

--Act Two--

Flood

Jack took in his surroundings. The colors were all wrong; too bright, almost fluorescent. The halo of yellow hair bent over him said “Hey” as his eyes moved back and forth, frequently centering on the girl. *Kim?* The fact that Jack's thoughts were a mess probably showed in his face and so Jack rose carefully to his elbows as the girl slowly retreated. As she moved, the contrast on the world came down and Jack looked toward the man who stood opposite her. Dark hair and pointed features gave him a look that some would say resembled a predator, but Jack took unexpected comfort in it. He knew the look given him was not malicious, very much not a threat... yet every instinct in him screamed to find a bearing and strike where the enemy was weakest.

The man repeated his greeting, more quietly and extending an arm to help Jack up.

“Welcome to Sanctuary.”

A small gathering of people circled him, and as he looked around, still entirely lost, the girl spoke her own greeting. “Welcome. I know you're confused, but that's ok. You're among friends here.” Jack's fight against his instincts was still apparent as she gave a small shrug to the man.

“Who are you?” Jack's voice shook too much for his own comfort.

“The name is Alexander Davan,” his voice strong and confident as he again extended his hand. “Most people just call me Davan, though.”

“Jack. Jack Winters.” Jack's shaking hand missed Davan's, corrected as he gave his full name.

Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly, taking some of the stress and adrenaline with it. Davan spoke again. “Jack, then. You have no idea where you are, am I right?” Jack gave an absent-minded nod as he met the smiles and studious looks of the others around him. A dozen in all. A welcoming committee or a guard detail, seemingly the former. “Well, you've made it to a small dimension beyond the place you were just a minute ago. Your inner power brought you here. It brought all of us here at one time or another... But I digress. We call this place Sanctuary.”

“Inner power...” Jack thought he might collapse from shock before, but now he was thinking again and steadied his nerves accordingly. There was no need to be on-alert if there were no immediate threats.

“Yes, your ability to control the elements. It's the only way you could have come here.” Davan gave him a knowing smile. “Once your power reaches a certain *maturity*,” he stressed the word as though implying Jack was a bit young, “it will then bring you here.”

“You're an Elementalist?”

“Ah... yes I am.” Jack took a half-step backward to turn and face Davan more squarely. “My specialty is air. Mariah over there controls fire. Aaron, behind you, controls earth.” He gestured to encompass the group. “Each of us has an element we can control. We have yet to see what yours is, though.”

Davan's speech came to a complete stop without signs of continuing and all eyes centered on Jack. “Um... I control electricity.” Signs of recognition and understanding reverberated across the group. Some gave smiles showing teeth, others remained expressionless, tensing their jaws at most.

An arm shot up from the back of the group and waved to Jack. The man's effort at moving through the now growing crowd of passersby was only slightly evident in his voice. “I just... want to say hi... to another from my *group*.” The last word was tinged with protectiveness, even possessiveness. “Hey.” He extended a hand. “My name is Tom Simmons. We're the same. Welcome

to the clique known as Arc-users.” Jack gave what, by now, was an almost permanently confused look. Tom leaned closer and whispered far too loudly for it to be taken as such. “They didn't like saying 'Electricity' all the time, so they just shortened it.” Then his voice dropped to a real whisper. “Don't worry, you'll do fine. They already like you enough, just be a little more...” he struggled for a moment to find the word. “... Interactive.” Jack's expression quickly took on a frown. “That's better.”

Jack's expression softened as he looked to the girl called Mariah. Their eyes locked. As if on cue, she and several others began to approach Jack. After the lightning round of names and the group dispersed, Mariah took over as official tour guide for Jack. She lead him to the five great wonders of Sanctuary, introduced him to many people on the way, and answered questions when asked.

“Well, we're done!” Her eyes lingered a moment longer than necessary on Jack as she turned to take a seat on the stairway to the shrine. Jack sat behind her with a reluctant sigh.

“This place is huge... and amazing... and...” Jack let his voice die. Mariah gave a short chuckle as Jack's wide eyes conveyed what his voice could not. Mariah's hair had turned from blonde to brilliant, fiery red and was rising in waves from her shoulders. “What are you...?” Jack's natural tendency to avoid fire made him flinch.

This time, a true laugh emerged. “Jack, ” she paused, rising to her feet. “Care to have some fun?” Her smile took over her face as her arms spread wide and the fire consumed her entirely. Jack's shock combined with the surge in heat made him take a few more steps backward, but he knew this game. Dropping into a defensive Krav stance, Jack took a deep breath and did as his grandfather told him, accelerating the flow of power through his body.

Mariah seemed somewhat impressed as Jack took on a bluish hue. Not nearly as impressive as her aura of fire, but something noticeable. *He's no newbie. He's definitely been trained.* She cranked her power up a notch and flared the flames outward, showing off for the boy, but his eyes were the giveaway: he was prepared to fight and he *wanted* it. *Shall I give him what he wants?* She weighed the decision as she adjusted the flames, walking down the few stairs to the open courtyard.

“I don't know the rules for this particular game. Care to teach?” His voice was guarded, an eyebrow raised.

“Just don't inflict a permanent injury.” A pause, a sidelong glance. “And see if you can win.” She gave a feral smile and her fire leapt forward. Jack dodged aside, carefully avoiding the flames, letting the power build toward his limbs. As his arms took on a brighter shade of blue, Mariah circled and let loose a small fireball. Jack's hair smoked as he closed the gap between them, power focused in his fists. He didn't exactly want to hit a girl, but this was a fight, the rules already decided.

Jack's fist came from her right, near the edge of her vision. He had managed to get beside her, a fatal mistake on her part as Jack saw it. Suddenly, just as her eyes darted to the side, the fire coalesced, and Jack's punch was brought to a very quick halt. It didn't help that, from what he could tell, the only thing saving his hand from third-degree burns was the thin blue bubble surrounding it. Jack didn't have time to sightsee, turning again for another quick blow, hoping she might not stop the second one. She didn't have to.

In an instant, her eyes dropped to Jack's very open midsection and her fire again obeyed her, rushing forward in a burst of pure strength. As Jack flew backward through the air, he regained a sense of smell along with his breath and noticed his shirt was on fire. Uttering a sound of shock, he patted out the flames. Mariah was standing there, watching the entire thing. *Okay... plan one didn't work. What's plan two?*

Jack rose to his feet, shaking slightly. A combination of what felt like adrenaline and the beginnings of shock ran through him. Jack closed his eyes. He pictured his core, the power he knew he had, flaring, growing, expanding to cradle and protect him. His power responded in kind, flooding his limbs with strength. As he opened his eyes, they caught Mariah's. Jack took another deep breath and as he exhaled, the aura of blue lightning grew more solid. He saw her eyes widen ever so slightly as it

coalesced and withdrew into his skin. Jack then gave himself over to the thrill of the fight...

Mariah knew the signs of an adept. People who were new to the experience weren't supposed to be able to call on that much power. And he was fast. She should have been faster than he was, yet she barely had time to block his attacks. *Maybe there's something to this-* Mariah's thoughts were cut short as Jack burst forward again. She called her fire around her again, a defensive posture, and summoned fire to Jack's feet. It seared the ground, but Jack was already beyond it, a fraction of a second from being too close for her comfort. She then ran the fire along her arm, shooting it right at Jack, a row of heat and light hot enough to leave blackened scars wherever it touched. In an instant, Jack spun on his axis, moving a hair to her right, facing her as he did before. He continued to spin, with speed and subtlety she couldn't counter, and brushed her shoulders. At that moment, Jack released the pulse of blue and kept moving away, gaining distance in case the gambit didn't work. He knew it worked when Mariah's fire shot in random directions, her body seizing and falling to the ground. The uncontrolled flame soon gained coherence as Mariah drew up to her knees. She stood and turned towards Jack, her face black with rage. "How *dare* you..." she growled. Her fire flared higher, exploding around her, and grew so intense her features were beginning to blur behind the maelstrom of light. Jack met her eyes with all the dignity and sternness he could muster.

A long moment later, she lowered her head and the fire retreated. Jack waited for the explosion to come, and was surprised to see Mariah smiling. "Good job!" Jack was taken aback. "You did well. Are you sure you're new at this?" Her giggle turned to laughter before he could respond. Jack let go of his power too, but remained where he was. "Uh..." Jack's confidence finally hit him. He knew this dance. He'd won. Now he had to meet his opponent. "Thank you for the fight. That was amazing." He took two long strides forward and extended a hand. Mariah followed suit and took the hand. She broke the handshake and spun on her heel. "Come with me." She turned, calling over her shoulder. "There's someone I want you to meet!"

As Jack followed Mariah toward the only "building" in the entirety of Sanctuary, he ran the battle over in his mind. He saw his mistakes, knew how to correct them, and made the resolve to do better in a fraction of a moment. The vast majority of his time was then spent watching Mariah. He couldn't explain it. He could almost *feel* the tension between them. But this was not tension brought on by vengeance, pity, or a number of other emotions; this was something else. It was as though someone had fastened hooks in his skin and was *pulling* him to her...

His internal monologue was cut short as Jack took notice of the construction of the building aptly named "the Star-Council Room." The floor was arranged in the way of a five-pointed star: each point ending with a roman-style seat, wide enough to sit cross-legged or lay down, but lacking a back rest. Behind the seats were pillars rising to the ceiling to form a larger pattern in the light, each pillar being adorned with symbols of their respective element. Proceeding clockwise around the star sat Earth, Fire, Electricity, Water, and Air, with each seat in front containing a man or woman of middle to late age.

As Mariah entered, Jack took in the room and watched her for his cues. Though he was perhaps only a step behind, he knew that could be seen as a sign of submissiveness, one he didn't intend to give. His attention faltered a moment as he saw her visibly relax when she reached the circle around the edge of the star. He thought for a split second that she has been tired from their fight, but was only more confused when thin tendrils of flame played up and down her body. As Jack crossed the threshold, she whispered back "Don't fight it, let your power do what it needs to." The moment he was entirely within the circle, Jack could feel and see his power ooze out from his fingers slowly. He fought for a moment before he remembered to let go and when he did, the blue lines swelled and flowed over his skin. The far pillar with a lightning bolt emitted a faint glow, but to Jack it seemed as brilliant as an over-decorated Christmas tree. Jack took measure of the five people in their seats, one or two of which were sitting in a meditative position. Jack's first glance was at the nearest and the most surprising,

Alexander Davan. *So, he's one of the Elders?* The thought was quickly answered and set aside as more information flooded in. The next two middle-aged men sat in their respective seats and two more ladies in the Earth and Fire seats. The Elder of Fire gave Mariah a careful but tender smile, as a proud teacher would give their student.

In seconds, Jack had already taken in the scene and followed Mariah to the center of the star. Once they had stopped, both the Fire and Arc Elders rose and announced themselves. "I am Peter Hobson" spoke the Arc Elder. "And I am Kira Roberts" followed the Fire Elder. Mariah gave Jack a discreet nudge and he spoke, loudly enough for all to hear. "I am Jack Winters." At that, all of the pillars glowed, the Arc pillar remaining brightest among them. As the glow faded and the tendrils of light retreated into Jack's skin, Peter Hobson rose and approached, extending a hand only as he entered the center pentagon.

"It's nice to meet you, Jack."

"Same." A small nod.

"And you, miss Allister, are expected." He gestured toward Kira and she rose.

As soon as she had gone, Peter turned to face Jack. He was entirely open to attack, but something about him spoke of a reserved power and Jack considered his instructor's words: "Only those who are stronger intentionally leave themselves open."

"So, it seems you are a new addition to the group. I'd like to learn more about you" he said as they began walking outside.

Jack saw his function as both protector and diplomat and thought it would be better to do as he'd asked. He related his tale of learning about his powers and arrival at Sanctuary, carefully leaving out anything identifiable aside from first names from his stories. When he'd finished, he subtly added "And, might I ask what you do here, sir?" The respect in his voice evidently made an impression and Peter smiled. "Why, I'm the Elder of the Arc-users. I am here to guide those who have our talent and act as an authority of sorts when something happens to my charges. That's why I'm speaking with you; you and I both will be seeing much, much more of each other." He paused, thinking about something, when he turned quickly to Jack and asked in a half-panic "how long have you been here?"

"Not long. Maybe a day?" The shock on Peter's face was not encouraging.

"Are you meditating somewhere safe? How long were you meditating before you arrived?"

"Yes, and I was meditating for maybe two or three hours beforehand? Is there something wrong?"

The strain eased from Peter's face, whether by true relief or force of will, Jack couldn't tell.

"Jack, I need you to return to your body. Break your meditation soon. When you get back, you will be rather weak, as you haven't had food in..." his eyes were hooded only a moment. "14 hours."

"But-"

"No." The word was said without force, but felt like a hammer-blow to Jack's reason. "You have to take care of yourself in the real world. You are wandering here, free from the body's needs, but you will *die* if you don't take care of yourself before you come here."

"Alright." Jack didn't like the sound of defeat in his voice. He felt like he was being scolded for letting a pet fish die. He knew Peter was right, but he didn't like having someone claim authority over him so soon. "Uh..." Peter stopped and turned to face Jack again. "How do I get out of here? Is there something special I have to do?" Peter's curt response did nothing but hasten his exit. "No. Just withdraw as you have done before. It just might take a *little* longer."

"Thank you, sir" he added as he hurried toward where he remembered seeing Mariah.

"Come back soon!" Peter called back as Jack quickly sped away.

Jack jogged back into the building, wary as he crossed the threshold, but nothing happened as he hurried toward Mariah. She turned from Kira as he approached. Mariah gave out a hand and Jack took it without looking, his focus on the Elder at that moment. "Ma'am?" He gave his other question silently. A half-smile and a nod from her answered it and he turned to Mariah. "I just wanted to say

goodbye. I have to go eat something, according to Peter.” His slight sneer showed his disapproval of Peter's priorities. Mariah's face took on a wistful look, but then turned to an almost caring smile. “Take what time you need, Jack. I'll be here. I usually am.”

Jack flashed a smile in return, nodded to Kira with a slight bow, and their hands parted. At that very instant, a small spark leapt between the two, blue and red. Kira's gaze sharpened only a moment, but Jack had already turned and popped out of existence. The surprise on Mariah's face was quickly replaced with calm as she turned to her mentor.

“Well, I guess that makes sense.” Kira had taken on the same piercing gaze again.

“I suppose that means something, Elder?”

“Only if you let it.”

And with that, Kira's brow flared with the symbol of Fire, the gemstone of a circlet of fire. Mariah immediately gave a low bow, arms spread wide, backing away as she did so.

“*I submit myself to the wisdom of Fire.*” Mariah's words echoed, but only to their ears. Her fire grew along her arms, circling her head, and seemed drawn toward the other woman.

“*Take this knowledge, Child of the Flame. Do great works in the name of rebirth.*”

Kira then extended a hand, palm out, toward Mariah. Mariah mirrored her movements and fire leapt between them, a rapid exchange of heat and light. She closed her eyes, as though reading the inside of her eyelids, and when they opened, she looked at the world with a new perspective. She and her teacher had done this few times before, but each time there had been important knowledge to pass on. Mariah thought this must be something different, something nowhere related to Jack's arrival, and yet when she tried to access these thoughts, she found they were *all* linked to Jack.

Incomprehension creped into her face and Kira's expression faltered. A quick glance around the room and she found all the other Elders occupied with their own endeavors. Two graceful steps closed the distance between them. The circle of flame died and the symbol faded as Kira hugged her apprentice. This was no longer master and apprentice, but friend and comforter.

“It's okay. Take your time.” A pause. “We can go to the Halls, if you wish.”

Kira made no move to release the embrace and Mariah shook her head within Kira's hold.

“I just didn't expect that, is all...” her voice smaller than it should have been. They parted and Mariah's face was dry. That didn't stop Kira from noticing the nearly invisible steam rising from her eyes...

Jack had initiated the process as soon as he let go of Mariah's hand and followed the familiar path back to his body. What he didn't expect was a multitude of minds watching him go. Once he was beyond Sanctuary a split-second later, he broke meditation immediately. Now, he almost wished he hadn't.

The shock of jump-starting his system after not moving for most of the day had nearly made him pass out. The water he had brought with him into the room gave him a scant few minutes of strength to grab some chocolate pudding from the fridge. That disappeared in three mouthfuls and he immediately proceeded to make a sandwich. “*It's nothing new, I just pushed myself again*” he thought as his body screamed for nutrients.

He completed his sandwich and sat down on the couch. After the hunger stopped screaming in his mind, he checked the clock. “*Holy crap!*” He had been in meditation for nearly twenty hours. Jack didn't like the idea that he was talking to himself, but he needed the sound to keep his focus. “Okay, next time, I'm leaving a gatorade in the room and getting a nice *mat*,” his pain evident in his voice. He checked the clock once more, grabbed his keys and drove to his grandfather's house.

Michael had already started making coffee when Jack called. It may have been 8 o'clock at night, but coffee was what they both needed to stay awake. Jack hadn't said much over the phone, but Michael could always tell when he was needed. He paused for a moment before putting the Irish cream

away unused. Having anything but coffee right now would mean he couldn't help Jack, despite how much he wanted a cup. Kim's death had hit him just as hard, if not more so than Jack. He and Kim had spoken not a week before her death, but they had been more distant than he intended. Now, he was steeling himself against his emotions, setting himself up for the worst. His entire world was helping Jack right then and, moments later, Jack knocked at the door.

Mariah made the all-too-familiar leap back to her body and opened her eyes. She didn't have the time to regret her decision. The tears fell and fell, a flood of emotion and pain. After a few minutes, the sobs ceased and she stood, passing a hand over the dark spots on her clothes and the floor. The only sign of her discomfort was her eyes. She focused her fire to her face and turned the wetness to steam. It never bothered her before, the intense heat required to do that. Now it seemed a comfort of sorts. She put on a face and left her room, all trace of her pain gone as she went downstairs and prepared for work.

Kira remained in her chair after her apprentice left. She did not have the same limitations as the others: she only broke meditation twice a week. That would be unthinkable to anyone else, but the fires sustained her. She also knew her room was safe, warded as it was to both defend and warn her if anything was amiss. She had only a flitting thought of how horrible that would be if it were different. Right now, she needed to focus on the newcomer, Jack.

She whispered into her hand, then cupped it and discreetly set a budding flame on the floor as it snaked its way out of sight toward the Arc Elder. When Peter rose and walked out of the room, Kira began her count. When she reached 500, she stood and also left, turning toward the Halls of the Burning Dawn. She found Peter ten minutes later, casually leaning against a tree.

"Greetings upon you, Peter." Her voice set the tone of the conversation to something this side of guarded.

"Lapsing into old rituals again, Kira?" The amusement in his voice and his slack posture did nothing to help him. She gave a cool look that sent small shivers down Peter's spine. The look and her... unwillingness... to make this a more pleasant encounter made Peter leave the tree and approach. He was no more than an arm's length away when she said "We need to talk..."

Jack stepped across the threshold of the doorway and was at once assaulted with the smell of coffee. *That* grabbed his interest and forced his brain out of its rut in a way that nothing else could. Michael said nothing as he checked Jack's presence, then went back to get two cups. Seeing that he was stressed and his grandfather could tell he was stressed, neither of them spoke. Jack assumed the couch, took his cup, and paused. The smells wound their way through his head, clearing the underbrush and wiping away the clouds of confusion and doubt. "*God, I needed this*" he thought as he took a few careful sips, enjoying the sunlight in his mind, and then set down the cup. As his expression changed to a happier demeanor, he noticed his grandfather's remained guarded, yet helpful, as a wizened grandparent should. This was their dance, and Jack simply had to take the first step.

"I... found something... new." A hesitant step, but Michael let him take it, answering with a slow nod. Jack never liked these things, so he decided that since he couldn't dance, he might as well do it with gusto. "I was meditating and ended up somewhere I've never heard of before." A pause, then a rush. "I ended up in a place called 'Sanctuary.' It's a place where there are lots of people, just like us." At this, Michael's eyes widened, leaning forward nearly out of his chair. Michael still said nothing but listened like a student to a teacher. Jack's hesitation merited response then, and Michael's voice strained as he whispered "Please. Go on."

After nearly half an hour had passed, Michael's coffee was gone, Jack's was cold, and neither of them noticed. Jack sank back into the couch. He'd related the entirety of his story as he saw it, and now he would have to answer questions. "One thing I don't understand is how I missed finding this

place.” A curl of wistfulness wound itself through Michael’s voice. “You said it has to do with your power ‘maturing’ to a certain point?” The conversation had been one-sided for so long, Jack couldn’t help but simply nod. “Well,” Michael began as his face slowly broke into prideful smile, “it seems I *was* right when I said you were stronger than me.” A creeping arrogance, then “yet, I still put you on your ass...” a bellowing laugh erupted, Jack with him.

The foul mood was broken, turning to a happier tune instead. Spirits were lifted and the grief quelled, if but for a short while. Grandfather and grandson, both going through the new experiences together, seemed to Michael like he was a father again and Jack felt a connection there that he hadn’t seen in far too long. After another hour, Jack’s eyelids threatened to smother him and Michael gave him a last cup of coffee, urging him home shortly after.

As the door closed, Michael let go a ragged sigh. He’d been reminded so much of his talks with Kim that he *had* to bury the pain. He felt the same feeling when his wife had died, but he never dreamed he’d outlive a *grandchild*. “This is what it’s like to feel old” he told the house, but he had a feeling it already knew.

Peter walked across the fields of Sanctuary, following a wandering path to a vacant spot where no one would think to find him. With a voice that did not shake, he answered every hail and even smiled, when appropriate. Truth be told, he just needed some time alone to think. The discussion with Kira had done nothing to help his mood and now he was thinking that maybe “just thinking” wouldn’t be enough.

As the meadow fanned out before him, he found a space to its edge with a small cluster of trees. He’d always liked the trees. It felt as though the rough bark and unyielding wood were a source of strength and resilience. *Prune a tree, it keeps growing. Send it through a storm, it rarely loses branches. The only way to end a tree is to cut into its heart with all of one’s strength.* That was how Peter felt just now. He’d maybe lost a few leaves to the breeze, but he knew he would endure the storm to come. He stepped away from the cluster of trees, so as to keep their beauty intact, and let his power build. Lack of exercise had made him restless and more than willing to play, if given the chance. Usually, that was Kira’s job, but sometimes, things just got in the way. That meant a useless display of power was all he could do, since most of the others didn’t indulge his urge to spar.

The air around him took on small sparks as he brought himself up, pushing past the halfway point and soaring higher and higher in his power. The sparks came, faster and faster, rising hands glowed with a pulse that could not only kill, but burn. Peter hadn’t turned his power loose just yet, but he’s opened the doors of its cage. He *knew* what his power was capable of in moments like these. The rush filled his veins and it flowed, roiled, *boiled*. He took only a moment to pause, to feel this as he hadn’t in weeks. He turned to a small boulder, no different from any other rock around, and assaulted it with a shock of brute force.

The splintered rock arced into the air, halfway turned to slag, the boulder’s grounded remains melting into the grass and dirt below. The rock must have had parts of iron in it because he caught the splintering shards before they could tear his face and stopped them, dropping them harmlessly to the ground. Peter breathed... This wasn’t enough, but it would do for now. The slightly tacky feeling in his muscles told him he’d at least *exerted* himself. As he turned back to the Council room, he couldn’t help but delight in the match he and Kira were going to have. Two minutes later, his thoughts and his mood fouled again, but this time he could handle it with a smile and the saving thought that he *was* like a tree...