

Long ago, tens of thousands of years before now, there existed the Elementals. They walked this earth with the powers of a god, shaping the world as they saw fit. Each belonged to one of the five elements: earth, air, fire, water, and electricity. Of course, each elemental had the power of their respective element, producing it or bending it to their will. They were revered by primitive man, but being primitive as he was, man still could do nothing but fear the power of the Elementals. As man grew and became more aware of the Elementals and their powers, they came to respect that power.

Then one day, the Elementals simply vanished. Nothing of theirs remained, except a small legacy, left in the bloodlines of the ancestors of man. Once in a great while, a child was born with the power to affect an element. It could be any of the five, but it all depended on which Elemental affected their bloodline. These gifted people were called Elementalists. It was a great gift, one that gave the Elementalist status and power beyond his peers, and for a time it was a blessing. But man began to fear the power of the Elementalists and drove them underground. Soon, the gift became a curse, and every family hid those who had it. Those that did not hide were tortured and killed and over the years, all thought and memory of the Elementalists faded away.

Yet, as always, there were children and they knew they were special. And so, quietly, the children learned what they could of their powers, alone or in groups, each finding they had different abilities and degrees of control. With that, the Elementalists taught their arts in secret, and remained hidden for hundreds of years. As civilization advanced, the Elementalists remained, searching for others like themselves...

## Act One

### *Landslide*

Meet Jack. Jack the college student. Jack the English major. Jack Winters. Jack was never the best at anything; always second-best. He carried a 3.9 GPA in high school, was never MVP in any sport, never got the highest score on a test. He was smart, quick on his feet, and often had great insight into any situation, but there was always someone smarter, faster, and better than he was. Even in his training in the Israeli fighting style, Krav Maga, the other students always beat him. Every time he would throw a punch, they'd always be there to block. Every time they threw a kick, he would always be a hair too late. "Put some effort into it!" the teachers would shout, and he would push harder, but it was never enough. He would prolong the fight, land a few blows even, but he rarely won.

Despite never really being the best, Jack had no complaints. His life wasn't hard, he always had the things he needed, and though he didn't talk that much with his family, they didn't have problems either. It was his last semester, and being a senior had its advantages. For one, he wasn't held down by the horrible course-loads of the freshmen and sophomores. That meant that he could take just a few classes and not be considered a slacker by the school. It also meant that he had enough time to explore his own interests...

Jack was on break when he went to his grandfather's house. Winter break was normally a time to get together with family away from college life, so instead of going all the way home, he decided to head to the much closer home of Michael Winters. The trip took maybe an hour. As he rolled up to the seemingly unkempt house, he noticed the lawn needed a little work, like it hadn't been cut in a couple of weeks. His grandfather lived alone ever since his grandmother had died four years ago. Ever since

then he had been watchful, making sure everything was okay, giving him a call once in a while.

The blinds were drawn, as usual, and the cloudy day made the house seem a little too dark for the home that raised his father. He parked his car in the street, walked to the door, and gave three quick raps. No answer. "Odd" he thought. He knocked again. "Maybe he just didn't hear." He fished for the key behind the ridge on the awning and then opened the door. "Helloooo... anybody home?" he sang as he walked through the front room. He checked the kitchen, then the back room. Finally, he got to the bedroom, and just as he opened the door, he took the entire scene in.

The walls were lined with fragrant candles, all lit. The scent overwhelmed his other senses, unable to cope with the power of the incense hanging in the air. The furniture was pushed to the corners of the room and his grandfather was sitting cross-legged in the middle of it all. He was looking right at him when Michael said "Hello Jack!" Jack took a quick step backward, eyes wide with confusion. His confusion was quickly replaced with anger.

"Why didn't you answer me?"

"You said something?"

"Yes, I knocked twice, and even hollered for you when I came in. I could have stolen everything you had! I could have been a robber!"

His grandfather remained entirely calm. "It's okay. I knew you were coming." His attempts at calming this grandson did nothing to quell the frustration and surprise in the youth.

"How could you have known I was coming?" He hadn't even called. He wanted it to be a surprise visit before he went home to his parents.

"You know me. I'm magic." *There*, he thought. That had calmed him a little. The boy's anger was fading quickly.

"Enough with the games, grandpa. I'm not so easily amused with your little tricks anymore." He recalled the 'feats of magic' his grandfather performed when he was a child; making pens float, having his hair stand on end. Those were good times, when his grandmother had still been alive.

"I'm well aware of that, Jack. But it's a pleasant surprise that you're here."

"Didn't you just --" He didn't bother finishing. His grandfather had already risen and headed to the kitchen.

Michael took the bottle of scotch from the worn wooden cupboard that smelled faintly of mold and mildew. Walking slowly to his favorite chair, lowering himself deliberately into it he said "well, tell me of your days at college. You're nearly finished, aren't you?"

And so the conversation went on as Jack spoke of his friends and experiences at the hall, how classes were still boring as always, and various job prospects he had lined up.

"Have a shot, Jack." He drank it quickly. "You're what, 21 now?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you asked how I knew you were coming, right?"

"Uh, yeah..." he replied. He was suddenly very confused and apprehensive.

"Well then, I guess it's time you learned a bit of your history. There should be some books on the shelf nearest the door in my room. Bring them."

"But... what does--"

"Fine. If you won't get them, then I will."

"No no no. It's okay. I'll get them." He then hurried to the room and brought the books. Some were old with yellowed pages, others were journals, hand-written and fairly new. Roughly seven books in total. When he returned he asked "What is this all about?"

"You remember the little magic tricks I used to do when you were young?"

"Sure."

"Well, hand me that pen." He did so and then Michael put it on the coffee table. "Watch it closely."

The pen rolled to one side, then the other, as he moved his finger back and forth.

“Yeah, so it's a trick, right? You never did tell me how those worked.”

“They're not tricks. They never were.”

“Huh? You're messing with me. Where's the magnet?”

“Like I said, it's not a trick. I can move the pen without a string or a magnet.”

“So, what is it, telekinesis” he asked jokingly.

“No. Watch my fingers.” He brought his hand up to his face and stared at his fingers. *Focus...* *Focus...* he thought, as he closed his eyes, then snapped his fingers. The minute he did, a large blue arc appeared between his fingers, accompanied by an appropriate \*pop.\*

“Okay, what was that?”

“Haven't you ever seen lightning, or a large static charge?”

“Well, yeah, but it's not dry enough for static to be like *that*.”

“That's quite true. In these books here is knowledge not included in the history books. You know about the pagan elements, right? Earth, Water, Air, and Fire?”

“Of course, but you're not explaining *anything*!”

“If you'll just use your brain and *listen* to me, you'll understand soon enough.”

“Argh... fine. Give me the books then.” He took the first book and flipped through it. It contained drawings of people being burned, various maps of the countryside, too much information to go through in a week.

“What is this? I can't read all of this.”

“Which is why I left the important details in the journals beneath.”

He then put down the book, opened a journal, and read a few notes.

“What does all of this mean? I still don't understand it.”

“Alright, I'll explain some of it to you. A long time ago, there were beings on this earth that weren't human. They could control the five elements. Yes, *five* elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Electricity. You only hear about the other four because they were very powerful in their time. The power to control fire would be a terrible thing to those who couldn't do anything beyond making small campfires. Electricity was nothing back then. Nothing to anyone except for the occasional lightning strike. That's why you don't hear of it. In any case, these elemental creatures *affected* some of us. Some of us have this 'power', this ability to affect the elements. For instance, *our* bloodline was changed by one of these electric beings. Because of that, every once in a while, someone in our family is able to affect electricity.”

“Uh...”

“In fact, it's exceedingly rare for you to have the power as well. No one has ever had the power within less than four generations before, at least within our family. Maybe you're a special one.”

“And maybe you've had too much already.”

“Oh shut up, dumbass. I'm fine. This is the first drink I've had all day. Still doesn't change anything, though. When I was meditating earlier, I sensed you coming. I knew it was you because you have a very unique aura about you and when you entered my house I could *see* that it was you. I hadn't really seen it earlier because I never meditated around you, but you have the same aura as me. And the same abilities as me, I assume. You just don't know how to use them yet.”

“Okay, grandpa, where are the cameras? I mean, it's not like I can't take a joke, but the jig is up. I'm done.” He listened intently for the sounds of people, stared at corners and furniture, yet nothing came to him.

“If you insist on making a fool of yourself, do it when I'm not around.”

There was a long pause. Jack was trying to decide whether this was some elaborate joke or whether there might be some truth to what he was saying.

“Okay, so, assuming you're *not* trying to mess with me, and assuming you're right, then where are my super powers?”

“Man... I assumed you'd understand that this isn't some comic book, but maybe I overestimated

your intelligence. You don't *have* any superpowers. The best I was ever able to do was to make your hair stand on end. Even in my youth I couldn't do much more than produce visible arcs between my hands."

"So what good does it do me?"

"It is your history. It's a legacy that you should at least know about."

"Right... so I should know about this power I supposedly have that isn't ever going to be powerful enough to do anything more than move a pen?"

"No! You should know about a power that can be much more than anything I was ever able to do! That aura I sensed before, your aura, was much greater than my own even when I was young."

"Okay, gramps, whatever you say..."

"Be flippant all you want, but it's your fault if you squander this gift. You could be quite a man if you learn to control your powers. When I was young, I could effectively tazer people just by touching them. It wasn't a powerful shock, but it did hurt. You, on the other hand, are a lot more powerful than I, especially now."

The thought of power quickly flashed across Jack's face. He contemplated how such an ability would help in his fighting...

"Jack, I can teach you how to work with your power. I can show you how to harness it; control it. You don't have to answer now, but I can work with you over your winter break. Just let your parents know that you're going to spend the holiday with me. They'd see it as a nice gesture, not the selfish motivation we know it to be, so you'll be off the hook. How's that sound?"

Jack sat there, astonished that his grandfather had already planned all of it out. He *knew* he was coming... He probably had everything planned from the beginning, but it didn't matter. Jack had found something he wanted. Being an English major, he knew there was little that was exciting in his future. Even though he enjoyed working with paper, he knew that it wasn't exactly what he wanted to do. This seemed like a chance at something he could enjoy.

Jack made the phone call. The day was getting colder. As he stood near the window, he could feel the heat leaving the room, passing on its way to the world outside through the small window. When he was done explaining things to his parents, he returned to the worn-out couch.

Jack asked "what do I need to do?" Michael saw that he was still apprehensive, but at least Jack accepted that he wasn't lying.

"Well, had I a choice, I'd make you learn Tai-Chi like I did. Seeing as we don't have that much time, I'll teach you the basics that lead me to control my powers. But, controlling them is like holding a fire hose; if you don't plant yourself firmly and maintain your grip, you'll lose control and destroy something. Even worse, you could kill someone."

Jack knew his grandfather had a flair for the melodramatic, but somehow he thought maybe it wasn't such a good idea to ignore *everything* his grandfather said this time.

"So, where do I begin... First, let me show you the furthest extent of my powers. Age weakens your powers, so as you get older, you'll lose them slowly. Now, just hold still. This *will* hurt, but the pain won't last long."

Despite his grandfather's warning to hold still, he was anxious and his adrenaline spiked. Jack planted himself and was prepared for an attack from all sides. The Krav Maga style lent itself to instincts and reflexive movements, so if he could see it, hear it, or feel it, he could fight it. His grandfather swung at his chest, palm-strike style. Jack blocked with his right arm, but he knew it was a mistake the minute he did. He had prepared for the blow, but he *wasn't* prepared for the massive electrical shock that ran up his arm and through his side to his leg. As he fell to the floor and the pain subsided, he analyzed the situation. He *did* see a small blue line between his arm and his grandfather's hand. The shock lasted only a moment, but he was immobilized in that instant and open to so many attacks, it was downright scary in hindsight.

“What did I *SAY!* I told you to hold still! Yet you played the idiot and decided to make things worse. Had I hit you square in the chest, it wouldn't have been so intense, jackass. No, you had to *not* trust me... god dammit!”

As Jack slowly, carefully, rose from the floor, he said “Well, you've always messed with me before, so it's not like I have absolute trust in you! Besides, Krav doesn't just turn off. And anyway, that was *really strong!* I thought you said your powers weakened as you aged. Aren't you nearly 75?”

The truth was, Michael was 78, but he didn't look it. He seemed like he was ten years younger. Michael would tell him about that later.

“You also know that I'm a Tai-Chi master. As such, I *might* have a bit more control than you'd think! I focused just about everything I had into that. I knew it wouldn't kill you, but it's not like you helped me, stupid. Son of a...”

Michael let loose a string of expletives. “Alright. Let's try something a bit different. You've *felt* my power, now you get to *see* it.” Michael then sat down in a cross-legged position so fast, Jack wondered if he had fallen. His hands were set so that his thumbs were across from his other four fingers, all of them touching their counterpart. He began to breathe slowly, deliberately. Jack sat down directly across from him and stared intently at his grandfather, taking in every detail he could.

It was the buzzing, humming sound that first caught his attention. Then it was the faint glow from his hands. A scant few seconds later, it was the small ball of electricity in the center of his hands that took Jack's full attention. He stared at it for a full two seconds before it quickly disappeared.

“Whoa...” That was all that Jack could manage. Little beads of sweat dotted his grandfather's face.

“That's it. That's all I've got. Now I'm out.” He was worn out, but as always, he kept his reserve untouched. *Never use all your power; you might need it later.* That was a rule he lived by, especially after that incident many years ago...

“So, wait. How do I do that?”

“Well, that'll happen later. First, you'll have to learn to focus. When you get good at that, you can work out how to mess with light bulbs. They're quite fun to practice with. You can work up from there.”

“So how do I 'focus'?”

“Sit down, clear your mind of everything but yourself. Pick a point inside yourself and focus on it. Focus inward.” Jack tried several times to get to a meditative state and failed every time. Michael took a couple of hours teaching him to meditate, and many more failures followed.

When Jack had finally reached a meditative state, his grandfather said “good. Now, feel that warmth, that energy within you? That is your aura and it's part of your power. You can feel it move, circulate inside you. Focus on it.”

And so, Michael trained Jack to calm his mind and focus in more strenuous environments. He was a quick learner due to his earlier training. Three days later, he was able to meditate despite his grandfather banging pans and shouting in the room.

“Okay Jack, seems I can't break you out of your trance unless you want to come out. You pass. Now we move on to harnessing that power you sensed during meditation.”

Jack waited for instruction.

“Well, don't just stand there, start meditating. But listen to me so I can walk you through it. Okay, the main thing is to know that the energy you feel can be moved as you wish. You can pull a large amount to any point in the body at will, instead of it working on its own. You've seen my aura when you meditate, so watch what I do with it.”

Jack went even deeper into meditation and turned his focus outward. He saw the blue haze of his grandfather and saw that it resembled him in real life, following the contours of his body. But as he watched, it began to shift, a pattern moving faster and faster in his right arm, then his forearm, then concentrated to a blinding blur in his right hand. Then it slowed, expanded, and took over the spaces

that seemed strained or left uncovered by the shift. After Jack realized that was what he was supposed to see, he opened his eyes. “So, what did you do?”

“Watch me again, but don't close your eyes. Don't even blink.”

With that, Michael's arm tensed, then short, thin blue lines began to arc their way down his forearm. When a few had reached his hand, they began to coalesce. Michael tightened his fist and the lines began to move faster as more appeared. The smaller arcs began moving around his hand and as he opened it, long blue arcs formed between his fingers. Then, just as quickly as it had formed, he closed his hand and the arcs were gone.

“So *that* is what happened,” thought Jack. “If my aura is concentrated in one area, my powers will follow. *Interesting...*”

He then verified his theory with Michael. “Indeed, but making it move the way you want to is harder than you think. We do it naturally when we're angry or scared, but it's very uncontrolled. This requires focus and control, which you've worked towards, but not quite achieved yet.”

“Wait a minute! Didn't you say I had passed? Didn't I have the right focus?”

“Yes, you did. You learned to focus correctly and hard enough to not be distracted, but this you must do with your eyes open, your mind in chaos. Find focus in distracting environments. I know your Krav Maga teaches you to do exactly that, but this requires a better focus than they will ever ask of you. You have to channel your anger and maintain control. This power will run away with you, especially if you're emotional. Alright, let's begin.”

With that, Michael squared off against Jack. “Now, get angry with me.” His face hard and set, Jack summoned up all the rage and hatred he could and focused on his grandfather. It didn't seem enough, but apparently, it was working. His grandfather smiled. “Good. Now, I want you to hit me as hard as you can.”

“What?” All his rage left him and confusion set in. “Why would I do that?”

“No, dumbass! Be angry at me!” Jack snapped to attention and quickly got angry again.

“Jack, you can't hurt me. I may look old and frail, but you should know by now I'm not. Now, attack me!”

Jack paused for a moment, deciding what to do, then quickly closed the distance between them. As the gap narrowed, his grandfather remained calm, watching his every move. Jack's focused rage and anger gave power to the punch. As he began to strike, he felt a tingle in his fist. *I've felt this before...*

The punch connected. His grandfather had not guarded, but he turned with the punch, taking the force with it, feeling the effects as it glanced off his chest. *He is stronger*, thought Michael. But, he couldn't tell Jack that. He had to keep him going, even though he was motivated already.

As Jack's arm moved past Michael, he quickly reached out and grabbed his arm, turning more, taking Jack's arm with him. Jack soon followed.

The couch turned over and Jack was on his back, in shock. “What the *hell*? What is *wrong* with you?” In that moment, he was on his feet, not caring whether the man before him was his grandfather or not, ready to knock him into oblivion. “Jack. Your hand.” Jack looked at his right hand. The small whirl of energy around it was a faint blue, pulsating, glowing. As Jack realized what it was, it began to fade and quickly vanished. Michael knew his gambit had paid off. He had hoped that would push him to release his power, even just a little. He hadn't dreamed he'd get it to manifest so beautifully. *Now he believes*. “Shall we go again? Your Krav against my Tai-chi?” Another gamble. *I have to wear him out*. “Whatever. Let me get my hand wraps.”

Jack walked out to his car, retrieving the black cloth from his bag. As he wrapped his hands, he thought about that sensation, that blue light. *Was that really me? Did I do that?* Jack thought long and hard, trying to remember exactly what happened. It was only a few minutes ago, but he was so wrapped up in that moment he didn't know what brought it out. *Can I do it again?* Jack had to do it. He knew in his heart that what he had was a special thing; a gift. When his grandfather brought it up

before, he cast it aside because of pride. "I don't need this. What good would it do me?" And yet, he knew it might be worth it. Now, he was certain. No need to string him along. He was along for the ride, clear to the end.

Jack awoke from his reveille and quickly ran back inside. "Took you long enough." Michael had already cleared the furniture from the center of the room. The couch was upright and in the corner. The fan was off, the floor lamp no longer giving light to the room. Everything in the house was quiet, save the central air. "I'm ready." Jack meant it and Michael could see that quite clearly.

"Let's begin." With that, Michael pushed off, closing the ten-foot gap in an instant. Jack was already on the defensive, ready to knock the punch aside. Then something strange happened. Michael switched arms, lightly bringing his left arm to hit Jack's right side, already beginning to be exposed as he swung at an opening. Jack could see where this was going and he turned his palm strike into an elbow, closing the remaining distance. It would hurt. A lot. But he knew Michael wasn't a weakling. Besides, paybacks are a bitch. Michael's left arm missed, but he got what he wanted. His arm, too far out to connect, became a hooked punch to Jack's ribs. Even as Jack's elbow glanced off his ribs, Michael was already preparing a nasty surprise. A painful shock again ran down Jack's side, but he kept upright and prepared. The elbow had connected, but to little effect. Michael had been trained plenty well enough that he could take a blow like that and not be out of the game. Jack snapped a quick kick to the back of his knee and *that* was unexpected. Michael tottered over, but as he did, he planted a hand and swept a foot out from under Jack. Michael and Jack both rolled away, springing back up to a ready position. *He's still hesitating.*

"Not a bad start, kid. But is that all you've got?" With that, it was time for Jack to take the offensive. He couldn't work at longer ranges very well, but that wasn't a problem in this room. He took two steps and was in Michael's face. Michael threw a defensible punch, and as he did, Jack knocked it aside and threw a hard palm strike to his chest. But, Michael's chest wasn't there and Jack hit only air. As Michael moved around Jack, turning with the momentum of the blocked arm, he simply touched Jack's neck.

Jack lost control. He was shaking uncontrollably and fell to the floor. *Is this a seizure?* Jack was scared beyond measure. *What did he do?* Nothing responded. His arms and legs moved on their own, as though his puppeteer suddenly had a coughing fit. As the shaking subsided seconds later, Michael was still standing there, watching his grandson writhe in agony the whole time. As Jack rose, it wasn't anger or hatred that filled his eyes. It was fear. "Get *away* from me" Jack spat as he backed away from his grandfather. Michael saw his error. He had gone too far too fast. "Jack..." Jack was already moving to the corner of the room. Michael was suddenly his grandfather again, instead of the hard teacher he was trying to be. Jack was still very scared and shied away from him. "I am not ever going to hurt you permanently, Jack. I did that because you needed to feel it. I'm trying to teach you and this is the way I know how."

"What you do, it's so damned confusing! I can't see what you're doing! I can't tell how you're doing it! I can't defend myself against it... This sucks." Jack was coming out of it a little more. Not nearly as scared, not nearly as defensive. He rose again. Michael saw he was still shaky, but not from his attack. "Why don't we take a break for now? I'll make some coffee." And with that, Michael went off to the kitchen, with Jack again unable to answer.

Jack walked carefully to the couch in the corner. He lay down slowly, wiggling his toes and fingers, *just to double-check*, he thought. He was tired. Nothing like when he trained at the dojo. He was exhausted. Laying there, he collected his thoughts, reflecting on the last week of training and what might come up in the next few days.

Michael pushed the button on the coffeemaker. His head bowed, eyes closed, he uttered a prayer of forgiveness. *What have I done? I've already alienated my student. And my grandson is afraid of me. Not good Mikey...* The water began to boil and Michael sat down on the old chair. He had to rework his plans. "Fighting won't work like it did with me. That may bring it out, but he's too

new to figure it out that way. I'd figured it out months before this, but he has only a month to learn what took me six..." The weight of the task burdened Michael's already heavy heart. The kettle had been filled and the smell of fresh coffee floated in the air. Michael made two cups and added a bit of sugar to one. He stopped at the threshold and studied Jack. The boy was clearly strong and a quick learner. He had proven that much. This wasn't an easy thing to do, but he was holding up better than Michael figured most people would. Maybe that was pride in his grandson talking, but the mental assault wasn't easy either. Michael knew he would break down eventually, but he never expected it to be so soon. Mike had gone through those trials himself and hadn't the luxury of a mentor back then. Perhaps he could make things a bit easier on Jack if he prepared with him... *AHA!* The idea struck him in its full glory.

"Coffee." Michael was quiet and he wondered if Jack had heard him. He set the coffee down on the table and shuffled to his chair. He hadn't expected Jack's strike to hurt so much, even with Jack's training. *When I was young I'd have healed already, but I suppose those are the failings of flesh.* "Jack, it'll get cold." With that, Jack slowly rose and clutched the coffee cup carefully, as though he might drop it. *I guess it's now or never.*

"When was the last time you *really* meditated?"

"Yesterday."

"Hmmm... would you like to try it now?"

Jack looked up over the edge of his coffee cup, carefully scanning the area, expecting an attack.

"Sure... why not..."

His utter lack of enthusiasm made Michael wince. They both seated themselves on the floor, cross-legged, facing each other. "You wouldn't know this, Jack, but when we meditate, we're not alone. We can even communicate. We just have to find each other. I'll try to find you first. Just don't go anywhere." Jack hadn't even known he could "move" while meditating, so he just did his normal meditation. As he entered the deepest part of the trance, he noticed something nearby. It wasn't a human aura like he was used to seeing. It was more like a point of light. And then he heard it, but it wasn't a voice, more like a thought. *Jack, it's me.* Naturally, he was surprised to hear his grandfather's voice in his own head, but without thinking, Jack spoke back.

"Whoa... so this is what you were talking about?"

"Yes. Now follow me."

"Just how do I do *that*?"

"Simply keep your attention on me and you'll follow. If your concentration breaks, you'll get lost and I'll have to find you again."

"Alrighty then. Let's go."

With that, they moved. Jack hadn't noticed it until now, but there were bounds to this space, like small islands of information in a sea of luminescent fog. There were occasional small groups of light, but most were just individual dots, far apart, like a sparse starscape. Jack's concentration began to slip, and Michael noticed as he shouted back "Focus!" Jack stopped "looking" at his surroundings and regained his focus on the pinpoint of light ahead of him. They moved through the haze and stopped in a relatively "unpopulated" area. "Now Jack, this is all quite new to you, I understand, but you've got to not get lost here either. To get back to your body, to return from meditation, you'll need to focus entirely on yourself and pull yourself inward. That's how you get back. There is no other way, and it's quite difficult to do, especially here now that you've got an idea of what this place is like."

"Right. I have some questions though." Michael remained silent. "Those points of light I see, those are other people in meditation right? And those clusters of lights. Those must be groups of people meditating like you and me?" "Yes. For the most part. But, most of those individuals don't know how to break out of their shells, so they remain there. I managed to drag you along, so you didn't have to work your way out, but it can be nearly impossible and most people can't push enough to get out. The clusters are probably martial-artists in group meditation. Sometimes a few will break out on their

own...” Jack took in the thoughts as he surveyed the landscape before him. It was an almost golden-orange place without edges, and yet, everything curved back in on itself. He had a feeling that if he kept moving away from a point, he'd end up running toward it soon enough. “If you need a name for this place, it's the ethereal plane.” *The ethereal plane...* “Yes, the ethereal plane, Jack.” Jack's shock was as easy for Michael to receive as his thoughts. “You need to learn to conceal your thoughts. It took a lot of work with an old friend, but eventually we could hide our thoughts. We'll work on that too. Just realize that your emotions, thoughts, everything translates here. Here, physical attributes mean nothing and information itself has form and size. Being without a body, your mind, your *consciousness* is the 'body' you'll have while you're here and if you can't control it, things get interesting.” Jack looked more and more around the small universe before him. He could move at amazing speed to any point he chose. *This is incredible...* he babbled as they moved again.

Once they reached a fair distance from any of the other “islands,” Michael stopped. Jack expected instructions to follow, but instead watched as the space near his grandfather produced a small golden orb, perhaps 20 feet across, seemingly out of nothing. His grandfather then said “Simply approach the orb and you'll be drawn in. Follow me.” He watched and the figure that was his grandfather was drawn into the orb. Jack then slowly brought himself closer and closer to the orb, until he felt a pull. It wasn't like anything he'd felt before. Almost like a tug on his consciousness, pushing his focus toward the orb instead of where he wanted it to be. And then, he was inside. Slowly he materialized from nothingness and as he did so, he began to realize where he was. Jack saw that it was his dojo and yet it wasn't. At one end was his grandfather, at the other, himself. Both were wearing fighting garb for Krav Maga and his grandfather was leaning on a training bag.

“What is this?” Jack inquired. He wondered if they had transported themselves to his dojo somehow.

“I created this place from both your and my memories. The training outfits are yours, I believe.” It seemed that Michael could still read his thoughts.

“Okay, so why are we here? Can we fight while meditating?”

“Indeed we can, but only in this place. Here we will not get tired, nor will we be injured. This is like a practice arena. Here you can let loose your powers and nothing will be harmed. Here things can be fixed. Being here will help you to release your power as well.”

“So wait, if I can't be hurt, then how will this help me fight?”

“This is about training your powers, not your fighting style. Now, come on kid. Let it go.” Silence filled the room. They stood there, staring at each other, neither one making a move.

“Jack, nothing happens just by sitting around...” Jack walked to a large hanging bag. He kicked it a few times, then began punching it. He continued to beat the bag, but nothing happened, so he asked for help. “Hitting a bag just doesn't feel right. What am I doing wrong?”

“Focus Jack. You'll bring it out if you want to. Watch me.” With that, Michael walked up to another bag, brought a visible bluish charge to his hand, then punched *through* the hanging bag. As he pulled his arm out of it, sand began to run to the floor. All he did was look at Jack. Jack closed his eyes and focused. “It's all in your mind, Jack. Just let it go. You don't have to hold back here.”

Jack brought all his awareness to bear on his fist and he *felt it*. He couldn't really see it, but it was there. He hit the bag as hard as he could and he felt the sensation move. It was like pins-and-needles moving from his entire hand out through his knuckles. As he pulled his hand away, he noticed little marks on the bag, like his fist but with extra lines.

“Hey, good job, kiddo. Can you make a bigger mark?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Try it.” And he tried again, with little difference. Every time his concentration slipped, even slightly, the sensation would fade. He hit the bag often with no effect and his frustration grew, clouding his mind. But, each time he succeeded, it got a little easier and he pushed a little harder.

After half an hour of watching his grandson hit a bag, he decided Jack could handle things in the real world. "Time's up, Jack. Let's go." Michael dissolved the training area around Jack and Jack's "body" dissolved too. Jack was confused and it radiated all about him. "Just pull out of meditation. Focus inward." He watched Jack struggle for a few minutes, then finally leave. Michael gave a mental sigh as he came out of meditation. *Who knew this would be so difficult...*

Jack was exhausted. Physically, he was just fine, but the problem was he couldn't concentrate, and a lack of concentration meant no powers. "I'm gonna go take a nap."

"Guest bedroom is all yours."

"Thanks."

Jack continued his training for a solid month, developing his powers. It was his sole purpose and nothing could drive it from him. His day was devoted to learning, practicing, growing. In an all too short time he had to return to school, but his mind wasn't on schoolwork. He might have been in class, but he was constantly thinking of ways to adapt his powers, things he could try as soon as he was alone.

By now, his control had grown to a level that equaled his grandfather's. He could dim or brighten lights, start small fires, and make a few objects float. Despite the abilities, they were all limited by touch. It wasn't as though he could throw electricity across the room. When he dimmed lights, he was less than six inches from them, but if he could touch it, he could blow the bulb to pieces just by concentrating hard enough. He had to remember to hold back during Krav training, as his powers seemed linked to his fighting and manifested fully when he was sparring. It wasn't as though he couldn't hold back, but it was extremely frustrating to know he had the ability to end fights beyond any of his instructor's dreams and yet be unable to show it. Since he couldn't practice much, he resorted to meditating for several hours every night after work and classes.

The books he received from his grandfather were another distraction. He devoured all the journals in a week. He tried everything they came up with and committed nearly all of it to memory. In two months, he was a tome of knowledge about the journals and he set them aside for the source. The faded pages were sometimes difficult to read, but so long as he kept his room clean and he had a few bright lights, he was able to learn. The books were interesting and had much more information than presented in the journals. *Perhaps it was a good thing to read the journals first...* Jack smiled at the incredible foresight his grandfather must have had to have all this arranged as it was. As Jack continued consuming the knowledge in those books, he came across inscriptions, drawings, and markings that were not English or translated, yet if he read the books shortly after meditating, they almost seemed like English words. Or, it could just be a hallucination; Jack wasn't sure yet.

One of the caveats to being "away at college" is that you must allow family to visit once in a while. This weekend was Jack's sister. Kimberly was 17, tall, and had sandy blonde hair. In short, a knockout. She liked her brother and he didn't mind her, so they were usually on good terms. Jack being 21, he was just a little too far behind for both of them to relate, but that didn't stop them from talking about other things. When he moved out, she pretty much had his parts of the house. Jack had a room to come back to, not *his* room. This helped keep his stays at home to a mutually agreeable minimum. Jack's situation with Kim was similar: she had an air mattress she brought with her and that was her sleeping spot on the floor, nothing more. The basics were taken care of, but she usually stayed for a day and then left. "Holidays are fun enough, why stick around" she would say.

That March weekend wasn't a bad weekend to come either. When she arrived, Jack had a long conversation with her about how Christmas was and how everyone was doing. He then told her about school, what was going on, and where the closest concerts were. After they talked a little more, they decided to go for a drive. There was no mention of rain that day, but the heavens had other things to say. It was hard and heavy rain, thicker than mud and just as murky. The sun hid behind the

completely dark grey sky and never did show itself. As Kim drove the Toyota down a winding backstreet, Jack was alert, but more interested in the latest conversation piece.

“So, not only have your grades been falling, but you're going out with that sleazebag Darren?”

“He is *not* a sleazebag! He's a great person. What would you know about him anyway?”

“I know him from his brother. Even his *own brother* says he's a screw-up! The man has nothing good going for him!”

“Well, it's my decision who I hang out with and it's my decision who I date! You have no say in it!”

“You're right, I don't. That doesn't mean I can't object and I do.”

“But why? You haven't even given him a chance to prove himself!”

“I guess I'll meet him eventually. *Then* I'll decide whether or not to break his face.”

A sly grin crossed Jack's face. Kim glanced his way and knew he was joking.

“Jack, you are *such* a jerk.”

They were focusing too much on the conversation as a large dog wandered out into the road. Kim saw it a little too late and instinctively swerved. She avoided the dog, but not the row of trees off to the side. Jack awoke from the shock after his head hit the glass and upper ridge of the window, then checked himself, and proceeded to check Kim. Her head was to the side, with blood gushing from her forehead. Jack immediately removed himself from the car and tried to open her door. It was jammed shut. Jack pulled hard on the door, adrenaline giving him inhuman strength, but to no avail. He ran back around and pulled her through the passenger side and out of the wreck that was now her car. He lay her out on the grass and checked her pulse: none. Jack panicked. He began CPR, and an eternal minute later, she still had no pulse. He continued, desperately trying to bring his sister back. In despair, a flash of hope flitted through his mind: *You control electricity, surely you can start her heart!* Jack placed his shaking hands on her chest and waist. He could feel his power waver with his feelings, but he didn't have time to steady it. He released a small burst.

Kim gasped, eyes wide, as her back arched and she rose from the ground. Her eyes were open and spasms coursed through her body as she writhed in inconceivable agony. Jack tried to keep her from injuring herself, but he knew something was terribly wrong. He heard the far-off sound of sirens, but he knew they were minutes away and she needed real help *now*. He saw a figure approach at a dead run from a housing division they had passed. As she neared the accident, she took in the current situation and Jack heard her quiet voice relay that a woman was having a seizure to the 911 operator, but left Jack alone to keep control of his sister. The sirens drew closer, just beyond the curve. And as Kim relaxed, and her eyes closed, the ambulances and patrol cars came into view. The paramedics piled out and rushed to Kim, lying face up on the grass. They checked her, then immediately moved to Jack. He knew it was all wrong. Everything was wrong, but he was already going into shock. The next fifteen minutes were a faded blur as the paramedics brought out a defibrillator and began their own CPR. After a minute, they ended their futile efforts and placed Kim onto a gurney and put her in the back of one ambulance while they put Jack in the back of another, minus the gurney. Jack dumbly answered the questions put to him on the trip while they poked and prodded, listening to his internals.

Jack was put in a small ER room, with a bed and all. Two doctors checked him for wounds, checked for internal bleeding, and deemed him fit to see his family. Jack followed his shepherd out to the waiting room where he saw his parents, grandfather, and his aunt and uncle. All were teary-eyed and leapt to embrace Jack when they saw him, half fearful of injuring him and half afraid of him slipping away. Their sob-filled mumblings were mixed with cries of relief and all the while Jack still couldn't accept what was going on. He knew she was dead. There was no doubt about it. He remembered her last moments, the rasping gasps that accompanied so much pain. It still didn't register. He wondered if this were some illusion. Jack didn't notice the tears until his mother wiped them from his cheeks.

The funeral was brief, yet long enough for everyone to feel like they had enough time to say goodbye. Jack followed custom and dropped flowers into the grave, but he still wasn't able to confront those feelings. The professors gave him two weeks off and he stayed at home, being with family as best he could, but he couldn't handle it. A few days after the funeral, he was sitting in his room. The family was gone and no one was around. For the first time in four days, Jack was alone. He listened to the empty house and cried. This was too much failure. The thoughts of everything he did wrong, everything he could have done to save her, to keep her... Jack's eyes managed to wander the room in a blurred haze and they landed on a faded yellow book. Jack wiped his eyes and read the cover. It was one of his books on the Elementals. Specifically, it was about meditation and various ways to expand it. He opened the pages very carefully, managing to drop a few tears on the cover. He wiped his face all over and began to read. Hours rolled by and Jack left his door closed. He read the entire book that day. He then read it four more times. Jack sat on the floor, calmed his mind as best he could, and set the book aside.

Jack's wanderings of the ethereal plane brought him to many things. In this dimension, thought had form and emotions had size. He floated among islands of information, sifting through them, "remembering" things he had never thought before. He probed people's minds, saw their thoughts, felt their pains. Jack didn't believe he was alone in his pain, but he felt it. He was in the midst of utter despair, after a week of almost constant meditation, when quite suddenly he felt drawn *upward*. No, not upward, *outward*, like he was coming out of his skin. Not painful, just *different*. He couldn't quite put feelings to it, but he knew it was definitely not normal. As Jack blacked out and caught a blurred vision of a white light surrounding him, he thought "Am I dying? Is this the end of it all?"

A dark face looked down at him, with a blonde girl behind him. "Hey" was their reply to Jack's questioning eyes. Jack began to rise as a voice from his right spoke words deep and low that gave unexpected comfort as his dark haired head came into view: "Welcome to Sanctuary..."

~End Act One~