Crashing sounds 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. These troops form lines that bristle with unnatural power. Stone freezes beneath their feet. Swords bend space and seem to possess independent wills. 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.

I flee through the fortress's open doors with my hands clutched over my ears trying to drown out these familiar noises. A vast entrance hall sprawls before me. Once wondrous tiles of rose, amethyst, emerald, and sapphire shift and fall to dust underneath my steps. Massive dirt encrusted marble pillars crumble. My feet carry me through the entrance hall at a speed that blurs everything. Rotting and shattered furnishings fly by as I struggle to escape the blood curdling echoes. Some force cancels my will and compels me to keep moving through the deserted grungy labyrinth of hallways despite the way that my heart threatens to burst. It is as if I am the last sane living being in all of the world. Hell is loose now and even in the depths of this castle the sounds still ring out.

My steps grow more frenzied as the songs of battle grow closer. I stop dead in my tracks. It seems as though a wall is blocking my path. Before me a massive spartan chamber appears. 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 crown that rests on his head does not appear to be

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gold, but rather a dull dead iron. A tall straight-backed figure in ebony armor embedded with bright emeralds stands across a large empty circular table from the ruler.

I can sense a man-sized gap seems to open in the unseen wall that is stopping me from going either forward or backward. I instinctively leap into the room. Neither of the men react to my breathing and footsteps which echo loudly in the otherwise quiet room. Without even thinking I try to approach them, but I am pushed off to the side against my will. No matter how hard I struggle my body refuses to obey me. From where I stand I can see more than I ever wanted to. I take up a defensive stance and try to shrink away to nothing.

“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 sits at his hip. He flinches when the other man’s gauntleted hand slams into the table breaking off a section of the thick wood. The warrior’s charcoal irises glimmer with mirth when the king stumbles back and sinks down onto the throne.

“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! The cities of your kingdom burned and all that you were concerned with was consolidating your power over this court! You had your scholar make 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.”

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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 and his eyes attempt to assert control. Despite the darkness the blade glows with and exudes a nearly blinding inner light. Nobility takes hold of him. Raw strength surges into him. In an instant he straightens to his full height and heaves off the burden that bent his shoulders.

“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!”

“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. 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.”

The armored man falls into a mock bow. He quickly straightens up and steps back. There is a darkness about him which gives him a height which could dwarf worlds. Though he does not draw his sword his right hand comes to rest on the pommel of the blade. Something in his eyes struggles to get out, but he wraps it in an embrace which smothers it.

“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. Stillness holds him tightly when he stands shoulder to shoulder with his nephew. His height which once towered over the warrior and cowed him in his youth is now his equal. An aura of fragile strength creates a melody that betrays his weakness.

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“Secure my quarters and family. Summon members of my personal guard to go with you. Arm them properly this time. Go!”

He turns away and walks 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 throne. There seems to be a world sized weight perched across his shoulder which bends him so that he is struggling to stand erect. Something that brings a momentary tear to his eyes passes through him at great speed.

“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.”

As soon as the words leave him, he turns back toward the side door and breaks into a sprint. That burden which he once carried flies off of him and lands in between the king’s shoulder blades. The heavy echoing steps that are heard as he crosses over the stone floor echo like the beating of many drums. Wasting little time, he grabs the door handle as soon as he reaches it and pulls the door open. Seemingly by some act of magic he vanishes as soon as he passes over the threshold.

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 trembles on the ground and whimpers.

“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.”

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I break free from the spell that is using me as a puppet just as the first torch - lit figures burst into the chamber. The temperature in the room soars as an army of broken people push and shove into the room. Nothing makes sense to me anymore while the chamber becomes like a desert at noon. There should be no way that I should remain invisible to this lynch mob. However, no one says a word to me. Instead, all around me men, women, and children whose bodies and rags are covered in blood, sweat, and mud start to madly chant in unison.

“Take him to the walls! Make him bleed as we have bled! Take his eyes!”

Over and over this chorus rings out. Each time the chant grows louder and more forceful. A dozen of the painted men and women from the keep’s walls 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.

I stupidly race forward. Something which only I might consider ancient and powerful springs to life inside of me. As I run past the fallen crown it seems to back away from me. Lightning arcs and races through my body while I run to the middle of the room. My eyebrow cocks for just a moment when I spin to face the mob and place my back to the spears that could skewer me. A crowd just like this one appears next to them and grabs my soul. Some of them who are basically little more than children point AK’s at those who stand across. Bricks and stones fly past me. These horrors smack me a dozen times before melting into the mob. They look as though they marched through hell if such a place even exists.

“Stop! Enough of this! Stop the killing! Stop it now!”

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These words bounce uselessly around the room. 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 hand to hand. When she reaches the front of this rabble she falls. An emaciated man with thin hair and few teeth who is well past his prime places a blade 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. Infirm shuffling steps carry the man into the haggard sea. Her eyes are empty of life as they stare at the king. That hazel gaze is still like a tree lost in the heart of a blazing drought. Bones stand out prominently both through her rags as well as her taut skin.

“Why can I understand you? Why can’t you hear me?”

I gnash my teeth when there is no response. What seems like an iron barbed whip comes out and beats me down. The ancient beast that hides in the depths of my heart makes itself at home. My eyes lock onto the prisoner whose body seems frozen in a block of stone. I step forward and reach out to her. Suddenly, my body jerks back like it’s attached to a bungee cord. No amount of preparation can help me be ready for the sensation of skidding helplessly across the floor. In an instant I fly forward. A gasp escapes as I come to a stop between the armies. Paralysis grips me so tightly that each breath burns my lungs.

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“She must be made to suffer as we suffered. My sons and daughters starved. They 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 surprisingly strong and wicked blow to her back with her gnarled cane. The woman yelps and tries to get away. Another blow rewards her for attempting to crawl to freedom. A sort of frenzy takes the crone as she strikes her captive with blows that grow in ferocity. Echoing screams mix with cheers until the captive is prone, whimpering, and shaking on the ground.

I am a trapped prisoner and when I try to talk a croak flies out instead of real words. Frustration rushes through me as I struggle to break free. My body does not move at all despite the way that I fight against the invisible powers that hold me. Every bone in my body screams for mercy as hammers crash against them. Tears race down my cheeks. A heavy blanket falls over me and takes away my 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 crowd. 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. He drops. 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

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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 personal feeding frenzies. At that moment the chains of inhibition that hold everyone down disintegrate. Rocks, arrows, and spears fly through the air.

All around me broken bodies fall. As the crowd scatters I feel the forces that paralyze me weaken. I begin to hyperventilate. These quick breaths weirdly break the fog that keeps me from seeing or thinking clearly. All of the bodies and screams are magnified in ways that I doubt that I can ever forget. Before my eyes the king cuts down children who are swinging at him with twigs. Horror makes my blood freeze. My every nerve bursts into flame. Shock destroys all other emotions and sucks the air from my lungs. A few weak words manage to escape my lips.

“Stop. Don’t do this.”

These words harmlessly bounce off the blood-stained monarch. Painful images assault me. Slaughter overwhelms me as it fills the room with the stench of viscera and torn flesh. Flaring my nostrils as my head begins to spin, I try to escape. In desperation I call on the winds to grant me unnatural speed. In a burst of power, I actually fly toward a door set into a distant corner of the room. How I try to block out the horrific scenes that are playing out. Fires rage in my skull as I slam into the icy stone of one of the walls. The jarring shock that shakes my teeth and rattles my bones forces me to step back and lower my head. Metal and crystal slides like water down his face. Impossibly loud screaming grows worse by the moment pulling me toward waves of sound. An abyss is all that I see though I can feel the glasses teetering on the precipice. Suddenly, the screams are gone, and the dampness of the room is replaced by a mild warmth.

“Stop right there!”

I hear a heavily accented voice assault my ears. My heartbeat rushes to the point that I fear that it will rupture. At the same time my movements speed up. A muted miniature explosion grazes my left ear. It feels like a whip of wind is trying to tear my skin. Even though I am swaying on my feet a half remembered instinct wastes no time in freezing me in place. Strong hands pull my arms behind my back and capture them in metal cuffs. Without so much as a word I stumble forward into an all-encompassing shadow.

Chapter 3

Lunar Visions

“Do you know where you are sir?”

A heavily accented voice echoes 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 to the questioner like a second skin. His chestnut colored eyes skin me thoroughly. He reveals both bleached bone and pulsing blood vessels. The questioner is a solidly hewn ebony statue standing erect across the bare metal table from me.

"No. I don't know where I am. Why don't you just tell me? I doubt that you actually care about my answer."

I am tied up and coiled with a tension that is so great that I feel as though no other person is capable of copying it. All of my cells seem frozen and stretched to the point of breaking. My

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words are meant to inject venom. Each syllable seeks my jailer's flesh to poison their blood and bring them a slow painful death. It seems to me that sparks erupt and fly through the air when my sharpened fangs uselessly strike invisible armor. Metal clinks as I heave in an attempt to shatter my bonds. I strain and pull as veins pop out in my forehead, but the links do not bend or break. After a moment of intense effort that sends sweat pouring down my face, I take several deep calming breaths. Nothing changes as my heart continues to try to leap out of my chest.

"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 room with a coat of velvet. A granite gaze causes stone to spring from the ground. Thought spins stone into a featureless rock box. The blank walls seek to strangle the air out of my lungs. Emptiness and void reach out and consume everything. There is an almost echo of breathing and pounding beating hearts. They spin throughout the chamber and create massive interlocking waves of sound. These slam down burying us under the crashing fusion of noise.

"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 thickly accented voice that coats the walls makes me want to shatter the teeth of the monster who's speaking. This question raises both fire and ice into my veins. Walls of cold steel shoot up and keep the fires burning within me. A small smile forms as I wait for screaming voices to either split my jailer in two or spill their blood.

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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. 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."

I rub my wrists and spread something that is too thick to be water. A coppery scent that I recall from some days past stings me like a thousand needles. My pulse slows to no more than a crawl. The desire to move when footsteps loudly carve a path toward the door frustrates me as I am effectively frozen.

"Before I ask you any more 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

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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?"

"Yes."

There is an almost alien vein that runs through the heart of both the question as well as its answer. They shift and flow in random and unexpected ways. The vein that rushes through the soldier's spoken words transforms itself into mountains that loom 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. He manages to draw in some oxygen though his breathing is a bit erratic.

"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 to give a damn about me and called jailers to haul me away. She made me promises that told me

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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."

My breath begins to freeze in my lungs. The sound of my struggle to pull in air fills the room. A river of sweat runs down my face. I'm drowning in my own lungs. There is so much air, but I can't use any of it. Despite the steel that I try to inject into my spine, chills quickly run down my body. This battle that I'm fighting is a losing one. Other than the sound of my struggle the room is empty of sound. I can feel the eyes of my enemy watching and taking amusement from my pain.

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 that moves below. Battle breaks and silence ends what seems like mere moments after it began. Victory comes to the unresponsive captor.

"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."

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Tears mingle with sweat on my face. I'm still shaking as though I'm lost in prayer. My throat is almost completely closed up. Everything burns as I force myself to remember a deep breathing technique from a long time ago. I force my mind to go blank as I inhale deeply. Finally, air floods my body which does not make the tremors that I feel go away, but it does make the fires in my body go out. I reach up and wipe away my tears with the back of my hand.

The two sides approach cautiously with 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 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."

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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's 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.

It feels as though ash or some other coat that might hide me is falling through my fingers and surrounding me. Something warm is holding me tightly and almost calling for me to sleep. I swallow and ignore this tempting offer which would take me away., It takes some effort, but I shake my head and continue telling my story.

"Broken pillars inscribed with words in a weird language were scattered throughout the field. For some reason there were parts of shattered chariots laying on the ground around my bed. They seemed majestic 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 my bed. 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."

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I turn my head to the right and let out a quick series of wheezing coughs. Suddenly, I remember all of the aches and pains of my body. They force my face to contort in ways that I know must be grotesque. Several hot tears fall from my eyes. The protective coat appears to grow very thick around me. Wherever one of my tears happens to land I can almost see the “protective” circle grow in strength. After a moment I turn so that I am 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 fall to the ground as they attempt to flee. These individuals 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 turned its maw away from the mountain and toward the place from which Adam’s chanting flows. It produces a cry equal to thousands of exploding stones which reverberates through the air and shakes the earth. Each step creates cracks and fissures that throw the beast back into the pit. An echoing roar erupts from its jaws as it falls back into the shadows.

“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 fangs was very real.

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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.”

My breathing speeds up painfully. Everything spins around me. I’m so afraid. On instinct alone I turn my head, nearly give myself whiplash, and let out a couple dry heaves. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. My hatred resurfaces and mixes with my fear in a way that leaves me shattered into millions of tiny fragments. For a moment I consider fighting my way out of here. A voice in my head that whispers gibberish is the only thing that is keeping me from doing what I’d like to do.

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 incredibly still. He plants his feet and chases the voice away with an unwavering gaze. Words gather as clouds that 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

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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 spreading fire. A richly dressed man stood in the back whipping his robust horses forward. He pulled tightly on the reins and stopped his chariot dead in its 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.

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"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 an arrow - shot of the walls. My companion glanced up, but otherwise failed to react to this castle located at no clearly strategic point. Our chariot slowed and then stopped as a 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 bathes in the ocean of words that produces a warmth that turns the walls a cheerful cherry red.

"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 from the door. A strong smell came from some unknown source beyond the polished wood. I

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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 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?"

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At some point my chest stopped moving like a woodpecker on drugs. My breathing returned to something that looks slightly normal. This allows me to gesture blindly at the table with my left hand without feeling like some over excited soap opera character. All that I can think about now is how these so-called interrogators think that giving me anything other than what I demanded will earn my trust.

"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."

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

" Take it away. Thanks for the unhelpful thought, but this is useless to me."

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

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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.”

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.

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This group looked up and turned when they heard our footsteps and our heavy panting. Wordlessly my associate walked over to them, leaned 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.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want the water Mr. Sanchez?”

My jailer’s voice fills up the empty air. She must love this story. It is classic that people show their hatred when they think that I won’t notice. Out of nowhere I start to clench and unclench my fists. It takes me a moment to stop myself and remove my hands from the table. I then take in a couple of breaths which make me wince internally. Once I ‘ve waited for a minute or two I remove all emotion from my response.

“No. They turned their backs on me and left me standing 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

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mine and I saw something bestial hiding in them. He raised his arm and pointed 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 the men who tried to drag me away let go of me and drew their swords. Around me everyone including the king ran about in absolute 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 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 charges of

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espionage and terrorism. 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?”

My voice shakes and nearly breaks. My every nerve seems to come alive. Adrenaline sets my teeth edge. It is a fight for me to keep from doing anything. Though I cannot see my expression I know that it does not change. How dare she do this? Every ounce of self-restraint is keeping me in my seat.

“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 closes after he is gone from sight. Max fades away in his seat. The darkness of this place seems to vanish just a little bit. Thomas’s demeanor is stony. He gives off no discernible emotions. His eyes seem intent on boring through the fabric of reality. Until he speaks there is no indication as to how he intends to react to her promise.

“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?”

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His interrogator shrugs and the walls surrounding Simon come crashing down. He sleeps fitfully on the changing ground Stone rains down as the mountains crack and then shatter. Everything shifts in the blink of an eye. Where there was once a chaotic natural landscape now there is a manmade room of poured concrete. A one - way mirror covers the whole wall opposite Thomas. The cold steel table in front of him and the chair beneath him fills this chamber dull with the reflection of the overhead fixtures.

“If you are an innocent man you will not run. Slowly lift up and stretch out your right hand.”

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

“Are you ready?”

I blink rapidly and take a deep breath to slow the rapids rushing through my body. It takes more than a minute of calm rhythmic breathing before I am ready to respond to my captor’s stupid question. Despite the animal roar that is consuming my mind, I bury all of my emotions. For a moment all feelings pool out of me and become one with room around me.

“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.”

Chapter 4

Portal in Shadow

“Are you aware just how much trouble you are in sailor?”

The cool air hums a slow song and dances around these words. A young man with two opposite facing faces speaks with both voices that instead of clashing strangely create a hypnotic melody. Everyone in the train car seems entranced by the voices. Thomas sits across from this figure. He is wrapped in a wool blanket that absorbs the music and nullifies its power. It is armor made of a metallic substance beyond anything created by mortal hands. Light appears to bend around him making him invisible to the naked eye. Max holds a book bound by living threads. Each moment they weave themselves into many different mystifying patterns and shapes. Simon glares silently at the man and struggles against writhing chains that dampen his breath. They do not live, but they react to his every movement.

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"Yes."

All emotions seem to have been drained from my words. My downcast head moves slightly every couple of seconds. It points aimlessly at indeterminable sections of the ground. I am lost in my own mind.

"Do you understand? First, you show up illegally in an allied country. Then you are caught attempting to commit acts that might be considered terrorism. They could charge you with espionage! If you are brought to trial and you tell them this story you will be charged with perverting the course of justice. You could go to prison for the rest of your life. There is nothing that I can do for you if you don't cooperate. Tell me the truth so that I can help you."

He trails off focusing his eyes on either side of the car. His body barely moves as his seat vibrates. Stillness flows off of him suffusing the air with chains that hold the other passengers in an unbreakable vise. It flows with purpose. An ocean surrounds him and rears up to strike his charge.

"You're no different than everybody else. You think that you understand what the truth is. The lies that you believe make it easy for you to judge me. I know what I saw. To hell with you and your judgement."

Each word that spills from my lips stokes the subdued spark of rage that I struggle to control. It rises as it does every single moment of every single day. One more word will turn me into the monster that everyone sees. If there is a devil then I will show him to the next person who disrespects me like this liar.

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"I can't make you take this seriously. However, your government is extremely concerned. We have been getting calls since the army first contacted us. New Scotland Yard and MI5 are calling for your immediate arrest. You may not care if you end up in jail, but how can you pretend that it does not affect other people? If there are people out there that are wondering about you, then you should help me contact them. They'll talk sense into you even though I can't."

Thomas's armor crackles with arcs of silver lightning as these words hammer away at him. Smoke rises from his seat. Max tosses his book aside. It lands on the back of an ebony swan which spreads its wings and vanishes moments after it takes flight. Simon continues to strain against these frozen links that pulse with life. Some of the power that rushes from his eyes forms a cloud that burns as a raging ember. Heat fills the air and encases the passengers in sapphire barred cages.

"If you don't believe me, that's on you! If I go to jail, then I'll be where your kind put me! There is no one in this life for me! I'm the one who is being persecuted and who will suffer. You can choke to death on your pity!"

I glare across the vast emptiness that engulfs me. My entire body lurches as the compartment that holds me moves to a place that is worse than the very depths of Tartarus. A familiar hell returns me to memories of an expanse of sand littered with broken bodies, torn metal, unbearable heat, and the perfume of burning gasoline. Everything squeezes me in an unrelenting grip that drills down into me and frees a raging river of tears. Despite the rage that still occupies my blood I cannot hold back the tears. The whole world is swept away as I cry. A monolith to stoicism crumbles despite my best attempts to produce bulwarks that will hold this

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structure up. Nothing prevents the years of self – destruction from revealing their toll. Light reveals rotting forms that until moments ago represented what I had thought to be strength. Heavy blocks that seem intent on entombing me where I sit fall across my shoulders and bend my body.

“Sir. Sir. Can you hear me? Are you alright?”

The spell that weaves an enchantment over the car explodes as calm is utterly shattered. Links of chains fly knocking out windows and lights that are all along the walls. Cold winds and the loud ruckus of the moving train rush through bringing chaos from the bed that is never far away. Thomas grabs a hold of the darkness. He throws it away as dancing shadows move all around him. Max cowers beneath his seat with wide eyes that hopefully seek anyone who will save him. His brows glisten intensely under the train’s lights. Simon's chest heaves as breath is pulled in desperately. Tremors push him to his knees in silent supplication to any and all gods who answer self - serving heretics who have never seen a need for the salvation of deities. For a moment it seems like a peal of laughter rings through the room. However, this absurd sound dies so quickly that it barely registers at all.

I can’t form words. My tongue is dust and vocal cords are shredded fragments that produce no sound. If only I could whimper. At least then I would have a way to hurt this demon who brings me to his fetid lair of hell spawn. There are no weapons that my hands can use to fight back against the oppressive world whose only interest is feeding on my pain. They relish telling me their lies and watching me pretend to believe them. Once hate would have pooled in a well that I would seal with pictures. Now floods fill me as I do the only thing that I can to lash

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out and make others understand what they have done. Pathetic though I may be now, they will be brought down. Even if I must hold them down as the waves rise, I will do so. This will be my revenge.

"Keep it down will ya!"

A heavily accented cry flies like an arrow planting itself in front of Thomas as a challenge. Silence is the second that follows the solitary arrow. In the void tiny points burn. Max trembles as he waits motionlessly. His eyes see a vast shape creating ripples that fill the air. Simon convulses with an almost religious fervor. The names of a thousand forgotten gods take root in his mind. Eyes that are alight with odium gaze upon this chamber with deadly intensity. They tear at the iron roots that hold everything together and with a single violent tug cause the room to lurch to the left.

"Mind your own god damn..."

My words instantly die in my throat. Sudden motion rips me from my chair and throws me to the left. I cut through the air and slam into a barrier which crumples and falls away. Knives lacerate my flesh and spread an icy numbness across me. Mud coats my body as I begin to tumble over rain-soaked earth. When I come to a stop, my body refuses to respond to my commands. Bells clang painfully in my ears, drowning out all of the world's sounds. A sense of loneliness like nothing that I have felt in a long time grabs me and refuses to let go. Shadows poke and prod me with brands whose touch sends shock waves of numbness rushing through me.

Screams fill the air with panes of jagged glass that rake across skin and spill blood. Smoke rises and grabs at the throats of dozens of writhing forms. Thomas lies among dull

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fragments of shattered plate. A tableau of broken bodies surrounds him. Max stares blankly skyward as the land is covered by a bloody hue. Stars peek through an ebony curtain and glare down at him. Harsh breaths rattle Simon. He stumbles about on uncertain feet and struggles to stay upright. Panicked voices ramble on about nothing at all. Moving pinpricks of light cast grotesque shadows. Torn limbs rest across the plain. Stiff winds fan the smoke and carry cries away from this field.

Shouting breaks through the bells that assault my eardrums. Ice wraps around my lungs and squeezes me until all of my breath is gone. Every inch of my body is drowning in a frozen sea. The numbness is gone. I gasp for air, but it refuses to come. Bile burns me as I suppress my urge to throw up. None of my limbs move as I struggle to stand up. Finally, I convulse as wisps of smoke strike at my throat and I manage to let the world know just how I feel.

"Curse you god or gods if you even exist! What is the point of any of this? Let me die!"

Suddenly, spasms free me from my paralysis. Hot bile pours from me as I turn my head and scorch the ground. Instantly, everything comes alive as lightning incinerates me. Heat fuses with cold and I once again lose the ability to speak.

Metal birds whirl and make a racket overhead. The air fills with blinding lights that reveal the people whose bodies rest beneath the rising blanket of smoke. Blurs rappel down to the bloodied field. Time slows. Thomas barely stirs when a voice calls out to him. This breathless voice falls through him and absorbs into the earth. Quick and steady hands gently prod at Max's arms and torso. Groans fly from his throat with each touch. Simon falls to the ground with a crash. and forces him to slam his eyes shut. Cars, ambulances, and trucks race toward the train

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tracks. Dozens of uniforms spill from the vehicles moments after they jerk to a stop. Several teams form from this mass of people. They rush in different directions. Some head into the smoking wreckage of the train. Those that remain split up and run to assist individuals who are both moving and lying within the field.

Whispered voices drift in and out of my ears. Questions that I can't understand drill down into my frustration. I shake as gentle yet firm hands tear open my shirt. Knuckles knock on my chest as warm breath tickles my skin. A warm ear shape is pressed against my flesh near where the fist hits me. Coughs rack my body and chase away all warmth. My body drips with sweat as I sink into an icy pool of mud. Everything seems to fall to earth when my head spins off of my shoulders and rises rapidly into the air. Suddenly, a familiar voice from another life vibrates every cell in my body. A light drawl born in South Houston soothes my flying skull.

"Look at me. Open your eyes. It's not time for you to go to sleep. Wake up sleepy head."

Shock waves jolt me to full lucidity the moment that these words fade away. The levitating slams down onto my neck. They are joined as though they had never separated. New words take the place of my feverish dream.

"Can you hear me?"

A middle - aged balding man in a dirtied uniform kneels beside Aaron. He holds a silver and black apparatus that projects a thin beam of light from one end. When he hears no response, he turns off the device and puts it in his pocket. The man removes his worn caduceus emblazoned blazer, folds it, kneels down, and carefully slides it under his patient's head. Once the head is elevated, he takes the device back out, leans in, and inserts it into the ear that is

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closest to him. His eye gazes into one side of this apparatus for a moment before he removes it, stands up, circles to Aaron's other side, and repeats his examination. After a few moments the paramedic's arm is caught by a surprisingly strong grip that painfully squeezes him. A small tear fills his right eye and slides down his cheek as he winces. Before he can remove the hand that shackles him a weak voice grabs him by the neck and forces him to bring his ear close to the source of a single question.

““Who's there? Who are you?”

Even though I can't hear myself I know that I'm very hard to hear. I feel frozen in my own skin and all I can do is let out a mental scream. No one answers me immediately and I am forced to wait in oppressive silence. A soft arrow escapes my mouth. Deep within me I grin revealing the jagged teeth that accuse the person who is touching me of being just another pretender. How dare they leave me like this? If they care they would have fixed me already. However, I know that there are others to be helped. They have no interest in helping me or anyone else. The only thing that they care about is looking good to everyone else. My grip tightens as I repeat my question. This time real words beat away my sense of loneliness with a burning barbed bat.

“My name is Eric. I'm a paramedic. You were in an accident. Can you tell me how you feel?”

He speaks slowly. His thick west country accent betrays no emotion. Grimacing, he pries Aaron's grip loose and frees his arm. One of his eyebrows quirks when his question is answered.

“I'm not well. Forget me and help someone else.”

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My arm falls to the ground and for the first-time cool metal in my left hand stops the world. I don't hear or perceive anything except for the ice that casts a spell on everything making reality disappear. Nothing matters to me anymore, but this cursed key. This world doesn't care about me. It'll be a much better place without my madness in it. There's no doubt in my mind that I'm crazy. Magic doesn't exist and that's the only other possible way to explain any of the things that happened to me. Everyone will be better off if I'm not here to return their hatred with my own. Any place whether real or made up by my madness is preferable to this world and its people. Only one decision makes any sense at all.

Eric does not respond and moves to continue his examination. However, he freezes in place as a wall of words holds him back. His head whips left and then right. A cry from the right draws his eyes. He lifts a sturdy canvas bag from the ground, opens it, and drops the device into it. The bag's strap drops across his chest. This bag is a pendulum that severs the air and throws aside the spirits that try to halt its progress as he runs off.

"Curse you Devlin for showing me the truth. I hope that the hells that you don't believe in come and punish you for your blasphemy."

This whisper carries the irrational hope that she will hear me. The fact that Eric's presence and choking cologne flew away to wherever glory seekers go expels a drop of my pain. My hands rise and open. For just a moment I measure the weight of the glasses and the strength left in my arm. A strange panic stops my breathing and makes my mind become fuzzy in a way that I only feel when I finish a heavy night of drinking. However, I can't describe the feeling that follows this thought. Is it possible that I once felt this way? Addicts have a problem giving up

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their demons. That is what tells me that I must be suffering from Deja whatever it's called. If it's possible for my world to go darker it does as my limbs thrash weakly. All of my thoughts melt together. When my left hand gets close to my face the fuzz fades for a second before getting worse. Everything including my worthless name is so far away from me. Before my heart forgets how to beat the cold metal guides me to do the only thing that I can do. Air whistles past me as soon as my escape touches my nose. Windy fists pummel me as I quickly drop through the sky. High pitched whining is the only thing that I can hear. Flashes of light explode through my closed eyelids. There does not seem to be an end to my drop.

Roaring lions of thunder bare their teeth as Aaron falls into their den. Thomas is lost in the dense clouds as steel boxes. His body is asleep while his mind tries desperately to force him to cry out. Max screams unintelligible things and waves his hands to try and scare off things that are moving all around him. Ice quickly coats his throat which cuts off his cries. Simon stares with bulging eyes at the approaching sparking spikes that threaten to tear him in two. Electricity strikes him and his limbs begin to wildly jerk. Lights cut through the sky and bathe the clouds in an unnatural glow. A city built on the shores of a seemingly endless lake bursts into

Tears burn my eyelids and force them open as beams set my mind on fire. My whole body is frozen in layers of cold that press in on me in ways more painful than I even thought was possible. A city built on the shores of a seemingly endless lake bursts into focus. Buildings grow larger as I freefall. Despite the agony I use every ounce of will that I have ever had to close my eyes. Suddenly, pouring rain falls and soaks me so badly that I feel like I'm drowning. At that moment a gust of wind pushes me forward and I dig in my heels. I fall through a door that seems to be made of shadows which is all that I see when I open my eyes upon realizing that I'm no

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longer falling. Shapes move at the edges of the room as I trip and hit a cold tile floor. Instantly, everything springs into focus as lights in the ceiling turn on.

Epilogue

A group of men and women who refuse to meet each other's gazes silently stand in a circle. Though they are separated by only a few feet each is a world away from their neighbor. A tall straight – backed figure carved of onyx with tempest filled eyes stands beside a bronzed figure whose gaze is focused far into the distance. To his right two olive boys who could not be mistaken for being anything other than twins who have terrible snarls carved into their flesh and whose bodies seem to spasm as they crouch slightly as though they are primed to pounce. On the other side of these frightening youths is a woman of indeterminable age whose eyes rove around like a lion searching for prey to tear limb by limb. Her shoulder length hair is a fiery scarlet like

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a cascade of freshly spilled blood which clashes with her skin of obsidian. Beside her a being that appears to bend the very fabric of reality around herself clutches an ostrich feather. The next figure in the circle possesses features that hide deep beneath a heavy black cloak and whose form seems to lack description. Thomas stares at his surroundings as his mind struggles to catch up with all that just happened. All the while Max is whimpering as he sits in a fetal position and rocks back and forth. Simon stands as far as he can from these people while still keeping them in his line of sight.

I see an unnaturally pale man standing next to a human shaped dark mass of cloth as I struggle to stand up. He mutters something and the room begins to hum with an energy that drives me back a step once I find my feet. Two tanned and aged men who could have been anywhere from seventy to five thousand years old complete the circle that is suddenly filling my ears with chanting in many strange languages. They are like nothing that I have ever heard. My ears pop as the air pressure rapidly drops. The people standing in front of me start to glow with a light that grows stronger by the moment. Pain grabs my head and squeezes it in a vise as the illuminated crystals on the ceiling are drowned by an invisible wave of power. It swallows everything and fills me with pain that cannot be real. Every breath that I take feels as though it is slowly ripping every inch of my skin and meat from the bones that support them. Fire seems to burn me while all of this is happening. All around me the air begins to scream in a thousand clashing voices that bury the circle of prayers.

The lights violently explode showering the room in a crystal rain. A massive ornately decorated shield of unnatural raven energy bursts from the void and holds back the darkness. Shockwaves emerge from the center of the circle of illuminated beings and shake the building

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until it moans in protest. Tremors tear the ring apart and scatter all but one member of the band who had stood both together and apart. Hairline fractures split the earth and race toward every corner of the room. Chunks of metal and stone crater the ground as they fall.

A violent hail of glass, stone, and dust knocks me off my feet and onto my back. The group that started this had almost without exception run away when the lights went out. One of the tanned young men and the graceful enigmatic woman stand together with their backs to me. I see her left hand come to rest on his shoulder as his muttering becomes a kind of feverish mantra. Despite the destruction going on around her she appears to be immune to it all in a way which makes me angry. My blood picks up speed with every moment that passes. Explosions stab my eardrums with burning spikes. Busted bodies fly in all directions while mortar shells go off around me. Shallow breaths fly in and out of my lungs. Everything dissolves into desert sands, red sand, and cracking sounds that rip the air apart. In a flash I'm back to the burning in my scalp and the dust that is covering my glasses.

The old man stands alone and his voice reaches a crescendo. Stone and metal shatter around him, but are unable to penetrate the large dome that surrounds him. Objects hurtle through the air and vanish from existence the moment that they make any kind of contact with the shield. Scripts from many arcane and esoteric languages blend together and shine when they are touched. Reality seems to stretch and tear. Holes that lead to tunnels composed of both indescribable light and unbreakable darkness appear throughout the room. Crows waging war against a squad of warriors wielding bloodstained broadswords lurch through one breach in reality and vanish through one of the others moments later. Age rapidly takes hold of the lone chanter. His crown of thick hair transforms into sickly wisps and then falls out. A rich rumbling

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bass voice transitions into a weak, brittle, and wheezing whisper. Flesh recedes and loses its color becoming a paper-thin shell over creaking bones. Failing muscles disintegrate leaving him barely kneeling. Each moment degrades the integrity of his body further.

I blink away burning tears that cut across my face washing away dust, pieces of rock, and fragments of glass. My whole world lurches as I push myself to my knees. The whole world spins and nausea takes over my body as I blindly crawl forward. A powerful wave of bile threatens to rip its way out of my insides. Razor stones split the skin of my hands while the ground trembles as though it is shivering from cold. Every move that I make threatens to put out my lights. Something must have hit me harder than I realized. Fog slows my mind to a confused crawl. Suddenly, I hit something which forces me to stop. Before I can think a pillar of raw power engulfs me. Visions burst into reality before my eyes.

Though the building is imploding, the dying man is untouchable. All of the debris is redirected by the shield of energy. Aaron bleeds from a head wound. He is paralyzed in the fading shadow of the epicenter of the storm of force that set this destruction in motion. The magic that pours forth paradoxically grows stronger as its source becomes ever feebler. Ever greater ripples that pull reality to its breaking point emerge from the center of the now vacated circle. A hissing sound as the mightiest winds and vibrant serpentine eyes followed by a towering body emerge from a massive breach in reality. It rears its head and bears horrible fangs. Roaring tempests fly from its rainbow plumes and obliterate whatever is left of the walls and upper stories of this ruin.

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I see and smell calm oceans become untamed maelstroms. Before my eyes, ships are shattered and legions of sailors sink into the depths. Horses pull free from the surf of suddenly calm waves and spread out over the land. A trident is thrust deep into the earth. It rips the land apart. The next thing I see is a spring bursting up from the ground. Beneath the sea throne carved from the bedrock the ocean floor sits empty. After this last image vanishes, I am transported to a freezing chamber in what looks like a palace or temple of some kind. Frozen pillars hold up a mosaic covered dome high above my head. Unlit torches line the walls around me. Metal bowls holding dead coals sit among twelve vacant marble seats of power set in a semi- circle. My eyes are drawn to a middle-aged man that I had not noticed when I first examined this room who is standing in front of the thrones. He seems to be even more amazed by everything than I am. His dark hair shimmers as his head swivels this way and that drinking in the sights like a relapsing alcoholic in a bar might consume liquor. No more than a minute after I notice him, he turns around and sees me.

The other occupant of this throne room is a glowing gnarled figure who wields a ruddy trident. His aura grows ever brighter as he trains his gaze on Aaron, Thomas, Max, and Simon. When he speaks the chamber trembles in terror. A bass noise like the crashing of the sea against a ship which is ready to surrender its souls to the depths rings out. Rage pent up for eons bursts his momentarily serene mask. He struggles to bring up the heavy staff in his shaking hands. It awkwardly smashes into the tiled floor almost as though it slipped. Marble shrapnel hums a lively tune when the pillars, thrones, and floor rupture as though something within them is lashing out mindlessly.

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“Whoever you are, get out! Be gone!”

Stone is spraying me and cutting my skin. Before I can even open my mouth to scream everything except the image of the middle-aged guy who seemed to be doing a poor impersonation of a gladiator disappears. What sounds to me like the world's heaviest artillery barrage follows my fall back to earth. The man calmly explodes into nothingness before my eyes. He releases a wave so primal that could be matched by no power that human beings could create. Ice rain and bitter winds shock me out of my stupor. To my left and right where there were once walls and other buildings there are only piles of shattered stone, twisted metal, and scattered victims. My body stops following my commands. That may have something to do with the winged snake that rises up into thick storm clouds in front of me. I can't hear anything and I'm struggling not to get carried off to Oz. Suddenly, a distinct rushing of water clears my hearing.

The earth rocks while the lake that is more like an ocean breaks free of its chains. Water gathers into a wall hundreds of feet high and then without warning crashes down sweeping everything before it with the destructive might of a god who has been angered by his followers for the last time. Concrete rises obliterating roads and bridges because of the water from below that shakes off its restraints and breaks through to join in the fun that its untamed brothers are having. Blasting spears of lightning are striking glass buildings and reducing them to mounds of sand which are washed away.

A moment before I am swept away by the most monstrous wave that I could ever imagine, the dragon is grabbed by the water and carried away. Pain steals most of my strength

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and will to fight. I allow myself to be dragged away by the storm surge. When after what seems like a thousand years, I see what was once a seawall I steel myself as best I can. Training from long ago returns to me and I begin to kick against the waves. Whether by luck or the love of some sick god I manage to make it to the base of a useless levee. On my hands and knees, I crawl to the levee's edge and paint the ground with my blood. Exhaustion smacks me across the head with either a brick or a tranquilizing pill of razors. Painful yet dreamless sleep collapses me and forces my eyes shut while disaster destroys my delusions.