

Out of every one hundred fighting men, ten shouldn't be there, eighty are just targets, nine are real fighters and we are lucky to have them. Ah, but the one, one, is a warrior. ~ Heraclitus on armies; 5th century B.C.

Battle has always been my story. From the first time, as a five-year-old, when I threw my body in front of my brother's, guarding him from our father's heavy hand, until now, with an M4A1 rifle gripped across my chest. Maybe it always will be.

"I got a bad feeling about this." Rivera frowns at the massive generators bolted to the ship's deck. We've served together since Basic Underwater Demolition training.

Tucking the rifle closer, I stand steady against the familiar sway of the ship as I frown at the machine. A technician in a white lab coat jabs a voltmeter through a cable as thick as my thigh. The numbers it shows are not comforting. *What's their plan for all that electricity?*

The ship dips again in the light swell of the open ocean, throwing the technician off-balance. Rivera snatches him by the back of his coat right before his forehead smashes into a metal corner. He frowns as the tech cringes at him.

The two couldn't be more opposite. Steve Rivera, one of the most capable men on earth as a SEAL Team three operative, and the lab tech, whose mental faculties outweigh his physical prowess. At least I hope they do; I have a sinking feeling that our lives are in his pale hands. Out across the brilliant-blue water, a fleet of anchored ships surrounds the LCS *Engage*.

"You figure they're counting on trouble?" Rivera looks at me, his tone sardonic.

"We wouldn't be here if they weren't. Question is, what kind?" I say, following the ominous wire's path to where it dives over the starboard side of the ship.

Rivera nudges me with his elbow, jutting his chin across the deck. Two precise rows of personnel form near the railing, standing at attention. Military medics, every single one.

I look from them to the generators, ready to feed high voltage around the ship. Swallowing hard, I suppress the unease rising in my mind; it's a tactic that's as familiar as the rifle in my hands. Rivera and I laughed when they'd pulled us from the op in Qala-i-Jangi, figured we were in for a vacation of sorts. But with the New World Order rising to power worldwide, free choice is a thing of the past.

I'd prefer the front lines to the heavy sense that the *Engage* is heading for a catastrophe. Rivera's hungry eyes remain locked on a pretty blonde nurse at the end of the line.

"Two Navy SEALs, two Delta Force guys, twenty-four medics, and a bunch of scientists. Sounds like a bad joke." His voice is low, with a dangerous edge to it.

"Or a disaster waiting to happen..." I say, sweat soaking under the full battle gear our orders had demanded. The *Engage* is in U.S. waters, with minimal personnel, no visible weapons,

or enemies, with an entire fleet of friendlies anchored around it. As a SEAL, having a clear objective is absolutely necessary; we play to win every time, keep getting up until we reach the goal. The mission's nebulous nature is not an asset. There is no enemy to take down, no hostage to extract.

We continue patrolling the open rear deck of the *Engage*, trying to put the pieces together. At 387 feet long with a beam of 57 feet, the *Engage* is a mid-sized littoral combat ship, one of the most versatile in the Navy.

Forty percent of the ship's area is reconfigurable, and right now, it's set up for what I can only classify as an experiment—one that's got me more on edge than mortal combat. The rules are clear then. Live or die. We cut under the shadow of the control tower, enter the empty helicopter hangar, and pass out of sight of the abundant medics.

"Four soldiers on board, armed to the teeth. For what? We're anchored in 259 feet of open water. Never a good idea, especially when the weather changes. Why hide just offshore like this?" He shakes his head. "There's no fight here. Nothing about this *mission* is adding up."

"We're due back to normal duty in three days, so whatever's going down, it'll be soon."

Rivera swears under his breath.

We stand at attention as a lieutenant commander escorts the rows of medics through the ship, his voice booming in the metal interior, "There are four decks below, two of them are open format."

The blonde nurse studies me as they pass, her brown eyes solemn. She seems as apprehensive as we are, her oval face filled with concern.

"Guess I'm not having any luck with that one." Rivera frowns when her eyes don't stray from me until the group clips down the stairway to the next deck.

I grunt in response to Rivera. The *Engage*, a type of ship usually well outfitted to protect U.S. coasts, is utterly devoid of weapons. Of course, now every border is blurred, and the turbulent change of power to the New World Order affects us the most. We're the boots on the ground, enforcing the bloodiest world peace in history. "Thirty minutes till the debrief. Think they'll shoot straight about this?"

Rivera gives a harsh laugh. "Not a chance, Jacob Carter, not a chance."

I nod as we continue through the hangar. I frown at a black puddle seeping from a control panel.

"What...?" Rivera dips his fingertip into the puddle and sniffs. "Oil."

I crouch next to him, scowling. At the far end of the expanding puddle, I find a distinct set of paw prints. Rivera and I share a sharp glance. A surge of adrenaline rises and I force it away with slow, steady breaths. Annihilating fear had been one of my main reasons for joining the SEALs, and I won't let it touch me now.

I stand, inspecting the prints as they fade where the massive animal had strolled down the hall, tracks gradually disappearing.

“Look at this.” Rivera holds his hand over a print; his fingers, spread wide, still can’t quite cover it.

“Remember South Africa? What? Two years ago? There’s no denying these are lion,” I say, forcing words through the thickness in my throat.

If there’s tracking to be done on an op, it falls to me. It’s in my blood. I’d grown up hunting deer through the Virginia woods.

There’s a sheen of sweat on Rivera’s brow. I blink hard, the air pressing in. Unable to resist the weight of it, I drop to one knee. A long slice runs through the wide main pad of the lion’s print. *A boot print underneath? No, it’s repeated in every single one. Must be a scar.*

I shake my head against the gripping sensation, as if I’m chained to the spot, locked in a battle of wills with the floor. Snarling, I free myself from the unseen force and see Rivera in the same struggle.

“Why would they have large animals aboard?”

Rivera doesn’t answer, his eyes still riveted. I follow the tracks a few feet, finding them clearer here where the oil is almost worn off.

“Overgrown lab rat?” Rivera stands, but his attempt at a joke falls flat as we scan the metal hallway. He shoulders his rifle, finger hovering over the safety.

Footsteps echo around the corner, and we spin to find a midshipman flipping a 50-pound bag of cat litter onto the oil spill. Pieces skitter far down the hall.

“Hey!” Rivera’s shout makes the midshipman jump.

The cat litter collects around Rivera’s boots, obliterating the tracks. Any hope I’d had of further study is gone now. Demanding answers from the brass is tempting, but that’s risky on a good day.

“I’ll get it cleaned up, sorry.” A gesture accompanies his words.

Rivera snarls at him, stomping off the clay as we continue down the hall.

“We’ve entered the circus.” He clenches his jaw as we round the far turn, ready for anything.

Dropping down the ladder to the next deck, I stop short. A mass of silver tubes and wires takes up most of the large room, surrounded by eight technicians in white lab coats. I scowl at the round symbol with DARPA in the center. Three of them are arguing.

“The particle decelerator must be tuned to the right frequency in order to...” Sensing Rivera and me, they fall silent, turning to glare at us.

We stare back, the air crackling.

“Decelerator?” Rivera growls under his breath.

I grunt, senses peaking the way they do before engaging live fire. The technicians turn back to the control panel with wires arching in every direction. We walk past the mass of pipes, dropping down to the next deck to find it empty, unlike my racing thoughts.

“Didn’t give much credence to the clause at the bottom of our orders about complete secrecy till now. DARPA? Being a science experiment ain’t gonna fly.” Rivera’s right eye is tight, which usually means someone is in for a bad time. But this enemy is as elusive as our mission.

“Why would they have a particle decelerator?” I squint, pulling knowledge from my hobby study of quantum physics.

Decelerators contain molecules of antimatter, which are separated by lasers or proton beams. For each molecule of matter, an identical molecule of antimatter exists, only with an opposite electrical charge and spin.

“They had a generator alongside the decelerator, so the gens topside aren’t feeding this.” Mind churning, I watch the medics file back up the stairs.

The commander directs them into a transport vessel as the *Engagé’s* massive rear door opens, greeting the gentle swell of the sea. Hydraulics hum and push the loaded boat into the embrace of the ocean. The door reverses, giving me enough time to watch the small craft reach the nearest ship and disappear inside.

“They’re keeping the medics close enough, but not on the ship. Carter, I think we should have stayed on foreign soil.”

I nod in agreement.

“Debrief in five,” I say, setting out for the top deck, rejecting concerns, clearing my mind. The crisp ocean air is welcome as we take our place with the skeletal crew of the LCS *Engage*.

“Is that Admiral Ash?” Rivera’s voice is hushed.

I groan inside. “Sure is.”

Ash has a reputation for pushing the envelope with his super-soldier projects. He’s the guy everyone talks about under their breath. At least that explains the DARPA technicians. His presence is the final blow. I didn’t sign up for this; but the New World Order doesn’t take complaints. I study the rows of medals on his chest, glaring at a pin I don’t recognize with an ellipse and a triangle behind it.

“I reckon they’re going to fry some fish, or we’re going to get a chance to become something special,” I say, glancing at Rivera, whose right eye is squinting tighter.

“I’m already special.” His voice is a low snarl as they start the debrief. The apprehension in the air is palpable.

"Rear Admiral Adam Brooks," a warrant officer barks out the name while standing at attention. Brooks steps forward, brown eyes scanning.

"Project 157 is now underway, the primary goal of which is the continued testing of a ship-cloaking device known as *Covert Force*."

Rivera sighs, a disgusted sound.

I'm not taking that bait any more than he is.

"At 1200 hours, the crew of 22 will proceed with the project. You may experience intense sensations of sound and light. All personnel will file a full report covering the scope of the project. The confidentiality agreement will be strictly enforced."

"They're blowing smoke," I mutter. Rivera nods, but the fact remains...we're both locked in to the Navy. Despite my skepticism, I can't back out of my commitment; it's who I am.

We watch another boat carry the two admirals and the extra officers to the safety of the surrounding ships.

"Ten minutes," I say, watching the lab techs skitter to their posts. The two Force Recon Marines join us, uneasy, and we spread out across the deck near the helicopter landing pad. Watching.

For what? Why do they need elite fighters aboard for a cloaking experiment? I grit my teeth, forcing my mind to remain clear and in control. Making decisive decisions under pressure is a huge part of what I do. I let years of training and live ops give me confidence to face the unknown.

The hum of the massive generator's startup module vibrates through my boots. A sharp click echoes across the deck, then the machine roars to life. We tighten up under the clear blue sky, searching for whatever enemy the brass is expecting.

Another vibration joins the first until the hull of the ship pulses with it. The numbers on my watch roll to 1200. With slow, deep breaths, I enter the familiar state where fear is contained, thoughts are clear, and action is fluid.

A high-pitched whine jumps to life along with the generators. I glance over my shoulder; the Marines hunch, searching. The sound rises, reverberating until it pierces my focus. I resist the throbbing frequency as pain grips my head. Still, it grows, accompanied by an intense volume rattling in my chest, as I fight the urge to roar in pain while the punishing sound doubles its crushing grip.

Blood trickles from Rivera's ear. His face is a mask of agony, eyes darting. Images flash like rifle fire, broken by the pulsing energy, the glaring sky, the dull-gray ship, the vibrating air. We writhe as the noise streaks through us, beyond bearing. Rivera crouches low, his expression savage.

The red streak oozes down his neck; in hunter mode, an unnerving light flashes in his eye. His rifle is tucked tight to his shoulder, muzzle sweeping back and forth erratically. I hit the deck as three rifles go off at once, their loud report lost in the chaos.

Everything in me wars to do the same, to stop the sound before it tears me to pieces. I bite my tongue hard and force my rifle ahead on the deck, fighting for control.

My muscles tremble, absorbing the energy that's flowing through the deck and streaking through the air. It invades every cell and engulfs me in a deadly grip. The ship's temperature spikes, its blistering heat inescapable. The heavy air is a punishment in my lungs.

Rivera falls to the deck, twitching beside me, swinging at unseen assailants. His mouth is open, face a mask of terror, but I can't hear him scream. There's only the agonizing sound, the hammering energy ripping through every cell.

I blink hard as an eerie green haze rises from the deck, engulfing me. The glow turns my thoughts into syrup, transfixing me. I buck erratically in the surging pulse. The green haze burns into my eyes as I thunder against the agony of it. I clench my fists in front of me, limbs rigid. Terror grips hard as I watch the quivering image of my hands melt into the deck.

"No!"

But the shout can't stop my body from sinking into the molten metal; it won't slow my disintegration. I gasp hard for a breath of searing air as my chin sinks through the burning deck. I grimace, the ship no longer supporting me; my right arm drops into the shivering air beneath. I scream as I plummet through the space of the deck below, glimpsing the technicians, glassy-eyed and stiff on the floor next to the particle accelerator, descending.

The next floor is the consistency of peanut butter. The green haze sucks me forward till I'm falling faster than a high-altitude parachute jump, still gaining speed. It strips away more of my being until I hit the ocean below. The shock of the cold water courses over me, the surging energy escalating at its touch—like gasoline waiting for a match.

The sudden deafening silence leaves me stunned. But I'm still falling, sinking, *no, rising*. Orientation lost, I struggle, holding my breath, but the speed of my travel sucks me forward. I flail in the chaos.

Then the pain disappears, peeled away, and an awareness of freedom comes that I'd never imagined. *The absence of my body*.

Loosed from all its input, I'm a clean slate. No past, only intense movement and energy. Time has released me and I fall for an eternity, though the acute grip of the green energy doesn't fade, nor does the forceful, blasting wind of my motion.

Something catches my face. I search for its name through the fog. *Tree branch*. Another, thicker limb clips my ribs; now there's a crazed tumult of branches and leaves ripping everywhere, slapping in quick succession, hissing past.

I land hard on a solid limb, void of air. Gasping at the sudden stop, mouth working like a fish as I dangle, arms and legs hanging from the unforgiving wood at my waist. I suck in a breath; the air tingles in my lungs as I struggle for balance, twisting on the wide bough until I'm draped over it lengthwise.

A flush of bitter cold washes through me; I shiver, mind empty, clinging to the wood. The rough bark scrapes my stomach as I clutch it. The forest floor is far, far below.

I take in a steadying breath and a barrage of scents fills my mouth: the warm forest loam, the spicy hint of the tree bark, the tinge of something sweet, like flowers.

Searching my mind, the wild speed of my arrival and the thrashing branches are clear, but only blank space exists before that. Turning my head, I'm entranced by the leaves wavering in a light breeze.

Their color is so intense, the shades of green captivating. I stare at the nearest leaf and, as I do, a humming sound comes to me and the soft scent of growing things curls into my nose. It has a fresh green taste.

Colors with sounds? Scents? I blink hard; the volley of sensations is overwhelming. A tiny bird lights on the end of my branch, its chest a deep-purple hue that shimmers in the dappled light. Spindly, coal-black legs glitter like diamonds; when it opens its beak, the sweet sound pierces me. Then, in a flutter of wings, it dives off the branch. Every sensation is magnified, like an exposed nerve.

A weighted hush falls over the forest as my gaze falls to my hands and forearms, white-knuckled on the branch. I resist the urge to gasp; my bones stand out, pale skin stretched over atrophied limbs. Disgust rises. *That's not right.*

My legs tremble, confirming that the condition affects me from head to toe. My stomach lurches as I search past the sensation of my wild fall, but the green haze conceals everything else.

A twig snaps, the sharp sound making my hair stand on end. A stench of rotten flesh makes me recoil. Sweat breaks out as I search the forest for the source of the sense of dread seeping into me. *There.* The leaf litter reveals the outline of a massive paw in the dim brush. I raise my eyes until they fix on a massive snout and one dark eye revealed among the cover. A rusty, unhealed crust lines the edges of the wound on the wide bridge of the lion's nose. I cling tighter to the branch, longing to disappear.

The beast steps forward, leaving a streak of bright blood on the brilliant-green leaves. Fear crawls through my skin. Wounds crisscross its hide, stinking patches of fur rubbed off. It's a male, but it lacks any thick glory of a mane; instead, scraggly locks cover its neck and chest. It's thin, pinched even, but that does nothing to diminish the sense of the innate power it exudes...or the terror enveloping me as I watch.

A second lion steps up next to the first. This one's right ear dangles, sliced almost through, and he's far larger, dwarfing the first.

His appearance makes me flinch, bringing an alarming revelation. The branch I'm clinging to is dead. Its empty dry fingers stand out from the health of the forest. The dried bark has slipped at my motion. Heartbeats pass like days as the sheath grates against the damp wood beneath it. Wincing, I lean the opposite direction, willing the motion to stop.

A third lion enters the clearing, swiping at the first with its massive paw. They growl and spin, the air vibrating. The sound is an agony in my ears, a sickening taste. They settle straight below, broad snouts in the air.

They've caught a scent. *Me.*

"No," I whisper as the bark under me lets loose, and I twist in slow motion.

Flailing, I grip only empty bark; then I land hard on the back of the largest lion. He takes the punishing impact with a savage hiss, claws scraping the ground, dirt clods flying high.

I hit the ground, lungs empty, scrambling to a crouch. We lock eyes for a breath. Fear clamps down, paralyzing me.

The largest one with the tattered ear shifts back, coiling, eyes pinning me. I lunge to the side, but the full extent of my weakness is crushing. My legs wobble, trembling as I run downhill, the incline forcing me forward more than anything else.

I dodge through the trees, the crashing sounds of pursuit too close. A branch lashes my face, drawing a hot line across my skin. Up ahead, the light intensifies—a *clearing*. I grimace; they'll have me there, in the open.

Sharp claws catch my pant leg, pitching me forward. *Can't slow down.* I break into the openness. There is no field; there's nothing but a chasm. I scream as my feet lunge in the air, plummeting toward whitewater far below.

I drop for long seconds before smashing into its depths, its icy embrace too tight as I crumple hard against the rocky bottom. Pain shoots up as the water's swirling energy rips at me, the current impelling me forward.

I break the surface, gasping for air, catching sight of a lion dangling from the cliff high above, his claws sunk deep in a tree root as he scrambles up. The river sucks me under, its thunderous voice ringing in my skull as I slam into a protruding rock. The froth reddens as the current tumbles me, its touch against my skin like an electrical current.

I make desperate grabs for air as I sweep around a sharp curve; the cliffs give way to rocky shores. I struggle toward the bank, washing up. The rocks rake my stomach. I flop on my back, the current still tugging at my scrawny legs as I drag in insufficient air.

On hands and knees, I crawl up the beach, empty without the surging of the energy of the water. A streak of blood stains the rocks behind.

Without the delicate cover of the trees, the light is piercing, making my eyes water. Forcing empty muscles to function, I roll over; the clinking, raking sound of the rocks makes me wince.

Memories explode in my mind, so fresh they mix with reality. A thin veil of green haze hedges around my vision.

I am six again, in the frigid dark on a riverbank, blood coursing down my cheek. Our crumpled car lies on its roof, only the wheels showing above the icy water.

"Save him, Daddy!" My throat is raw in the frigid air from screaming at the limp form of my father.

I shake him, red fists small against his shirt collar. He groans, and a blast of familiar alcohol-laden breath hits me. Cars stop on the bridge high above, the guardrail dangling, a testament to our path. They're too far away to save my little brother, Ruben, still trapped in the car.

I run, rocks clinking, back to the car, and plunge myself into the deadly cold water, searching for a way past the twisted metal.

"Ruben!" My scream echoes over and over, tearing me to pieces.

I open my eyes, struggling out of the intense grip of the memory.

Lion.

Breath hisses through my throat, the air fetid with the creature's rank scent. Massive yellow-stained fangs open, inches from my neck; his head is as wide as my shoulders. I crab-crawl backward over the rocks, but it's a futile effort.

One massive paw pins my chest to the ground, crushing me against the rocks. I'm too weak to resist. The thick black lips open; *this is it. I'll see Ruben soon.*

A wild bellow pierces the silence and the lion's massive head snaps toward advancing footsteps. His growl rattles my chest, saliva splattering my face.

A flash of light reflects off metal that draws a bright-red slash down the lion's flank. He shrinks back as a wide-shouldered man rains blows on him. I scramble away from the wicked claws as my rescuer shouts again. His muscled arm lofts a deadly sword; the lion spins, paws spitting rocks as he makes for the tree line.

Chest heaving, the man turns toward me. A thick dark beard hides most of his face, but his green eyes brim with life.

I groan, empty, exhausted, lion bait next to his virile strength. He wipes his sword and looks me over.

"Aye. You've got the light about you, Boy."

Blinking, I stare at his skin, which glistens with a faint glow. He stretches out a wide hand and I take it. At the contact, everything comes back with a jolt. I'm Jacob Carter, a Navy SEAL. *Strong. Able.*

What happened to me? I grit my teeth, hating the fear my condition produces. I waver on bony legs. The man slaps my back, and I almost crumple. Hands on knees, I struggle with the green haze, the sound, the crazed speed of my journey here, stealing everything from me.

“When did you last eat, Boy? You look like a wet rag.” He scowls down at me.

One side of my mouth pulls up in pain. “I’m not sure.”

“You’re in no condition to be traipsing about the woods. Lions are never far off. And there’s worse than them lurking. Follow me, Boy. I’ll bring you to the table.” With that, he strides off, his long legs eating up the distance.

I push through the loose footing, struggling to keep him in sight. He walks through an old-growth forest, wide shoulders swinging, one with the wild nature of it.

My legs burn, calf pulsing where the rock had smashed it open. My breath is too short. I hiss through my teeth, desperate to keep up. As we travel, the sounds that have scents, colors with tastes dilutes the sharp awareness of my past. Experiencing the moment is overwhelming and easier than grieving for my former self.

Minutes pass and as I fall into a painful rhythm, my awareness expands. The trees are massive—older than any I’ve ever seen. Pausing mid-step, I press my hand against one, hear a deep, steady hum. *Growth*. I jerk my hand away. The word had been loud in the forest’s hush, yet no one had spoken.

This forest has little undergrowth and I can see for a surprising distance. The man is coursing over ancient hills and gullies at a punishing pace.

My legs cramp as we descend toward a small creek. The sound of its rippling water raises goose bumps on my skin; *I can smell it*. Vigor returns as we near the water. The air above the thin rill seems electrically charged.

He spreads his hands, held under the fast-flowing water. His head cocks, as if listening. Then he looks up, sniffs the air, and grunts. His green eyes are bright. “Drink, Boy! It’ll do you good.”

Kneeling, I cup my hands to draw water. As my skin immerses, shock waves ripple through my body. Terror had cloaked it earlier but it’s familiar from the river. Sounds like muffled voices seem to travel through my bones, energy surging. Hesitating, I raise the water to my lips and find it sweet and refreshing. A shiver of power runs down my spine, and relief floods me at the sensation.

“I’m Demyen. Glad I came upon you when I did.” He nods across the stream. “A pride of lions is two clicks south, heading this way. We better get moving.” He leaps the stream and strides away up the far hill.

I’m surprised to find the water’s surge of energy still coursing through my veins. Still, the disturbing weakness of my frame eats at me.

When I top the rise, Demyen is leaning against the tree. *No, wait.* I search the area, spotting a hut behind him. The well-concealed forest dwelling is almost indistinguishable from its surroundings, made from branches, mud, and logs. Weeds, brambles, and sticks break its outline, jutting out as they naturally would.

Demyen pulls open the door as I draw near, his sharp eyes scanning the woods beyond. A soft light and a mouthwatering aroma flood the air. Ducking through the low entryway, I find a tidy interior far larger than I expected.

A massive, roughhewn table splits the length of the single large room. Neatly arranged bowls and platters covered with lids sit steaming there. Two people turn at our arrival; I'd guess there are often larger gatherings than the hut hosts tonight. They both smile on seeing Demyen's stout frame.

"Demyen, welcome! I was hoping to share the board with you today," a slender man with sandy blond hair and slate-blue eyes says.

Demyen nods, reaching to grasp his outstretched hand. "The pleasure's mine, Ian. I see we've arrived just in time."

A petite woman sets down a platter; her dark hair and eyes remind me of my mother. The thought gives me pause as I try to grasp her image in my mind, but it's as if the memory is sky-bound: beautiful, but unreachable. Her image mixes with the reality of the woman before me.

"And who is this you've brought around today?" A bright smile accompanies her quiet voice.

Demyen turns, gazing down at me.

"I'm...Jacob." The name on my tongue seems foreign, like a puzzle piece with the colors misaligned. "What is this place?" I swallow hard; the implications are heavy. "Where are we? Is this a dream, or an alternate reality?" Suppressing a shiver of dread, I force the question: "Is this permanent?"

My words seem to hang in the air as Demyen, Ian, and the woman exchange an intense glance.

Demyen turns back to me, clasping a meaty hand on my shoulder with a forced smile. "Well, Boy, this is no *alternate* reality. This *is* reality, stripped of...the finite. But we'll have clearer heads once we've partaken."

I follow Ian and Demyen to the table. The woman guides me to sit on the long bench, placing a thick wooden bowl before me.

"I'm Myah. Be at ease here and eat your fill." She settles on a stool, and the scent that's rising from the bowls consumes my thoughts.

Ian lifts his hands to the heavens. "Almighty, we thank You for Your Word that sustains us. Guide our steps. So be it."

My mouth waters as they lift the lids and steam drifts upward. As it clears, I scowl: the plates are not full of meat and bread, but *scrolls*. They fill every platter, different sizes and shades of tan and brown, their damp edges curled. The words, written in tight script, are unintelligible to me as I glower at them.

None of my dining partners seem to see anything amiss as they reach out, ripping hunks from each platter. My mouth is watering, my frame desperate for fuel. I watch Demyen rip his pieces even smaller. Then with practiced ease, he rolls them inside a larger section, opens his mouth, and takes a bite. Ian as well is chewing with gusto as he mops his bowl with a scrap of scroll.

Myah nods at me. "Don't be shy; there's plenty more."

Driven by the urge in my stomach, I reach out to the nearest platter and rip off a corner. The soft scroll tears, then I take a deep breath and put it into my mouth.

An intense bitter flavor bites my tongue, tingling and burning. It seems to catch fire in my throat. Uncontrollable coughing racks me, and I feel the exact location of the scroll as it slides into my stomach.

Demyen leans over, slapping my back, "Here now, Boy! That's a hard one to swallow all by itself. Let's add a bit of the others."

Through watering eyes, I watch Demyen's expert assembly of another roll, then he stuffs it into my hands.

"No fear, Boy. This will soothe the burn."

This time it pays off. Layer upon layer of flavors roll, from deeply satisfying, almost meaty, to smooth and buttery, then a burst of sweet, with only a tinge of the burn. A solid sensation spreads through my stomach, replacing the emptiness.

Ian glances over at me. "You wondered if *this* is an alternate reality. It's an interesting question."

Myah smiles at him. "One of your favorite subjects, Ian."

"True. It's the foundation of everything. If you don't take the first step, you can never ascend the stairs." He shrugs, "The real question is, what is *reality*? Here, we experience the cause, *there* the effect. Life originates in the spirit. This 'reality' is the source. The physical order overshadows the spirit for most. Some never even know the spirit exists. But it dictates all things." He leans forward, intent. "The Lawgiver...His words change everything. They are the code upon which everything runs. One can go a lifetime without knowing the code, the law, the way. The right knowledge determines your success or failure." He goes back to eating, now on his third helping.

Demyen wipes his beard. "Boy, if you want to survive the morrow, you'd better eat."

I sigh, battered by the import of Ian's words. All I want is to go back. I force another piece of paper into my stomach, determined not to retch. I must survive until I find a way.

Morning breaks over the forest hut, and wisps of smoke rise from the firepit, the scent bringing a distant memory of the “physical order,” as Ian called it. Of running, fighting, *winning*. The opposite of me now.

I draw the memories closer, studying the time frame leading up to my arrival here. An icy sensation spreads across my chest, and my peripheral vision blurs with green. Something’s off; the strange symbol on Ash’s uniform comes into sharp focus, forcing the adrenaline higher. There’s significance to it I can’t quite grasp. But it’s like water in my hands; that world won’t stay in focus long enough.

Frustrated, I shift toward the fire. *The experiment must have created a tear between realities. Is the rift still open? Did the memories slip through the fog that divides the two worlds?*

Fists clenching, there’s only one thing that’s certain: *this is real*. Every sense is heightened here, intense to the point of pain. The most poignant experiences of the physical are dim compared to this place, this breath, this second.

I reposition, side tender where I’d rolled into the hilt of a sword at my belt. In the quiet dark, I’d drawn it, remembering Demyen’s impressive weapon. But I’d burned with shame to find just two short inches of blade showing above the intricate, jeweled hilt. With a deep embarrassment, I’d sheathed it, lest anyone see. Somehow, it’s too personal—not just a weapon, but a reflection of me.

Pulled from my thoughts by movement, I follow Demyen through the rickety door. Outside, the sounds of birds’ wings and voices are everywhere. The mossy wet scent of the forest floor fills my lungs; I can taste the clean, dark aroma, hear it.

Demyen turns his head as I stop beside him. “Ready for the day, Boy?”

I meet Demyen’s eyes and answer with painful honesty, “Not at all.”

A slow smile spreads across his face. “Then let’s seek He who is.”

He heads down the hill, back toward the stream we’d drunk from last night. This time I’m certain Demyen is listening as he spreads his broad hands under the water.

I whisper, “Do you hear something?”

I’m desperate to grasp the rules of this place, to gather the intel he does.

“Rest your hands in the water, Boy, and open your ears.”

Needing his perception, I plunge my hands under. First comes the sense of energy surging, flowing, tingling up my skin. A whispered hint of an airy voice follows. The swirling current mingles with the sounds.

“With time, you will understand. The Almighty...He is always speaking. If you can hear and understand, all things become possible.”

Nodding, I decipher words as I wait, intent on the communion with the water. It's in this quiet, with shivers of exotic life racing up my arms, that I'm caught by the sight of a familiar pugmark on the far shore. It's large and crisscrossed with scars. The twisting tension in my chest returns; clear in the firm mud, the print's scars form the symbol I'd seen on Admiral Ash's chest.

My mind contorts over the immense distance, the other reality vacillating, peaking again, gripping. *A dark puddle, expanding, the same huge paw prints lead off down the cold metal hall. A man crouches next to me.* I search for his name, but it eludes me, the knowledge fading like fog before the heat of day.

"Boy!" Demyen has been calling.

"What?" I blink hard, the difference between worlds so clear, that world so flat and gray, lacking the 5-D scope of this one so vibrant, so full of piercing life.

"Aye, he's a brute, that one. You've seen his print before, no?"

I nod, glad to have a reason to look elsewhere. "Yeah, I have. Was he hunting us?"

One of Demyen's thick eyebrows goes up. "They are always hunting, Boy, especially for the likes of you, fresh into the spirit. Best move along now."

Demyen points to the far shore to one side of the print. "Can you see your way? That faint incandescent line? It's golden. Almost like a crack in the ground?"

"I *think* so."

There's a glowing thread in the soil across the stream. Impossibly thin, it traces away out of sight.

"Let me tell you truth." Demyen raises three fingers in the air. "One. That line is your path. The perfect will of the Almighty." He drops one finger as he continues. "Two, it only takes one step to get off your path." Another finger goes down. "And three, the path *never* terminates."

I grunt. "So, I'm to follow it always?"

Demyen's head dips. "Aye. It looks as if our paths run together a bit longer. It's strange that I've been able to see your path this whole time. Usually, you only get a glimpse of someone else's path. Can you see mine? Running there, to the right of yours?"

I don't see another thread per se—only a distortion in the ground, as if light isn't settling, or maybe it's vibrating.

"Almost."

As we set off through the woods, with every step, it's easier to see my golden thread running ahead of me.

As the woods thin out, a gathering of people becomes visible. Most of them are thin with sallow complexions, looking as if they'd blow over in a gentle breeze. I wish I differed from them, more like Demyen with his solid muscular bulk.

Most hurry forward, lost in their own reality. Many wear dark clothing, gazes shifty; they make the weakness of the first group seem like strength. Their eyes are hollow and a strange darkness is in their skin. Only a few, like Demyen, are strong, fit, and able-bodied, skin glowing with a healthy luminosity.

One girl catches my eye in particular; her bones protrude and her brown hair hangs limp. Pain is etched in the creases near her mouth, the tension around her eyes; whenever someone walks by, she smiles, but it can't cover the truth of her emaciated condition, or the darkness that emanates from her skin.

Two more figures emerge from the distant woods. A head and shoulders taller than any man in sight, they exude light. Heavy swords hang from their sides and they wear pure white.

Demyen whispers. "Never seen a Watcher before, eh? Well, you'd better hope you see plenty. They serve the Almighty and help His people. So, I must be off. Looks like our paths diverge from here. Be careful, Boy. Keep your sword at the ready; hold to the path."

I cringe at his words about my sword, thankful he doesn't know. With that inadequate advice, Demyen sets off, and I feel conspicuous. I try to ignore the sweat that pops out on my palms as I step forward onto the path. As confident as I had grown walking with Demyen, now I stagger along as if on a tightrope.

My strides lengthen when my path turns left, veering through the crowd. Many of them stand or walk with their right hand stretched before them, staring down at nothing, empty, unaware of their surroundings. Their thumbs twitch back and forth over space. The oddness of their behavior and the emptiness in their eyes make a shiver run down my spine.

A man stands on a stump up ahead, his voice rising over a small crowd. He lacks the mass of Demyen, but his physique reveals him as a fighter. I'm drawn to him, longing for the quiet confidence I'm missing in this reality. As I draw closer, I catch his words, mid-sentence.

"...the law of seeds. When the Almighty created you, He made you triune, like Himself. You are a spirit, you have a soul, and you live in a body. He gave you the seed of His Word, when this seed bears fruit, you will defeat all enemies and live in victory."

A man next to me sniggers; he is so thin it's painful to look at him. "Law of seeds...like words will shut the mouths of lions." He turns away through the crowd; the darkness that clings to him gives him a harsh edge.

"But your spirit is dead, cut off from life by the darkness. The Almighty has life for you! Come to the light and live. Everything you need is in the light: strength, health, abundance. Turn from the darkness now; be made new and live!" The crowd shifts, their murmurs growing louder at the man's words.

But the girl I'd seen earlier has tears in her eyes as she listens, an expression of rapture on her face. In her condition, it seems hopeless. Could she have life like Demyen's? Can I? Her gaunt face makes me cringe. The man steps down from the stump, and I lose him in the crowd's swirl, wishing I could ask if he meant that literally.

I frown at my path, its wavering light creeping away through a thick forest ahead. Perfect cover for lions. I scan the crowd; most people don't focus on the ground ahead of them, clueless about the way. I stare down at my traitorous one, fading into the underbrush. Demyen's words find me again. *It is your path, the way you are to follow.*

The first step into the dark woods takes me a while. Senses on fire, I stalk through the thick scrub until it gives way to the relative openness of the forest. Heart slamming, I move from tree to tree.

A memory slips through; the barren, war-torn streets of Ramadi. I am stalking through hostile territory—able, ready, deadly, the self I have lost in this place. It seems real for a moment. Tantalizing, the memory of confidence. My legs tremble as I lean against a tree; growling, I slam my fist against its bark. I hate my condition, and this crazy place where the rules aren't defined.

With a steadying breath, I move forward, wincing at the snap of twigs under the thin sole of my shoe. I'd have been invisible in my other life, would have loved this challenge instead of cringing in fear. Sweat pours as I press ahead.

A large bramble drapes its long tendrils over my path. The flat area on the left is easier to traverse. Scanning hard, I decide to rejoin my path a few feet ahead, avoiding the bramble.

I ease out, searching for lion sign. Everything's quiet. Sliding my foot forward, I ease into the open. Two more steps and the ground beneath me shifts. I spread my arms, but the sound of the dirt shifting grows. A heartbeat passes as I fall, screaming. Logs, dirt, and leaves pile over me as I hit the bottom of a deep pit. Groaning, I struggle, leg pinched tight under the heaviest beam. I peer up through the choking dust; I must be fifteen feet down, and the sides of the shaft are sheer.

"Aha!" It takes all I have to shove hard enough to pull free. My leg throbs, swelling already setting in as I pile the wood to one side. Maybe I can build a ramp out.

I imagine lions finding me here; one simple pounce; the end of Jacob Carter. Working faster, sweat turns into a muddy slurry as I try to climb the pile. Everything shifts, too loose to hold my weight. A sharp protrusion jabs my foot. My mind screams to get out; this is the worst possible scenario.

Noise above makes me crouch, jaw clenched, but I see a man's silhouette. "Hey! Help me, will you?"

He disappears, returning with a long pole, a noose at one end. I reach up and the man expertly snags my wrist, and the noose tightens until the skin threatens to tear. *It's better than dying in here.*

Belly flopping over the top, I cough in the dust, rising to thank the man, but he yanks my arm back down to the path, his heavy foot on my neck.

With my cheek on the ground, I shout, "Let me up!"

The noose twists hard over my back till my scrawny shoulder screams in pain, tearing.

"Shut up and listen. You fight, I'll kill you outright. You obey, and you get to live."

The man's words ignite rage. Overriding the pain, I twist toward his weight-bearing leg. As he crumples on top of me, I grasp the pole, swinging it hard until I hear its satisfying crack against the man's skull. I roll free, chest heaving. The man scrambles away, eyes dark, holding his head. I back off farther, scanning the woods. Sure enough, two others appear, wary.

"Stay back. I don't want a fight."

The sheen of their skin holds the wavering dimness that tells me I'm in dangerous company. I back away into the undergrowth, pitch the pole deep into the brambles, and rejoin my path, keeping a careful ear out for pursuit. By the time I'm sure I'm alone, the elation of having fought him off gives way to wracking pain in my overused muscles.

I press on, exhaustion building; a smear of rotten scent mars the pine forest I've passed into. Senses on fire, I search ahead. Something's out of place: *human skin*. My breath comes heavy; a limp hand lies stark against the leaf litter.

Nothing moves, not for many breaths, so I approach, vigilant. It's the girl. She'll be lion bait out here, collapsed in the woods. I crouch next to her, feeling way too exposed. Rolling her over, my gut churns. She's already dead, neck mangled.

The pitiful, wistful expression in her eye as she listened to the man settles like a brick in my stomach. Hoping for strength isn't enough. Longing for it doesn't do the job either, or I'd not be wavering here, endurance gone. I have to figure it out. Survival here demands it. What's the difference between Demyen, the teacher, and me? We have *the light*, but it isn't affecting us the same way. I seem closer to this girl than to them.

I draw back as the girl's corpse seems to waver, translucent bands moving in waves. Then her skin blackens and a choking sulfur scent rises as the translucent streaks flash red. I jolt backward as she disappears, a smear of blood all that remains on the forest floor. The hair on my arms stands on end.

I blink, lock eyes with the dark, dead gaze of a lion, its mouth wreathed in dripping red. It hadn't gotten to eat before she disappeared. Its massive jaws open. I crouch, desperate to run but unable to...until it lunges forward. All that keeps me from being overtaken right then is the wonderful grittiness of my leather shoes and the wild, ineffective scrambling of the lion's paws on the damp leaves.

My atrophied legs propel me through the trees, my lungs struggle to haul in air, and I long for my former strength. The pursuing sound of claws raking the turf behind me raises goose bumps on my skin.

My path! When did I leave it? There, its golden glimmer is straight ahead. A high sheer face of rock rises in the distance, and my path heads straight toward it. I tuck my head and run, lungs wracked with pain.

I reach the base of the cliff at top speed. With a desperate twist to the right, I use my ricochet to propel me along my path. The sharp bite of claws rips through my calf. Driving deep to regain my speed, I hear the massive beast slam into the cliff face, piling up against the rock, not making the turn, snarling in pain.

My legs are giving out; I can't keep up the pace much longer. Searching the path, my heart almost stops. There, not far ahead, its wavering golden light ends. *Does the lion eat me? Do I die right there?*

Demyen's words return, "The path *never* terminates."

The ground vibrates under the lion's next leap toward me. As I run, high above I see a vine dangling, a golden thread weaving up its length.

With a shout, I leap for it. The lion swipes one massive paw, and my pant leg whips flat, *way too close*. My hands close on the thin vine, as my stomach muscles scream, forcing my legs up. With a savage growl, I make slow progress up the vine, grip slipping. Eventually, I can use my knees to clench the bottom of the vine. I dangle, trembling like a leaf, sweat pouring.

The lion circles below, burning eyes riveted on me. He leaps, front paws reaching high. Terror forces me higher. Branches reach out, entangled with the vine. I fold myself over one, groaning. The lion claws the trunk.

Darkness is coming, and its arrival pushes me to escape, making a wild leap for the next tree. Then I waver, arms flailing for balance as I tightrope across the center branches. Wrapping my arms around the trunk, I give my empty muscles a second to recoup. The warm scent of the bark brings a wave of clarity. If I can work back toward the cliff face and exit the treetops onto its height, I'll evade the enemy.

I force myself to push off again, hands gripping branches as I rush along. The lion keeps pace below, its stench rising, mouth open. Up ahead, the rock face comes into view; even its dull gray hums with a peaceful sound in the fading light. Hope surfaces. *I'm close*. Coiling back, I launch over open air before thought can keep me from action.

I shout, slowing at the high point of my leap. *I'm not going to make it*. Stretching, willing myself forward, I grasp at the branches; their thin tips give way under my weight, fists full of leaves. The sharp snap of them shearing off the tree fills me with dread. I plummet, my shout morphing into a scream of terror as the lion surges; there is no way to escape.

A rippling energy surges in the vibrant air, pulsing through me. My fingers, still gripping leaves, tingle with it. I blink hard, trying to clear the green haze clouding my vision. My legs buckle as I slam hard into a small stream; energy explodes from the chilled water like a lightning bolt. *Thud*. Through the green fog, I see the lion land a few feet away, one more leap and I'm done.

Halfway through his next leap, his eyes go wide, and he lands half-turned, his heavy head searching. *He can't see me through the haze.*

I'm still falling from the tree. *No*, rising. I grip my head as the energy spikes, unbearable. The sense of motion is disorienting; there's nothing but green haze burning my eyes in the crazed rush. Pain. *Body*. So foreign. I open my eyes, vision narrowed, trapped in my flesh that's shrieking in agony and bucking on a metal table.

Foam bubbles from my mouth, but through these sensations, it's the flatness that crushes me. This world is gray, only three-dimensional. Sounds without colors.

The green haze dissipates, and I'm seized in a body that's determined to jerk off the table. *The lion*. Determined to fight, I strike hard. Hands try to hold me down as I roll off the cold table. A face appears above me, warm brown eyes holding mine...must protect her.