

Copyright 2015 by Amber Dalcourt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights.

This sample is an unedited version of Awakening: Prodigy and may or may not resemble the final product upon publication.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers and Internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher or the author assumes any responsibility for errors, or for changes that occur after publication.

Further, the publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

SAMPLE

"Lady Daamon," Seth would have recognized her blindfolded. The only experience that came close explaining his attraction to her was when he could feel the demons' presence saturating the tournament grounds in last year's final game. Her presence was similar in the sense that he could feel her essence permeate the area. Hers' was an open void, not so much the absence of space, but rather, a deep infinity. He knew that if he wasn't careful, he could lose himself in her. Was this feeling the side effect of her being a survivor?

She moved her head just so, indicating that she had heard her name, but would force him to come into view. Hands behind his back, shoulders and back straight, he stepped out onto pedestrian crowded street and stood in front of her. He wouldn't allow her the chance to pretend she didn't see him. "Please, come with me."

The fourteen-year-old did something he wasn't expecting. She smirked. She didn't go doe-eyed and flushed beet red with the prospect of an older boy speaking to her. It surprised him that much more when she chortled, "No."

He didn't know what to do with that. His ranking didn't mean anything to her, and the uniform hadn't phased her as being mildly important to the school's core activities. She arched a brow at him as though daring him to try again. He narrowed his eyes at her, attempting to gauge how serious she was with that 'No'. "Please?"

Her smirk transformed into a grin. He wasn't sure that he felt comfortable with that smile or the way her pale blue eyes seemed to penetrate his being. She rolled her eyes and gestured to the countdown on display. "The opening ceremonies are about to begin..." Two minutes until the fanfares.

A twinge of guilt tugged at his conscience. He hoped that he could get the information that he needed from her quickly and make it to his squad before their showcase. On the one hand, his squad would be the last to perform their demonstration. On the other, he felt that this encounter was fated. He was hoping he wouldn't have to resort to desperate measures, but that didn't mean he didn't have a plan.

He should have waited until after the opening ceremony, but he had been so caught up in the prospect of meeting a survivor...

"You plan on watching the ceremony from here?" There wasn't a bad spot to watch the events. Most students were outside to watch the parade. They would retreat indoors to dine and watch the showcase. Odds were, she didn't know that. He didn't know anything about the opening ceremony in his first year, just that he needed to be on this street by 5:00 p.m. She had been told the same, no doubt.

"I'm meant to rendezvous with friends." He couldn't help but smile. She had chosen her words carefully before answering him. She wanted to sound like she belonged to her station, which was well above his.

"Perhaps I might help you find them," he offered his arm. She arched a brow and the smile on her lips turned into a grimace.

"I'd rather not," she admitted. "It's not you...No, it is you."

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" Seth realized that maybe he was coming on too strong.

She laughed a genuine hearty laugh. He smiled and relaxed. Maybe honesty would be a better approach. "No, that's not it. My friend is just a really big fan. I had to put up with stories about how awesome you were all summer."

"So you're giving me a hard time because of him," Seth concluded.

"No. I'm not letting you escort me to him, because of him," she reiterated.

He nodded. He could understand that logic. He'd have one hell of a time getting the information he needed from Astral with a fanboy vying for his attention. Of course, he could always use the fanboy to do most of the up selling of the military games for him. "I think I can handle it," he told her confidently.

"What do you want with me that's so urgent that it can't wait until later," she pressed, peering down the street, likely checking to see if her friends had come looking for her.

"I was hoping to discuss that with you in private," Seth challenged.

"It would appear that we're at an impasse," Astral stepped passed him to begin her trek down the street. He couldn't let her go. His reasons to recruit, albeit selfish, were less superficial than others who would no doubt seek her out. If word got out that he had spoken to her at all, the other squads would try to collect her out of a desire to deny him a potential asset. Her wealth and political connections wouldn't hurt any squad that would have her either.

His opportunity was narrow at best. He couldn't afford to let her go unless she agreed to join his team. He took hold of her arm. "If you want to keep that hand..." Astral's tone had turned from friendly to a low growl, making it clear that she did not believe in idle threats.

He noted the small teddy bear in her possession. "I know about Clearwater," he blurted.

Astral paused mid-step. His world felt a little colder, a little darker. He knew he struck the right nerve. A second later, he had lost her attention; she kept walking toward her destination, toward her friends. He needed to know if what the officer had told him was true. If she was a survivor, then she knew how to survive a demonic raid. Desperate he chased after her, grabbing at her once again, forcing her body against his, hissing into her ear. "I know about the puppeteers. I know what those demons did to the bodies. I know about the demon who made it impossible to leave." He felt her go rigid beneath his tight embrace.

The security feeds were ample across the campus. There wasn't a single area that wasn't under constant surveillance, outside or in. The A.I. algorithm regularly scanned the feeds for violent actions. In minutes, security personnel would come barreling out of their hiding places, and detain the assailant. The only exception to the crime alert protocol was during training sessions on specific training fields, ranges, and dojos. In the time that it would take security to arrive on the scene of an assault there would be no time to run. Given the high level of security, the student population felt safe, at least from each other.

He felt her arms wind around his torso, squeezing him, gently, comforting at first. He thought she was going to cry. The strength of her hug increased, driving the air from his lungs. "You. Know. Nothing." She hissed in controlled breaths. He could barely breath with the pressure she was applying to his ribs. He could feel her hand console stabbing into his back. He knew she wasn't going to let him go unless he relented. He couldn't break her hold without drawing attention to himself and her. He needed her answers, her experiences. He couldn't risk causing a scene.

"I need you to show me how to survive the war," he told her through clenched teeth.

A moment later, she released her grip on him. "Show me the way." The seriousness of her tone sent chills down his spine.

He let her go, fully expecting her to run. There was no fear in those haunted blue eyes. He could lose himself in the vastness of her soul.

The vibrant hues of the world around him faded to dull grays. The cacophony of celebratory hoots and cheering, mixed in with the fanfare announcing the beginning of the opening ceremony dulled as confetti snowed down onto the excited crowd. The claustrophobic closeness of the student population faded away, leaving himself and this strange young girl alone on the street. The confetti precipitation slowed then froze in midair. These episodes were getting annoying.

"I wanted to spare you from all of this," he heard her say. He narrowed his eyes at the girl glaring up at him. Her lips hadn't moved. Her voice wasn't quite right either though he was certain it was her voice. "I'm sorry," her voice continued in a whisper, like a recording caught in the moment, meant for his ears alone. "But I can't do this without you. I'm so sorry."

The multi-coloured confetti fell into Astral's dark curls. He stroked them from her hair, caught in a place between the present and the future. "I will always be here for you," he whispered to the memory. Tresses in hand as the world animated itself back into action, Seth's eyes grew wide, shocked at his actions, embarrassed. Astral's glare hardened. He couldn't fathom what had overcome him.

She slapped his hand away. He reached for her wrist, giving her plenty of slack ensuring that she knew that she was free to go. After all of the alienating he'd manage to do in the course of two minutes, he wouldn't be surprised if she never spoke to him again. His heart ached at the thought. He felt foolish for feeling so attached after having just met. He wondered if this was what love at first sight was supposed to feel like.

He chanced a glance at her disgruntled frown. He was certain that if this was love then she obviously didn't feel the same for him. No, it was far too cliché. The lovelorn dreamed about moments like these, failing to recognize what was really there. The lovesick were willing to stage the most elaborate meetings, just to be recognized. Their encounter was by all account a staged meeting. He called her to him, and she made him work for it. It was far too convenient to have her happen to be at one of the two entrances to the courtyard, where he had commitments to attend. He was certain that she was there to see him, and the reason she hadn't run was because her objective hadn't been completed.

He led her into the Leadership tower. The noises of the outside world remained trapped behind closed doors. He let her go, knowing that he wasn't going to lose her to the crowds. "I'm not that kind of girl," she told him sternly.

He flushed. "I never thought...That's not why I brought here." Though they were away from human eyes, they weren't exactly alone.

Such indiscretions would mark her credibility for future contracts. Girls who liked to have fun were considered less suitable as wives to the elite, though viable breeders. A man who dabbled in the fruits offered to him was thought of as untrustworthy, though suitable as a potential breeder. Men and women of questionable integrity would not be chosen as a spouses unless they could improve their worth. It was amazing what people were willing to overlook when there was enough credits involved.

"It's not much further," he told her, gesturing to the empty hall ahead. He led her through the reception hall, down the corridor passed a series of vacant classrooms to the back of the building. Tall windows, side by side, offered a clear view of the proceedings in the courtyard. Had it been raining, the students would crowd along this hall to watch the events as squad members performed in the rain.

Members of the sixteen squads stood at attention, waiting for the command to begin their march for the parade. It wasn't uncommon to see a position or two empty. Graduates moved on to serve in the war or began their contracts. Sometimes members quit, preferring to focus on the high demands of their studies. Some, like Wallace, never returned to the academy at all. Leaving a vacant position advertised to the student population that these squads were looking for new members.

Seth hurried to the left, hoping to avoid witnessing the march. Elevators were set on the opposing ends of the gallery hall, but it was only the left lift that would take him to the training program. He glanced at their reflection in the tinted windows, in an attempt to gauge his companion's mood. The woman reflected back was not the teenage girl behind him. He stumbled. Was she a demon? Wouldn't the shields have prevented her from entering the academy's safe zone? Or worse, was he hallucinating? The councilors would have him think that he was under too much stress. It was suggested that he reduce his workload though he noted that leaving his squad was never suggested as an option.

"Do I make you nervous?" came Astral's rueful taunt.

She did. Could he tell her what he was seeing? Would she understand? Would she be offended? At least in public, he wouldn't have to worry about being devoured; not if she wished to remain among the people. The very idea of a demon biding its time went against everything he had been told about them. They were savage, ruthless, and unrelenting creatures who thrived in the destruction of man. Their strength was as limitless as their thirst for blood, flesh, and anguish.

She moved toward the tinted windows, attempting to correct the path a few of her stray locks of hair. Did she know? Could she see it too? She fussed with one particular lock attempting to decide if it was supposed to fall to the right or the left of her head. The girl was reflected back at both of them, but a second person was also a part of her reflection, standing between himself and her. It was taller, looming far enough behind the girl that he struggled to recognize any details. He knew that it was female, older, and bound to the girl, though he couldn't decide if this entity was benevolent or otherwise.

"You see something?" She inquired, messing up her hair and smiling at herself with a satisfied smirk.

The colour had drained from his skin; he knew he must have looked like he was holding back a scream. "Your second shadow," Seth stammered. He wanted answers, revealing what he was seeing was a good place to start, though it might also prove to be a fatal mistake.

She sighed heavily and turned back to gaze at her second reflection. "One of them is an illusion," she told him. "I'm hoping it's not me." The sadness in her voice resonated with his desperation for salvation.

"What is it?" He chanced. She didn't feel like a threat. Was this entity some dormant demon, using her as means to gain access to the people? He was beginning to understand why survivors fell under the Red Order's protection. The average person wouldn't be able to bring themselves to understand the survivor's plight. Even if they made small steps toward that end, it wouldn't take much to spread panic and fear. He could envision mobs gathering around her home, dutifully removing the blight from their town, reducing the risk of another demonic entity rising up to kill them all.

"My core," she confessed. Her smile was broken. She clutched the small pink and purple bear in her hand. "It's the answer to your question. How I survived the demon raid, is because of that." She gestured toward her second reflection watching both them.

He wondered why she would tell him at all. Wouldn't denying it be a better option? She could have played it off as a hallucination, or that he had some mental disorder. His records would have supported the claim.

Given her station, she could easily bury him in whatever situation she chose to distract him with. Instead, she told him what he wanted to know, as terrible as the truth was. But why?

"How? I mean-" He wanted answers, but he didn't want to sacrifice his humanity to achieve his survival. He didn't want to be a threat to the people he wanted to protect.

She shrugged. "I have no idea. Quite frankly, I'm surprised you can see it. No one has ever noticed, not even the Red Order Master that watches over me."

He didn't know how to respond. Maybe he could tell her that he always could see the things that people knew nothing about. "Can your Master see demons?" he wondered.

"Only when they manifest," she told him.

He was excited, thrilled with the prospect of having someone who knew the details he sought. He had a million questions, enough to bury his fear under the elation of new possibilities. "Can you see demons before they manifest too?"

She arched a brow. That had to be the reason the officer had been so insistent on recruiting her to his squad. If she could see demons before they manifest, then she'd serve her country better as a soldier, saving countless lives.

"It's not much further," he told her, gesturing to the lift.

They proceeded silently into the elevators. She said nothing as he swiped his wrist across the scanner, triggering access to second digital control panel. He entered a passcode like he had done hundreds of times before. Passcode accepted; the lift began its descent toward their destination. A new panel appeared, replacing the previous one. Seth scrolled through the options in search of his final entry. The screen flashed a brief 'verify settings' screen, followed by a 'selections confirmed' notice before blinking out of existence.

There was once last thing to test, he doubted that she would confess to the skills he suspected she must have. There was no way, that her 'core' as she called it, was the only reason she survived a demon raid. There had to be something more. He needed her survival to be something he could achieve. He hadn't anticipated ethereal interference. Nonetheless, it would interesting to see it in action. Would it activate if it thought she was in danger? If so, how would it manifest?

The lift slowed to a stop, and the doors slid open to absolute darkness.

The contrast of the stark white elevator hampered Seth's view of the large room beyond. He cautioned a glance to Astral, who shared her silent skepticism. He had the distinct impression that the only person he was fooling with his cleverness was himself.

"After you," she insisted. He had this image of Astral pounding on the lift's interface urging the doors shut, trapping him in the darkness of his plan as she waved gleefully good-bye. He fought the urge to grab hold of her, ensuring that the terrible thought never came to pass.

"You wanna see something neat?" she smiled up at him. He had to admit, there was something frightening in her innocent smile. "No, not particularly," Seth replied, half expecting her to come up with a rebuttal implicating her core.

She watched him. He had the foreboding impression that she was much more aware of his growing fear than he wanted to give her credit for. He found himself pressed against the back of the elevator as she reached over to the console, blocking his access to it. She promptly made a couple of adjustments, though what they were, he couldn't get a clear view. "My uncle has this training program too," she smiled broadly. "It's been obsolete for a couple of decades. But I think I can... Ah! There we go..."

'Oh! God!' Seth felt his soul threaten to crawl away, wanting no part of what was to come. *'Remember: this is going according to plan!'* he screamed inwardly in his best attempt to calm the sense of terror that overcame him. It was going a little too well.

"Here hold this," Astral tucked her bear into Seth pocket and thrust a long finger in his face.. "Under no circumstance is that bear to be damaged."

'As long as I don't leave the elevator, the program won't acknowledge me.' Seth forced an awkward smile onto his face. The thought did little to stop his heart from repeatedly throwing itself against his chest.

Her smile faded. "What scares you more. Me or my core?" It was an oddly honest question.

"N-neither?" It was true. His fear lay in uncertainty of what she did to an already dangerous training program. He had set it to a low-risk setting, with an incremental increase in difficulty over time. His private training had allowed him reach a ranking class of fifty within the program. He had set it to end when they reached an increment of twenty-five, which was well within his ability to handle on his own. His plan served two goals. The first, would reveal Astral's latent talents, and possibly the reason she survived where expert Hunters met an early death. He hoped that those reasons lay beyond her core and that new talent was a result of having survived in the first place. The second would sell his point on the advantages of joining his squad. A win, win scenario, or so he thought.

"Well, that's disappointing," Astral sulked. "Clearly you don't understand the situation you've put yourself in."

His eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth, ready to reveal every gory detail about his plan when the elevator melted away, leaving the pair of them in the dimly lit space. "Oh....." was all his brain managed to express as he realized how off-course his plan had gone.

He spun around, denying that the only safe place in the program had been erased. He felt around, risking a few steps into the dim space beyond, finding nothing. It denied the rules of physics. It denied reality! Wide-eyed, he spun to confront the fourteen-year-old girl who had vanished from sight.

At that point, he realized that he had made a few dire mistakes. The first, no one knew about this training station. The hardware had been in a state of ruin when he had discovered the program in the middle of his second year. He knew, having researched the archives, that the blueprints didn't list the facility. Upon further inspection, he learned that it was on an isolated system. His second mistake, which tied in with his first, was that he didn't tell anyone about his plans. Regina might alert security assuming she wasn't too angry with him for bailing on the opening ceremony. His third mistake, he hesitated to admit the sad fact to himself, is that he underestimated his target. He was confident, however, that her usurping his plan had everything to do with her and nothing to do with her core.

He peered into the darkness, searching for the girl. He'd have to keep her safe. If she thought that the program was a game, she'd be in for a nasty surprise.

He dashed behind a pillar, back against it. He kept his body loose, ready to spring into action as the first sign of trouble. The dim lights were set evenly across the remnants of a half millennium old parking garage. It was no coincidence that he was in a re-creation of the final tournament arena. He had spent his summer working diligently putting everything together. There was no program in this training module that could recreate the dashing of shadows, or the way the darkness appeared to breathe around the competing squads. Even as he listened for the sounds of Astral's frightened screams, it wasn't the shadows that he feared.

He dashed from the pillar to a nearby rusted car, ducking down behind it, and peered through the broken window. There was no sign of her. Of course, she would know to stay quiet. Noise of any sort would draw the demons to their prey. The program's fiends operated on what intelligence the military had gathered over the years.

"I'm bored," Astral's voice boomed on the security speakers. Seth's nerves frayed. "Don't make me do something you might regret. Didn't you say something about wanting to learn to survive the killing fields? Do you know what good hiding does?"

There was an odd scratching sound nearby. Seth focused in on the new element introduced to the game. It sounded small, like a mouse gnawing away at something metallic. He couldn't place the sound in the listing of demons he had encountered through the program. Did she raise the difficulty level to something higher than he had used? It sounded like it was gnawing at the underside of the car. He backed away from the vehicle, slowly hoping to avoid making noise that would cause the program to spring into action.

A hollow metal object fell from beneath the car, likely dislodged by the creature gnawing at the metal supports. Insects swarmed over the car. In the dim light, all Seth could make out was millions of black insect bodies surging toward him. What sort of monstrosity did Astral revive from within the program?

"Eeeewe! I hate bug spawn!" Astral taunted. "Their regenerative abilities are... annoying." The insects swarmed together, towering over him as a single living mass. "Oh, I wouldn't stand there. Spawn often feed on their host and until they mature. They're going to look for protein. Here's a hint: that's you."

He ran. He was without a weapon, but he knew where to go to reach a weapon cache. The insect swarm skittered after him, devouring the car in seconds. "Pro tip: spawn have this unique ability to integrate unprocessed materials into their biological being."

'That means...' He heard the change in the sound, just before the air behind him shifted. He rolled out of reach as the insect swarm came down heavily on a nearby car he had to abandon as a quick refuge. It did little to slow the insects, even with it consuming the vehicle. He gasped, glimpsing their metal bodies catching the light.

"Hrm..." Seth's heart sank at the sound of Astral's voice. He dodged a spray of insects as they smashed themselves against a pillar. "I see that they haven't updated their database. The spawn aren't behaving quite right. Let me fix that."

"Please, NO!" Seth shouted, dashing behind a van, knowing it would do little to protect him from the swarm. He would have to make a mad dash for the security booth and activate the barriers. Hopefully, the metal shielding would buy him enough time to access the weapon stores. He'd be fine as soon as he had something to defend himself with. The swarm pursuing him slowed as the teenage predator initialized updates to the program.

He hoped that she wouldn't attempt to bar his access to the weapons. "Now that's better. You see, not only do spawn reuse materials for things like armor, but they can also make weapons. Look at those tiny little knives." Seth whimpered, dashing out of range of the insects as they tore into the van. "Oh quit your whining! At least they don't have lasers. I hate it when they eat lasers. It's really dangerous!"

He slid across the small space that was left to the security booth, his salvation. He slammed the reinforced glass door shut behind him. He locked it and slammed on the button that would raise the metal shields, sealing off the parking garage from the rest of the building.

He rushed to the back of the booth, to a door that had rusted in place, leaving a small gap to squeeze through. He sucked in as much of himself as he could and began to push himself through. He was half way in when he was tapped on the shoulder.

"Just stop that," Astral splutter. "It's embarrassing." He sagged. He couldn't even turn to look her in the eye. He tried to push himself out. He needed to keep her safe. "Don't bother, I hit pause." He felt like a child who had deeply disappointed his parents.

Astral pulled on his arm, attempting to pull him out of the small opening. He sighed and wiggled out, returning to the booth. He couldn't muster the energy to glare at her. He fell back against the rusted door and slid to the ground, his legs refusing to support him a second longer. "Is that all you've got?" Astral sneered.

He had never encountered anything quite like the swarm she had pulled from the program. "Easy for you to say," he growled. "You're here. Safe."

"I had the same amount of time you did to get here." Her tone was harsh, reminding him of a firm teacher who wouldn't accept any self-fed excuse.

"You used me a decoy!" He found his rage.

Astral's lips curled into a menacing scowl. "I did nothing of the sort."

"How do you explain that!" He gestured to the metal barricade that separated them from the swarm.

"That," she pointed toward the direction of the swarm, "Is not going to do anything. Were you not paying any attention to your surroundings?"

He was ashamed to admit that he was not. He was so fixated on getting to the security booth that he ignored everything else. "You missed two opportunities to takeout that swarm. Both would have given you plenty of time to make it here more or else unscathed." She shrugged, "But there's no accounting for skill there."

"Hey!" That hurt, right to the core. Who did she think she was to lecture him? What gave her the right to criticize his skills against an enemy he had no idea existed? She gestured to him. He glanced down. His coat and pants were soiled and torn. His clothes were wet from blood and sweat. He felt the sting of his injuries, not all of which could be attributed to the swarm.

"How was I supposed to deal with something like that without a weapon?" He hissed.

"Do you sleep with a gun?" She asked honestly. "Do you shower with a gun? Do you dine with a gun at your hip?" She shook her head. "Little good it would do you. You plan on shooting every last one of those

insects? Do you know how much ammo that would cost you? Besides, running is your best option until you see an opportunity to take out as many of them as you can."

"You just gave me crap for running!" Seth shouted.

"No. I gave you crap for missing two opportunities to take out the swarm."

"Go on then, genius," he sneered. "When did I have the chance to take them out?"

"You could have set the vehicle on fire as soon as the swarm manifested." She raised her index finger.

"You heard them scratching, right? The ground was saturated in oil, and if that isn't enough, the remains from the gas in the car should have been enough to do the job. Those little bastards were probably made of gasoline by this point."

"Light them up with what?"

"You just need one spark," Astral replied.

He fumed. It was a valid approach, and it could have dealt with most of the threat to an almost manageable level. "Fine, what else?"

Astral raised her middle finger. "The pillars. It didn't stop to consume the pillars because it wanted you. It's also very thick but had you stuck around; it would have tried to go through the pillar out of frustration. Forcing it to eat it-"

"Would have caused the floor above to collapse. It would have killed me," Seth challenged.

"Especially since you. Don't. Pay. Attention," she assaulted his chest with her index finger. "Result, it would have crushed the swarm, granting you access to the upper level, which in theory would have better lighting conditions or better, sunlight. Though they have consumed a great deal of metal... In theory, their metal skin may have been enough to make that irrelevant."

He narrowed his eyes, glaring at nothing as his mind processed the snippets of information Astral had been feeding him over the course of this disaster. She had to be so much more than a survivor. Was it possible that she was a Hunter? At fourteen? Was that even possible?

"Now you're in a real pickle," she continued to instruct. "If you would have made it inside that room, sure you'd have had a gun, but you'd be cornered. You'd have about as much time as it took for the swarm to eat the door. After that, you're bug food. Assuming you don't go for the guns, you're still screwed because now the insects have ingested even more resources."

"What do I do?" Seth felt like his pride had been torn apart, shredded by some little girl who wouldn't have to step food onto the killing fields. How could she? He felt insulted. He felt angry at her for saying such cruel things. He felt angry at himself for his incompetence. He was the pride of the school, and he wouldn't have survived ten minutes in a real battle against demon spawn.

"You, do nothing. Let me handle this," she told him, tossing him her hand tablet. She unlocked the door and stepped out of the booth. "Program resume."

The insects bore their way through the thick metal shielding. It wouldn't be long before they tumbled out of the holes they created. Astral didn't waste any time. She leaped from the wall to the booth, catching the metal divide, separating the lower part of the frame from the windows. She soared backward, striking the

cement brick wall behind her, giving her enough momentum to reach the exposed pipes and wiring above. With all of her weight, she dove to ground level. The bundle of wires in her hands broke apart, sparking excitedly at their new found freedom. Just as the first of the insects burrowed free, Astral lunged toward the barricade, connecting the live wires to the metal divide. The lights flickered as the energy surged to electrocute the metal reinforced swarm beyond.

Seconds later the program ended. Their digital world disintegrated, leaving the pair in a large empty room with white reflective panels along all surfaces. Seth understood how projections worked and to some degree how virtual interface technology allowed for user input. However, he never understood how the previous regime managed to make a training program feel so real, complete with realistic consequences.

Astral stared off into the space beyond, the weight of the world weighing down on her. Seth reached out to her, the distance between them too wide. He wished he could help her to carry the burden, whatever it was. But if today's exercise had proven anything, it was that he was bigger hindrance than support.

He fetched the teddy bear from his pocket. It had remained safe and untarnished from the wrath of the digital swarm. "This system..." Astral wondered out loud. "Has it always been here?"

Seth nodded, volunteering: "Yes. I repaired it the year before last. I've been using it to train. I've reached class fifty," he added with a note of pride.

She glanced at him, measuring his worth, determining if his class level meant anything in the grand scheme of things. "No virtual interface behaves like this one," she sighed. "It's got to be a ghost in the machine. It's on a closed circuit?"

Again, he nodded. "Good," she replied. "Anyone else know about this?"

"No," his stomach twisted. Had he died today, would she have brought him to the surface? Of course not. He lured her into this death trap to satisfy his selfish curiosity. It would be too much of a risk for herself and her future to be seen with his body on the security feed. There would far too many questions. He got the impression that she might want to keep the facility's existents quiet. If he was right about his assumptions, he wondered why she would keep it from the administrators.

"You're not a survivor are you?" He braved. He didn't expect her to admit to anything. She wouldn't be able to risk it; an unlicensed Hunter was a punishable offense. She'd be sentenced to exile if she were reported. A secret like that would be worth killing for. He regretted asking.

"Of course I am," she replied. Her voice was factual and cold. She cocked her head, suddenly concerned for Seth. "Are you sure you want this? Are you sure you want to be taught how to survive?"

Of course he did. "More than anything!"

She lowered her pale blue eyes as sadness touched her lips. She nodded and turned away to seek out the elevator. She pressed her palm against the reflective panel. Her palm scanned in, a set of doors slid open revealing their escape. Was it possible that she had a high-level security protocol embedded in her profile? That wasn't possible, everything, profiles included were kept separate from this facility.

He had to gain physical access through forgotten access tunnels, layered under newer infrastructure. It was like the training program had been forgotten entirely, and the newer generation chose to use the surface buildings to rebuild a new compound, oblivious of the treasure trove that lurked beneath it. He had spent months learning how to hack into the archaic system to create a profile just to be able to activate the program and track his progress. It took even longer to figure out how to call the elevator to

and from the hidden facility. He couldn't understand why the military would have abandoned such a useful tool.

Seth followed her into the elevator. Would she really teach him everything she knew? She stared straight ahead, long after the doors had closed. He reached over to the panel that would take them to the ground floor, only to have his hand slapped away. "My bear," she told him.

He handed it and her tablet over. She poked at the bear's nose. "I don't think you're ready." Her penetrating gaze held Seth captive. "You don't understand what you're asking for." Her brows furrowed. "Are you expecting to come out of this as some...hero?"

"No," he gasped. "Did you know that there's only an eight-teen percent chance of survival from the killing fields? I come from a middle-class family, so my odds are even lower."

"I know what the odds are," her tone stopped him cold. "My father served two tours, the first one as part of his civil duties, the other as a convict. I know all too well what the killing fields do to survivors."

"So what!" Seth raged. "I should just go and expect to die? I should just give up now! Is that what you're telling me?"

"No. What I'm saying is once you step foot onto the killing fields, you don't ever step off."

He felt like he had been punched in the soul. He had always suspected that her words were true in one form or another. The men and women who came back from serving their tour were never the same. Friends and family who knew them best had always felt the day their sons and daughters left, was the day that they died. They would return to rebuild their broken lives. They would eventually adjust to civilian life. The reality was that the men and women who came back were not the ones who left four years prior.

He felt his frustration manifest. He blinked away tear and struck the elevator doors. "What else am I supposed to do?" He couldn't hold back his tears. He was embarrassed to reveal the depth of his desperation.

"Seth..." Astral whispered. No one had ever said his name with such compassion. He couldn't bring himself shrug off her hand as she stroke his back. "You're asking me to rob you of your last year of peace, of sound sleep, and innocence. You're asking me to bring you to the war zone now."

He tried to wipe away his tears. She gave him a minute to think about what she was telling him and severity of his request. "I don't understand," he admitted. Some part of him knew that he was lying to himself. It was the same part that knew that his problem was bigger than himself; it was bigger than some arbitrary line in the sand that separated the war from the remnants of humanity.

She sighed and stared up at the ceiling. She could barely look him in the eye. Spelling it out for him was weighing heavily on the teen. "You don't need me to tell you what you already know," she said at last. "By the way, this program will get you killed. Eventually, it will win. Don't use it without my supervision."

First, deny him what he so desperately crave: salvation. Next, deny him the only method available to achieve that end. "It knows that you can't handle swarms," she told him. "But it's still too weak to send out anything stronger."

"I'm not following," Seth admitted. He appreciated the distraction. She shook her head. "It's nothing to worry about as long as you promise me that you won't come here without me."

"I can't promise that," he scowled. "I won't promise that."

"You would sacrifice the lives of thousands to satisfy your ego?" Her words cut into him.

"This has nothing to do with my ego!" He roared, striking the elevator door for a second time. She glared at him. "Then quit pretending that it is," she countered. "Your life, your desperation may be just strong enough to jeopardize the students here. Do you wish them to die so that you can achieve your goals?"

"Don't insult me," he hissed. "I'm not like that!"

"We'll see, now won't we." Astral activated the console to return the elevator to ground level.

SAMPLE