

CHAPTER I

Into the Deep

We fight neither to inflict pain nor to prolong suffering. We fight neither to mollify anger nor to satisfy vendetta. We fight neither to accumulate wealth nor to promote social standing. We fight so the rest shall not have to.

First Precept of the Combat Codes

Murray wasn't fond of the crowd at Thaloo's. Mostly scum with no respect for combat who liked to think themselves experts in the craft.

His boots clung to the sticky floor as he shouldered his way to the bar. Patrons lined the counter, drinking, smoking, and shouting at the overhead lightboards broadcasting SystemView feeds.

Murray grabbed a head-sized draught of ale before making his way toward the center of the den, where the crowd grew thicker. Beams of light cut through clouds of pipe smoke and penetrated the gaps between clustered, sweaty bodies.

His heart fluttered and the hairs on the back of his neck bristled as he approached. He wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow. Even after all these years, even in a pitiful place like this, the light still got to him.

He pushed past the inner throng of spectators and emerged at the edge of the action.

Thaloo's Circle was eight meters in diameter, made of auralite-compound steel fused into the dirt. Standard Underground dimensions. On the Surface, Circles tended to be wider, usually ten meters in diameter, which Murray preferred. More room to maneuver.

Glowing blue streaks veined the steel Circle, and a central cluster of lights pulsed above the ring like a heartbeat, shining down on two boys grappling in the dirt.

"Aha! The big Scout's back. You runnin' out of kids already?" A man at the edge of the Circle clapped Murray on the shoulder. "Name's Calsans."

Murray ignored the greeting and focused on the two boys fighting. One of them looked to be barely ten years old and had the gaunt build of a lacklight street urchin. His rib cage heaved in and out from beneath the bulk of a boy who outweighed him by at least sixty pounds.

Many of the onlookers flicked their eyes between the action and a large lightboard that hung from the ceiling. Biometric readings for each boy in the Circle flashed across the screen: heart rate, brain wave speed, oxygen saturation, blood pressure, hydration levels. The bottom of the board displayed an image of each boy's skeletal and muscular frame, down to their chipped teeth.

As the large boy lifted his elbow and drove it into the smaller boy's chin, a red fracture lit up on the board. The little boy's heart rate shot up.

The large boy threw knees into his opponent's rib cage as he continued to hold him down in the dirt. The little boy writhed, turning his back to his opponent and curling into a ball.

"Shouldn't give your back like that," Murray muttered, as if trying to communicate with the battered boy.

The large boy dropped another vicious elbow on his downed

prey. Murray winced as he heard the sharp crack of bone on skull. Two more elbows found their target before the little one stiffened, his eyes rolling into his head as he fell limp.

The ball of light floating above the Circle flickered before it dissipated into a swarm of smoldering wisps that fanned out into the crowd.

“They call the big one there N’jal; he’s been cleaning up like that all week. One of Thaloo’s newest in-housers,” Calsans said as the boy raised his arms in victory.

Beyond a few clapping drunks, there was little fanfare. N’jal walked to the side of his Tasker at the sidelines, a bearded man who patted the boy on the head like a dog. The loser’s crew entered the Circle and dragged the fallen fighter out by his feet.

“Thaloo’s been buyin’ up some hard Grievear this cycle,” Calsans continued, trying to strike up conversation with Murray again. “Bet he’s tryin’ to work a bulk sale to the Citadel, y’know? Even though they won’t all pan out with that level of competition, there’s bound to be a gem in the lot of ’em.”

Murray barely acknowledged the man, but Calsans kept speaking.

“It’s not like it used to be, y’know? Everything kept under strict Citadel regulations. All the organized breeding, the training camps,” Calsans said. “I mean, course you know all about that. But now that the Kirothians are breathin’ down our necks, Deep Circles are hoppin’ again, and folk like Thaloo and you are making the best of it.”

“I’m nothing like Thaloo,” Murray growled, his shoulders tensing.

Calsans shrank back, as if suddenly aware of how large Murray was beside him. “No, no, of course not, friend. You two are completely different. Thaloo’s like every other Circle slaver trying to make a bit, and you’re a...or used to be...a Grievear Knight...” His voice trailed off.

The glowing spectral wisps returned to the Circle like flies

gathering on a fresh kill. They landed on the cold auralite steel ring and balled up again in a floating cluster above. As more of the wisps arrived, the light shining on the Circle grew brighter. Fresh biometrics flashed onto the feed.

It was time for the next fight, and Murray needed another ale.

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Murray drew the cowl of his cloak over his head as he exited Thalo's den, stepping directly into the clamor of Markspar Row.

Stores, bars, and inns lined the street, with smaller carts selling acrid-scented foods on the cobbles out front. Gaudily dressed hawkers peddled their wares, yapping like bayhounds in a variety of tongues. Buyers jostled past him as ragged, soot-faced children darted underfoot.

Much had changed since Murray had first returned to the Underground.

Two decades ago, he'd proudly walked Markspar Row with an entourage of trainers in tow. He'd been met with cheers, claps on the back, the awed eyes of Deep brood looking up at him. He'd been proud to represent the Grieviar from below.

Now Murray made a habit of staying off the main thoroughfares. He came to the Deep alone and quietly. He doubted anyone would recognize him after all these years, with his overgrown beard and sagging stomach.

A man in a nearby stall shrieked at Murray, "Top-shelf protein! Tested for the Cimmerian Shade! Vat-grown in Ezo's central plant! Certified for real taste by the Growers Guild!" The small bald hawker held up a case with a mess of labels stamped across it.

Compared to the wiry hawker, Murray was large. Though his gut had expanded over the past decade and his ruffled beard was now grey-streaked, he posed a formidable presence. From beneath the cut-off sleeves of his cloak, his knotted forearms and callused hands hung like twin cudgels. Flux tattoos crisscrossed the length of Murray's arms from elbows to fingertips, shifting their

pigmented curves as he clenched his fists. His sharp nose twisted at the center, many times broken, and his ears swelled like fat toads. His face was overcast, with two alarmingly bright yellow eyes penetrating from beneath his brow.

Murray turned in to a narrow stone passageway sheltered from the central clamor of the row. He passed another hawker, a white-haired lady hidden behind her stand of fruit.

“The best heartbeat grapes. Clerics say eat just a few per day and you’ll outlive an archivist.” She smiled at him and gestured to her selection of fruit, each swollen and pulsing with ripeness. Halfway down the alley, as the sounds of the market continued to fade, Murray stopped in front of a beat-up oaken door. A picture of a bat with its teeth bared was barely visible on the faded awning overhead.

The Bat always smelled of spilled ale and sweat. An assortment of Grievor and Grunt patrons crowded the floor. Mercs keeping an ear to the ground for contract jobs, harvesters taking a break from planting on the steppe, diggers dressed in dirt from a nearby excavation project.

SystemView was live and blaring from several old boards hanging from the far wall.

And now...broadcasting from Ezo’s Capital, in magnificent Albright Stadium...

The one thing that brought together the different breeds was a good SystemView fight. Though most of the folk living in the Underground were Esonian citizens, their allegiances often were more aligned with the wagers they placed in the Circles.

Most of the Bat’s patrons were tuned in to the screens, some swaying and nearly falling out of their chairs, with empty bottles surrounding them. Two dirt-encrusted Grunts slurred their words as Murray pushed past them toward the bar.

“Fegar’s got the darkin’ reach! No way ’e’ll be able to take my boy down!”

“You tappin’ those neuros too hard, man? He took Samson down an’ he’s ten times the wrestler!”

Grunts weren’t known for their smarts. They were bred for hard labor like mining, hauling, harvesting, or clearing, though Murray often wondered if drinking might be their real talent. He didn’t mind the Grunts, though—they did their jobs and didn’t bother anyone. They didn’t meddle with Grievar lives. They didn’t govern from the shadows. They weren’t Daimyo.

The man behind the bar was tall and corded, with near-obsidian skin. The left side of his face drooped, and his bald head gleamed with sweat as he wiped down the counter.

Murray approached the bar and caught the man’s good eye. “Your finest Deep ale.”

The man poured a stein of the only ale on tap, then broke into a wide half grin. “Old Grievar, what brings you to my fine establishment on such a sunny day in the Deep?”

Murray took a swig of the ale, wiping the foam off his lips. “Same thing every year, Anderson. I’m here to lay back and sweat out my worries at the hot springs. Then I figure I’ll stop by the Courtesan Houses for a week or so ’fore returning to my Adar Hills mansion back Upworld.”

Anderson chuckled, giving Murray a firm wrist-to-wrist grasp from across the bar. “Good to see you, old friend. Though you’re uglier than I remember.”

“Same to you.” Murray feigned a grimace. “That face of yours reminds me of how you always forgot to cover up the right high kick.”

Anderson grinned as he wiped down the bar. Both men were quiet as they watched the SystemView broadcast on the lightboard above.

The feed panned across Albright Stadium, showing thousands of cheering spectators in the stands before swooping toward the gleaming Circle at the heart of the arena. Two Grievar squared off

in the Circle—one standing for Ezo and the other for the empire of Kiroth.

Murray downed his ale and set the cup on the bar for Anderson to refill.

A list of grievances popped up in one corner of the screen to remind viewers of what was at stake in the bout: rubellium reserves in one of the long-disputed border regions between Ezo and Kiroth, worth millions of bits, thousands of jobs, and the servitude of the pastoral harvesters who lived out there.

The fate of nations held in the sway of our fists.

The fight began, and Murray watched quietly, respectfully, as a Grievar should. Not like crowds modernday—booing and clapping, hissing and spitting. No respect for combat.

Anderson sighed as Ezo's Grievar Knight attacked the Kirothian with a flurry of punches. "Do you remember it? Even taking those hits, those were good days."

"Prefer not to remember it." Murray took another gulp of his ale.

"I know you don't, friend. But I hold on to my memories. Blood, sweat, and broken bones. Locking on a choke or putting a guy down with a solid cross. That feeling after, lying awake and knowing you'd done something—made a difference."

"What's the darkin' difference? I don't see any. Same lofty bat shit going on up above." Murray sniffed the air. "Still got that same dank smell down here."

"You know what I mean," Anderson said. "Fighting for the good of the nation. Making sure Ezo stays on top."

"I know what you mean, and that's just what those Daimyo politiks up there say all the time. *For the good of the nation*. That's why I'm down here. Every year, the same thing for a decade now. Sent Deep to find fresh Grievar meat."

"You don't think the Scout program is working?" Anderson asked.

Murray took another long swig. “We’ll discover the next Artemis Halberd. That’s what that smug bastard Callen always says. The man doesn’t know how to piss straight in a Circle, yet he’s got command of an entire wing of Citadel.”

“You never saw eye to eye with Commander Albright—”

“The man’s a coward! How can he lead? The Daimyo might as well have installed one of their own to Command. Either way, doesn’t make a difference. Scouts—the whole division is deepshit. Grievar-kin are born to fight. Thousands of years of breeding says so. We’re not made to creep around corners, dealing out bits like hawkers.”

“Times are different, old friend,” Anderson said. “Things are more complicated. Citadel has got to keep up; otherwise, Ezo falls behind. Kiroth’s had a Scout program for two decades now. They say even the Desovians are on their way to developing one.”

“They know it’s just the scraps down here, Anderson,” Murray said. “Kids that don’t fare a chance. And even if one of them did make it? What have we got to show for it? Me and you. For all those years we put in together in service. The sacrifices—”

Their conversation was interrupted as the door to the bar swung open with a thud. Three men walked in. Grievar.

Anderson sighed and put his hand on Murray’s shoulder. “Take it easy.”

The first to enter had piercings running along his jawline, glinting beside a series of dark flux tattoos stamped on his cheekbones. The other two were as thick as Murray and looked to be twins, with matching grizzled faces and cauliflowered ears.

The fluxed man immediately caught Murray’s stare from the bar. “Ah! If it isn’t the mighty one himself!”

Murray left his seat with alarming speed and moved toward the man.

Anderson shouted a warning from behind the bar. The man threw a wide haymaker at Murray, who casually tucked his

shoulder, deflecting the blow, before dropping levels and exploding from a crouch into the man's midline. Murray wrapped his arms around the man's knees, hoisted him into the air, then drove him straight through a nearby table, which splintered in every direction.

Murray blinked. He was still in his seat by the bar, the pierced Grievar hovering over him with a derisive smirk on his face.

"Nothing to say anymore, huh, old man? I can't imagine what it's like. Getting sent down here to do the dirty work. Digging through the trash every year."

Murray ignored the man and took another swig of his ale. "Think any of your trash will even make it through the Trials this year?" the man taunted. "Didn't one of your kids make it once? What ever happened to him? Oh, I remember now..."

Anderson pushed three ales across the bar. "Cydek, these are on the house. Why don't you and your boys find a place over in that corner there so we don't have any trouble?"

Cydek smirked as he took the drinks. He turned to Murray as he was walking away. "I'm scouting Lampai tomorrow. Why don't you tail me and I can show you how it's done? You can see some real Grievar in action. Nice change of pace from watching kids fighting in the dirt."

Murray kept his eyes fixed on the lightboard above the bar. SystemView was now replaying the fight's finish in slow motion. The broadcaster's voice cut through the quieted Ezonian crowd at Albright Stadium.

What an upset! And with the simple justice of a swift knee, Kiroth takes the Adarian Reserves!

Anderson leaned against the bar in front of Murray and poured himself an ale as he watched the knockout on replay. "The way things are going, I hope the Scout program starts working...or anything, for that matter. Otherwise, we'll be drinking that Kirothian swill they call mead next time I see you."

Murray let a smile crease his face, though he felt the tension racking his muscles. He downed his ale.

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Murray realized he'd had a few too many, even for a man of his size, as he stumbled down Markspar Row. The duskshift was at its end and the arrays that lined the cavern ceiling bathed the Underground in a dying red glow. Murray had stayed at the Bat chatting about old times with Anderson for the entire evening.

Though he often denied it, he did miss the light. He wished he were back in fighting form, as he had been during his service.

That's the thing with us Grievar. We rot.

He cracked his knuckles as he walked in no particular direction.

Murray felt his body decaying like the old foundations of this crumbling Underground city. His back always hurt. Nerve pain shot up his sides whether sitting, standing, sleeping—it didn't matter. His neck was always stiff as a board. His wrists, elbows, and ankles had been broken multiple times and seemed like they could give way at any moment. Even his face was numb, a leathery exterior that didn't feel like his own anymore. He remembered a time when his body was fluid. His arms and legs had moved as if there were a slick layer of oil between every joint, seamlessly connecting takedowns into punches into submissions.

He'd seen his fair share of trips to medwards to sew up gashes and mend broken bones, but he'd always felt smooth, hydraulic. Now Murray's joints and bones scraped together with dry friction as he walked.

It was his own fault, though. Murray had his chance to stay young and he'd missed it. The first generation of neurostimulants had debuted when he was at the top of his fight game. Most of his team had started popping the stims under the *recommendation* of then-Deputy Commander Memnon. "We need the edge over the enemy," Memnon had urged the team of Grievar Knights.

Coach hadn't agreed with Memnon—the two had been at each

other's throats for those last few years. Coach believed taking stims was sacrilege, against the Combat Codes. The simplest precept of them all: *No tools, no tech.*

The man would often mutter to Murray, "Live and die like we're born—screaming, with two clenched, bloody fists."

It wasn't long after the stims started circulating that Coach left his post. The breach in Command had grown too wide. Memnon would do anything to give Ezo the edge, even if that meant harnessing Daimyo tech. Coach would rather die than forsake the Codes.

Even after Coach left, Murray kept to his master's teachings. He'd refused to take stims. A few of his teammates had stayed clean too—Anderson, Leyna, Hanrin, old Two-Tooth. At first, they'd kept up with the rest of the team. Murray had even held on to the captain's belt. It wasn't until a few years later that he'd felt it.

It had been barely perceptible: a takedown getting stuffed, a jab snapping in front of his face before he realized it was coming. Those moments started adding up, though. Murray aged. He got slower and weaker while the rest of Ezo's Grievor Knights maintained their strength under the neurostimulants.

And then came the end. That fight in Kiroth. His whole team, his whole nation, depending on Murray. Everything riding on his back. And he'd failed.

Wherever Coach was right now, he'd be spitting in the dirt if he could see what Murray had become. Skulking in the shadows, stuck with a lowly Grievor Scout job, to be forgotten. Another cog in the Daimyo machine.

Before Murray realized it, the light had nearly faded. The streets were quiet as most Deep folk returned to their homes for the blackshift.

Murray was walking on autopilot toward Lampai Stadium, now only a stone's throw away, looming above him like a hibernating

beast. Shadows clung to him here, deep pockets of darkness filling the folds of his cloak as he made his way to the base of the stadium.

Murray stopped abruptly, standing in front of Lampai's entrance. He stared at the old concrete wall and the black wrought-iron gates. He craned his head at the stadium's rafters towering above him.

Murray placed his hand against a gold plaque on the gate.

It was cold to the touch. It read:

LAMPAI STADIUM, CONSTRUCTION DATE: 121 P.A.

LET THIS BE THE FIRST OF MANY ARENAS, TO SERVE AS A SYMBOL OF OUR SWORN ARMISTICE AND A CONSTANT REMINDER OF THE DESTRUCTION WE ARE CAPABLE OF. HERE SHALL GRIEVAR GIVE THEIR BLOOD, IN HONOR AND PRIVILEGE. THEY FIGHT SO THE REST SHALL NOT HAVE TO.

"We fight so the rest shall not have to," Murray whispered. He had once believed those words. The first precept of the Codes. He would repeat the mantra over and over before his fights, shouting it as he made entrances into stadiums around the world.

The Mighty Murray Pearson. He'd been a force of nature, a terror in the Circle. Now he was just another shadow under these rafters.

Murray inhaled deeply, his chest filling with air. He pushed it all out again.

* * *

Murray returned to Thalo's every day that week and saw more of the same. Just like it had been every year before. The well-nourished, stronger Grievar brood beating down the weaker lack-lights. There was little skill involved; the brutal process pitted the weak against the strong. The strong always won.

Eventually, the weaker brood wore down. Patrons didn't want to buy the broken ones, which meant that Thalo's team of Taskers was wasting their time training them. Thalo was wasting bits

on their upkeep. So, like rotten fruit, the slave Circle owner would throw the kids back to the streets where he found them. Their chance of survival was slim.

Murray's head throbbed as he stepped back to the edge of the Circle. Spectral wisps gathered above as the light intensified on the dirt fighting floor.

The first Grievar emerged from the side entrance, stopping by his Tasker's corner. He looked to be about fifteen, tall for his age, with all the hallmarks of purelight Grievar blood—cauliflowered ears, a thick brow, bulging forearms, bright eyes.

The boy's head was shaved like all the brood at Thaloo's to show off the brand fluxed on his scalp. Like any other product in the Deep, patrons needed to see his bit-price. This kid looked to be of some value—several of the vultures were eyeing him like a slab of meat.

The Tasker slapped the boy in the face several times, gripping his shoulders and shaking him before prodding him into the Circle. The boy responded to the aggression with his own, gnashing his teeth and slamming his fist against his chest as he stalked the perimeter. The crowd clapped and hooted with anticipation.

The second boy did not look like he belonged in the Circle. He was younger than his opponent and gaunt, his thin arms dangling at his sides. A mop of black hair hung over the boy's brow. Murray shook his head. They'd just taken the kid off the streets, and hadn't even put in the effort to brand him yet.

The boy walked into the Circle without expression, avoiding eye contact with his opponent and the crowd around him. He found his designated start position and stood completely still as the glowing spectrals rose from the Circle's frame and began to cluster above.

"The taller, dark one—name's Marcus. Saw 'im yesterday." Calsans pulled up to Murray's side, just as he'd done every day this week. Murray expected the parasite to ask him for a favor any

moment now. Or perhaps he was one of Callen's spies, sent to ensure Murray didn't go rogue.

"Nearly kicked right through some lacklight." Calsans smirked. "This little sod is gonna get thrashed."

The skinny boy stood motionless, his arms straight by his sides. At first, Murray thought the boy's eyes were cast at the dirt floor, but at second glance, Murray saw his eyes were closed. Clamped shut.

"Thaloo's putting blind kids in the Circle now..." Murray growled.

"Sometimes, he likes to give the patrons a show," Calsans said. "Bet he's workin' on building Marcus's bit-price. Fattening him up for sale."

The fight began as Marcus assumed a combat stance and bobbed forward, feinting jabs and bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"It's like one of them Ezonian eels about to eat a guppy," Calsans remarked.

Murray looked curiously at the blind boy as his opponent stalked toward him. The boy still wasn't moving. Though his posture wasn't aggressive, he didn't look afraid. He almost looked...relaxed.

"Wouldn't be so sure," Murray replied.

Marcus approached striking distance and feigned a punch at the blind boy before whipping a high round kick toward his head. A split second before the shin connected, the boy dropped below the kick and shot forward like a coiled spring, wrapping around one of the kicker's legs. The boy clung to the leg as his opponent tried to shake him off vigorously, but he stayed attached. He drove his shoulder into Marcus's knee, throwing him off-balance into the dirt.

The boy began to climb his opponent's body, immobilizing his legs and crawling onto his torso.

"Now this is getting good," Murray said as he watched the blind boy go to work.

Marcus heaved forward with his full strength, pushing the boy off him while reversing to top position. Hungry for a finish again, Marcus straddled the younger boy's torso, reared up, and hurled a punch downward. The boy slipped the punch, angling his chin at just the right moment, his opponent's fist glancing off his jaw.

Marcus howled in pain as his hand crunched against the hard dirt. Biometrics flashed red on the lightboard above.

Capitalizing on bottom position, the blind boy grasped Marcus's elbow and dragged the limp arm across his body, using the leverage to pull himself up and around onto his opponent's back.

Murray raised an eyebrow. "Well, look at that. Darkin' smooth back take."

The crowd suddenly was paying close attention to the turn of events. Several spectators hooted in approval of the upset while others jeered at a potential bit-loss on their bets.

Murray saw the shock in Marcus's eyes. This was supposed to be an easy win for the Grievor, a fight to pad his record. His Tasker probably told him to finish the blind boy in a brutal fashion. Instead, Marcus was the one fighting for survival, looking like he was treading water in a tank of razor sharks. Marcus grunted as he pushed himself off the ground. He stood and tried to shuck the boy off his back, bucking wildly, but the climber wrapped around him even tighter.

The blind boy began to snake his hands across Marcus's neck, shooting his forearm beneath the chin to apply a choke. Either as a last resort or out of pure helplessness, Marcus dropped backward like a felled tree, slamming the boy on his back into the dirt with a thud. A cloud of dust billowed into the air on impact. The crowd hushed as the little boy was crushed beneath his larger opponent's bulk.

Murray held his breath as the dust settled.

The blind boy was still clinging to his opponent, his two bony arms latched around his neck, constricting, ratcheting tighter. The

boy squeezed until Marcus's eyes rolled back into his head and his arms went limp.

The light flared and died out, the spectrals breaking from their cluster and dissipating into the den.

The boy rolled out from beneath his unconscious opponent, his face covered in dirt and blood, his eyes clamped shut.