

Determination Force

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Karson looked at the edge of the jungle. He could not believe he had made it this far. He had traveled a long distance to arrive here, leaving his homeland and wife behind ... but at last he was here, to see if the jungle was everything that everyone had claimed it to be.

He was armed with a machete, which he had used to cut through many of the places he had traveled through. It was still sharp, hadn't gotten dull with heavy use. It was rumored that this was because the blade had been created in this jungle, making it a special blade.

But Karson wasn't sure he believed such nonsense, even though the machete itself had proven that it was something special. The jungle that Karson had reached—often referred to as Dictator, for its rumored ability to control the people that lived inside, the jungle itself said to actually be *alive*—appeared to be a normal jungle ... certainly not alive, and certainly not a dictator. Nothing about the jungle was out of the ordinary, and Karson, though disappointed, was not surprised. It was insane to believe that there was a jungle that possessed powers beyond comprehension—it was utter madness. Karson was going to prove just how ordinary this jungle was.

If it later appeared to be just what everyone had believed it to be, however, things would be different. But Karson would worry about that later, if the jungle proved itself. So far, it was nothing spectacular.

That is, until Karson stepped inside.

It felt as though he had entered another world. Day light had been filling the sky, but as soon as he stepped inside, the night hit, darkness emerging from every crevice of the jungle. What was strange was that he could still see. This was because the trees and the leaves on the trees were glowing, ever so slightly. Perhaps they were there to guide him.

But he wasn't sure, and already, the mood he had been carrying had changed. Usually, Karson was bored with danger, but he had to admit that now he was a little afraid. There was no telling just what the jungle had in store for him.

"There's nothing to fear," Karson reminded himself, hand poised over his machete, which rested in its sheath on his side, attached by a small rope.

He had killed two people with this weapon, he recalled, and if he had to do it again, he wouldn't hesitate. Let danger come to him, if it really wanted to. He would just have to prove it wrong.

But according to the myths of this jungle, danger didn't operate in a way that was traditionally stoppable. And if this jungle was everything that it had been rumored to be, Karson was in trouble. He would need more than his wits.

To prove to himself that everything was in his control, he pulled off a leaf from a tree and ripped it apart. This was a bad idea, according to the myths of this jungle. It was unwise to destroy the jungle in any fashion, because it was like hurting a human being ... a human being that didn't appreciate injury.

But nothing happened. The pieces just fell to the ground.

Karson waited, but still, nothing happened. So he took his machete and sliced down a small tree. It fell.

Nothing.

So Karson continued to walk. He didn't notice that the tree had mended itself behind him, that the leaf had attached itself back to the tree it had been stolen from, mended itself as well. And he didn't feel the pain of the jungle, either.

At least, not immediately.

The boy hid, crouched behind a tree. He was very different from this new man named Karson, different in ways ranging from language to patterns of thinking to abilities. The boy didn't know English, which was what the man spoke, but by watching the man, the boy was able to learn the language and how he needed to act around Karson.

He would of course need to know English to communicate with Karson. It would have to be soon, because there was no way this foolish man was going to survive in this jungle, especially if he kept up his behavior, toughness that was excessive, frowned upon by the boy's culture, and for a reason.

But the boy liked the attitude, was personally intrigued by it. The correct term for the man was "rebel." Most likely, this man would definitely be of use.

It didn't matter right now, and the boy knew it. For now, he would need to focus on how he was going to interact with the man. He still wasn't sure.

He pulled a name out of the language he had learned. Timothy. His name would be Timothy.

But the boy couldn't reveal himself yet. For now, he would continue studying the man, follow him until the time was right.

It would have seemed wise not to test the jungle, especially considering that it was already doing two strange things: enclosing Karson in darkness that shouldn't have existed, and showing trees and leaves that glowed. But Karson didn't care, had no reason to care—he was tougher than this jungle, and nothing would get in his way.

But as he walked, he realized that he was gradually slipping into pain. The deeper he went, the stronger the pain became. It started out as just the feeling one would get in his arm if someone was tugging at it maybe a little too hard. That eventually morphed into the feeling one would have if someone was trying to rip off the arm.

Karson staggered, the pain now so intense that he felt hot tears leaving his eyes involuntarily. He continued moving, trying to avoid the feeling, but it continued to get worse.

But when Karson looked at his arm, he saw that it was fine. It wasn't moving as though someone was trying to yank it off, and it certainly wasn't wounded in any fashion.

Karson bit through the pain. He wasn't going to let the jungle beat him, especially so fast. He pulled out his machete with his pain-free arm, and waved it in front of him. Because of his pride, he didn't realize that he was already becoming delirious from the pain.

Karson wasn't able to hold the machete for very long; he dropped it, and fell to the ground along with it.

Through his blurring eyes, he saw someone approaching him. Because of this and Karson's delirium, he wasn't able to see what the figure looked like; but he had to admit that he felt safe around the person.

Karson closed his eyes, unable to do anything else. That was when he felt something pour onto his arm, a liquid of some sort ... and it burned.

He opened his eyes, looked at his arm. Now it was wounded. The skin and bone looked as though it had been torn, and severely. But the liquid slowly began to heal this, he saw, that being the last thing he saw for quite some time.

When Karson awoke, he noticed that his arm was just fine. There was no more pain, and it wasn't wounded in any way.

The figure that had healed him was gone.

Karson stood up, looked around, confirmed that no one was there. On the ground was a pile of torn up leaves, glowing.

He was about to touch them when they stirred, then moved into the air, and began to form letters: "Turn back while you have a chance."

Karson read the letters carefully, then said, "Sounds like a threat. I don't do well with threats."

The leaf pieces moved in the air, formed new letters: "I reserve the right to threaten. I advise that you leave now, while you are still alive."

"What will happen if I don't?" Karson asked, rhetorically. "You'll try to tear my arm off again?"

"You think because you were saved that things will be easy for you here. You think because you're brave you won't have to worry about the powers of this jungle. I'm warning you that you're wrong."

"I don't even know who you are," Karson said. "What kind of coward hides behind leaf messages, anyway?"

"It's the most peaceful thing I have to offer. You don't want to know what I'm truly capable of."

"Says who?" Karson said.

"The jungle itself."

Karson felt his heart skip a few beats. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't *really* expected the jungle to be alive ... but it clearly was.

"I know you're looking for answers. But you won't find them. A beautiful woman hides them, the answers tucked deep within her lair."

Karson thought about this, said, "I'm not turning back."

"Then you'll have to face my fury."

"I'm not afraid."

"Then you're a foolish man."

The pieces of the leaves fell to the ground, and disappeared.

The jungle being alive was interesting. It meant that it was going to be Karson's enemy, and that it wasn't going to tolerate him being here. And the jungle itself had confirmed that the Woman of the Lair was real.

According to the myths, she was at the end of the jungle. And Karson was going to get to her lair, no matter what happened, and collect the answers he was searching for.

Even if he died along the way.

But Karson doubted that he would die, because he had made it this far, and nothing the jungle threw at him could truly stop him. As long as he didn't hurt the jungle, he would be all right, and the jungle would have no reason to hurt him.

In theory, though, the jungle was already a dangerous place, whether it wanted him dead or not. Since the jungle didn't want him here, it meant things would be harder than usual.

But what could really happen? An animal might attack him, he might brush against a poisonous tree ... but Karson would be ready for either of those incidents. He was trained to deal with a brush against poison, and if an animal attacked him, he could kill it with his machete. It was true that the jungle was a single organism, a malevolent creature, but what could it actually do to him? Nothing, as long as he left it alone.

There was so much that Karson didn't know, however, and it wouldn't be long before Karson figured that out.

Karson continued to move through the jungle. As long as he didn't hurt the jungle, it would have no reason to hurt him back. That was just how the rules worked. Granted, he was wrong about this, because the jungle didn't have to obey that ... but this knowledge wouldn't come until later.

There was still the strange figure that had healed him. Though Karson was a proud man, he knew that he had to confront that truth. If the jungle pulled another trick that he didn't expect, and that figure wasn't there to save him ...

But Karson wasn't going to dwell on those thoughts, because he was in control. Nothing would be able to stop him ... and he was going to prove that.

Karson's strength of mind faltered when he heard thunder in the distance. The sound was wrong. It was high-pitched, the most high-pitched thing that Karson had ever heard.

It's just thunder, Karson thought ... but he began to wonder.

You'll be fine, Karson thought in response to his previous thought. Karson hated the person who had helped him, for his presumption that Karson needed help. Karson would have been fine if he'd been given the chance.

You wish. Karson knew that this thinking was right. He had a lot of pride, and was tough, but he couldn't let those features bog him down too much, now. He owed the unknown figure for saving his life, for breaking past the power that this jungle boasted of.

More thunder in the distance. So high-pitched, so strained. And it was moving closer.

Karson remembered his machete at that moment. It was attached to his side, he saw. Perhaps the figure that had saved him had put it there. The jungle of course wouldn't have done it, because it wanted Karson to fail.

The machete wouldn't do much against the thunderstorm coming, but Karson didn't care. He took it out of its sheath and carried it by his side.

A bright, red light suddenly appeared above Karson. He looked up, saw a glowing red cloud swirling above him. Its light was brighter than the trees and leaves that glowed. It was uncanny in nature, unlike anything he had ever seen. Even though it was small, it held a lot of light, the redness much like blood.

Karson didn't let it bother him. He moved through the jungle. But as he moved, he noticed that the cloud was following him, spilling its light, the light seemingly trying to drown him. The cloud itself reminded him of a wild animal stalking someone before the kill.

But it was a cloud. What could it possibly do? Granted, Karson had never seen a red cloud before, but still ...

That was when another cloud moved beside it. It wasn't long before there was another, and then another, clouds moving as though they were alive ...

"What is going on?" Karson wondered, but continued walking.

It was probably just getting ready for a storm. He would be prepared for that.

The moment he thought that, as though to spite him, Karson felt a few drops fall on him. It was red, the liquid, and as expected, much like blood.

The drops multiplied, and fast. It wasn't long before he was soaked with this red liquid. He wasn't sure what it was, but it tasted disgusting, some of it inadvertently getting in Karson's mouth. He spit it out, continued trudging.

The ground wasn't absorbing the liquid anymore: it was beginning to puddle. Not much had fallen, but it was nonetheless accumulating around him.

As though preparing to drown Karson.

"You've got to be kidding me," Karson said, but continued to move.

It wasn't long before the liquid was ankle-deep.

He noticed that the more it touched him, the more it glowed. And it seemed to be feeding on him ...

That was ridiculous. He wasn't even sure what that meant, anyway.

You sure? Karson thought.

He wasn't sure that he didn't know what that meant, actually, now that he thought about it. Because the liquid was literally draining his energy. The more it touched him, the weaker he felt.

Karson put his machete back onto his side, knowing it wouldn't do any good against this type of adversary.

The liquid was now up to his waist, and the intensity of the pouring had increased, the intensity matching the sound of the thunder. The liquid was literally slowing him down, refusing to let him move, acting almost like tar. But Karson didn't care, continued to move through the liquid.

Swimming through it, by the time it reached his neck. But it didn't matter: Karson was enclosed within the liquid, it bearing down on him excessively. Doing everything it could to keep him entrapped. This incident was definitely strange.

You're trying to judge this place from your own perspective, Karson admitted to himself.

It wasn't long before the liquid was enclosing him so much that he felt himself beginning to drown. He pushed through, but felt his arms getting tired. He refused to let that bring him down, however, and continued moving.

He did this, seemingly for hours.

The liquid would not cease. It didn't matter how strong he was, it was going to drown him eventually.

When it did, when it pulled Karson into its depths, Karson wasn't aware of it. The last thing he remembered was a distant thundering, shaking everything around him with its fury.

Timothy liked his new name.

He looked at Karson, wondering how he was going to explain everything when Karson woke up.

Timothy knew that this man was after the Woman of the Lair. If he helped Karson, Karson would succeed. But it was going to take a lot of effort on Timothy's part, because he would have to help Karson out, and a lot. There was much that Karson didn't understand about this jungle's anger, about how it operated. But he had proven himself so far, and that was a good start.

Timothy was deep in his thoughts, when Karson stirred. He woke up, scanned his surroundings. When he saw Timothy, he leapt up, almost as though he was afraid. That expression was quickly drowned by an expression that said he was ashamed for being afraid, that expression then followed by an expression of toughness, vigor.

But Karson then appeared sympathetic, as he said, "You ... you're the person who helped me before, aren't you?"

Timothy nodded. "Yes. I saved you from the jungle, which would have torn you apart, limb from limb, for destroying that leaf and tree, if I hadn't interfered."

"But the jungle ... it's still trying to kill me."

"Yes, but you managed to escape that liquid it threw at you."

"How?"

"With my help, of course. We did it together."

"I mean ... how?"

Timothy didn't say anything for a moment. Then: "Don't worry about that right now. It will make sense later."

"I don't need your help," Karson said, after he had processed this omission of truth. "Get out of my way."

Karson pushed past Timothy.

"I know who you're looking for," Timothy said.

Karson turned back around, said, "You do?"

Timothy nodded. "You won't find her unless I help. This jungle will kill you."

"I've made it this far."

"With my help."

Timothy could tell that Karson wanted to do this alone, but reluctantly gave in, said, "Why does this jungle want to kill me?"

"Why don't you sit down, first," Timothy said. "Take a seat, relax."

Karson didn't move at first. But when he sat down, Timothy joined him.

They were quiet for a little while.

Then Timothy said, "This jungle can't kill you as easily as it can if you hurt it. I was able to stop you from dying from that. But that doesn't mean it won't try in other ways."

"Wait ... so as long as I don't offend the jungle, it won't try to kill me too severely. Thanks for the encouragement."

"Well, let me finish first," Timothy said. "What I'm saying is it won't have a good reason to kill you. Right now, you're just an intruder. But if you become an intruder with malevolent intent ... that's when it changes."

"Cutting down a tree is hardly full of malevolent intent," Karson said defensively.

Timothy laughed. "You know so little about this jungle. I would listen to me."

"I am listening," Karson said, but then, realizing his mistake, amended: "Okay ... continue."

“This jungle is sensitive. But as long as you're just an intruder, it can't have any reason to hurt you. And that's why your ability to defend yourself works so well. With my help though, of course.”

“Wait, what are you talking about, with my ability to defend myself?”

Timothy didn't say anything for a moment. Then he said, “Maybe one day I'll tell you. But for now, don't worry about it.”

“Don't worry about it? Are you crazy? This jungle's trying to kill me and you won't even tell me how I—or I guess technically we—survived that liquid?”

Timothy just said, “You have to trust me.”

Karson pulled out his machete, put it out in front of him, ready to hurt Timothy. “I don't trust you. Get away from me. Don't make me tell you more than once.”

Timothy was not intimidated. He said, “You miss him, don't you?”

Karson hesitated. “What are you talking about?”

“Your son, Timothy. You miss him a lot, don't you?”

“How did you even know about that?” Karson said, relaxing the machete.

“Relax, my friend,” Timothy said. “I guess I should have introduced myself first. My name, coincidentally, is Timothy.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You know my name now. We can start forming a friendship.”

“Why should I trust you? How did you even know about ... about my son?”

“It's a long story, Karson,” Timothy said. “Don't be afraid that I know your name, either,” he added, looking at the machete, which Karson had put in front of him again.

“How do you know so much about me?”

Timothy laughed. “Why, by studying you, of course. It's a trick my people know.”

“Studying me?”

“I just have to look at you, watch you for a little.”

“Great. You've been spying on me.”

“Just a little. But if you want to get to the Woman of the Lair, you'll have to trust me. This jungle will tear you to pieces without me.”

“I don't need your help. I survived the strange liquid.”

“Yes, but you may not be so lucky next time.”

“But you said I don't have anything to worry about if I don't ... hurt the jungle. Whatever the hell that means. That as long as I'm just an intruder—”

“Yes, but I said that to give you comfort.”

“So you lied.”

“Not exactly. But this jungle ... it still wants you dead, since you want to talk to the Woman of the Lair. You'll need my help to survive.”

“I don't need your help,” Karson insisted. “And what else do you know about my son?”

“I know he died when he was very young, about eight. He was murdered by a famous kidnapper. He—”

“Okay, stop.”

Karson's eyes had begun to water. He quickly turned away, as though ashamed.

“I'm sorry.”

“Not, it's not that,” Karson said. “It's just ... you remind me of him.”

Karson talked with the strange boy whose name was Timothy for quite some time. Karson had by this time loosened up, but he felt a pain within him that he hadn't felt in a while. This boy reminded Karson so much of where his own son would have been if he had made it to fifteen, this boy's age.

At first, Karson had felt extreme discomfort with this boy, but as the two talked, Karson gradually felt more comfortable with him. Eventually, comfortable enough to travel through a jungle.

Karson felt the boy wasn't being completely honest about things, though, and that made him suspicious. But he knew that he couldn't do this alone. He still didn't even know how he had survived the red liquid. Timothy also hadn't explained why he was helping Karson, but Karson had a feeling there was a secret reason for this.

"Well, you want to get going?" Karson said, once he had decided to let Timothy travel with him.

"Yeah."

They walked, were silent for a while.

Karson was about to say something when a black jaguar jumped out of a tree, its claws reaching for Karson's body. Karson quickly pulled out his machete and tried to slice the animal ... but the blade went straight through it.

It was like slicing a mirage.

The jaguar attached to Karson's chest, went for his throat. He was only a few moments away from getting Karson's throat when ...

When the jaguar acted as though it was trying to eat a mirage. It was strange, because Karson could feel the weight of the jaguar on him. But it couldn't hurt him.

The jaguar, clearly frustrated and confused by this, jumped off Karson and moved away.

Strange sounds were exiting Timothy's throat. It was as though he was trying to talk to the jaguar.

The jaguar, which seemed to be listening to Timothy, acted like a distraught dog after punishment, and went to Timothy's side, lay down.

"What just happened?" Karson asked.

"You clearly defended yourself. Just like I told you. All I did was tell the jaguar to heel, and it did."

"Well tell it to get out of my sight," Karson said.

"Why? It listens to me. We may even be able to use its services later."

"Why, if I can protect myself?" Karson asked. "Why bother with it?"

But Timothy didn't explain his reasoning.

Karson let it slide. It was a dangerous jungle, and perhaps the jaguar could come in handy if they ran into trouble.

Karson saw how obedient the jaguar was, just resting by Timothy, still eying Karson suspiciously, but behaving.

"Why did it try to kill me?" Karson asked.

"I imagine the jungle wanted it to," Timothy explained. "But it can't. Now let's go."

Karson followed Timothy.

The jaguar followed them.

Karson later understood why the boy wasn't honest about everything. His understanding began to formulate when Timothy literally ran into his father.

Timothy had been traveling with Karson for at least four days (though the time was hard to gauge, because the jungle always remained dark), when it happened. It was an accident on both ends, but it happened nonetheless, Timothy forced to think fast if he was going to sort through this.

In Timothy's home language, his father said, "What the hell are you doing helping an outsider?"

"He's my friend," Timothy said.

Timothy's father struck Timothy across the face. Not hard, but Timothy knew that he was going to hurt him more if he kept this up.

"Don't lie to me," Timothy's father said.

But the truth was, Timothy wasn't completely lying. Timothy wasn't just using the man, as had been the original intention. Karson seemed like a good guy, and his reasoning for being so tough made sense; it was the way he had trained himself to be, after his son had died. And it was how he had survived the subsequent years after, with his marriage falling apart, with the world seemingly turning against him ...

It was all long and complicated, but Karson had explained his situation openly, and a certain friendship had formed between the two.

But it was still true that Timothy was using Karson, so Timothy, in an attempt not to shame himself (as using people, no matter what the reason, was a reason to be shamed according to their rules), said, "Okay ... but before you get mad, understand that we need him, to free us from this jungle."

"We don't need his help," Timothy's father said.

Karson, during this time, had seemed as though he wasn't sure what to do; but Karson clearly wasn't going to be reckless with this situation.

It was still tempting for Karson, though, as evidenced when he pulled out his machete and said, "Slap him again and I'll kill you."

"He's my father," Timothy said to Karson.

"I gathered," Karson said. "But that doesn't give him the right to treat you this way. Did he understand my English? I would assume so, because your culture doesn't seem to be different from mine, at least as far as clothes go."

And this was true. Timothy's father's clothes were much like Karson's clothes. It was just the language that separated them.

But Karson was quickly going to learn it was a lot more than language.

"The jungle will kill you," Timothy's father said.

"It can't, with him," Timothy explained.

But Timothy's father didn't care. He grabbed Timothy and, a moment later, was holding Karson's machete. It had simply appeared in his hands.

"I have to kill you with this gift of the jungle," Timothy's father said.

Karson understood this, even though Timothy knew their sounds were unintelligible and impossible to decipher in every sense.

Karson said, "Don't make me strangle you. Don't tell me you just said you were going to kill him."

"I'm sorry," said Timothy's father in English. "But our culture demands that of us, to punish those who are disobedient and belligerent. Whether we like it or not."

And Karson, though quick, was not fast enough to stop the machete from swinging toward Timothy's neck. If hadn't been for the jaguar, who quickly pounced on Timothy's father when seeing the danger, knocking the machete seemingly all the way out of the forest, Timothy would have been beheaded. But the jaguar was quick, and began to slash at Timothy's father, creating huge wounds, tearing him apart.

"We better go," Timothy said, and began to run from the scene, fast.

Karson followed, not sure what to make of all of this. But it slowly began to make sense as they ran away from the jaguar's fierce attack.

Karson did not understand how he knew the information he knew, but he understood that he could partially speak the language Timothy spoke. Timothy's father clearly had powers, but that had only come from the jungle itself ... and the jungle had tried to get Timothy killed, Karson understood, which was why it had given Timothy's father the ability to steal the machete without even literally grabbing it. But the jungle's ability had backfired because of the jaguar.

But it was clear that the jungle wasn't just trying to kill Karson, and that led him to understand that the jungle was acting as an oppressive force ... true to its name. Karson wasn't sure why a father would turn against his son, and that fast ... but clearly the jungle's influence over Timothy's people was a reason for that.

After it had been quite some time, Karson finally said, "Wait, Timothy, stop!"

Timothy pulled over. He was not even breathing hard. Karson, though physically fit, had to admit he was tired, his panting proof of this exhaustion.

"What just happened?" Karson asked, even though a lot of it made sense.

"My father wanted to kill me. I'm not going to tell you why, because it won't make sense."

"But the jungle has something to do with it, doesn't it?"

"It might," Timothy said.

"Look, you've got to start trusting me."

But Timothy was adamant: "It's better if we just leave it be. I'm not in the best state of mind right now, because now my father's injured."

"After he tried to kill you," Karson reminded Timothy.

"It's against my culture to turn against our parents, and for any reason. They are the authority."

Doubt flickered in Timothy's eyes.

Karson understood: "But you don't want that, do you?"

"No," Timothy admitted. "In order for us to be free from this tyrannical jungle, I have to do what I'm doing."

"You mean, we have to work together."

"Yes. We have to work together."

"Why didn't you just tell me that I was helping you free yourself from this jungle?" Karson said.

Timothy didn't say anything.

"I understand," Karson said. "You lie because you're afraid I'll leave. But look, I know that I need your help. You being around me is helping, somehow. It's why I've made it this far. But look ... you don't have to worry about trying to protect me. I can take care of myself, at least in some regards."

Timothy laughed. "I like your toughness. It's against our culture, because it's against the jungle's rules ... but I like it anyway."

It was Karson's turn to laugh. "It's gotten me in trouble in the past. But I still have to be man enough to admit that you're helping me through this. Somehow. Can you explain it to me?"

"I would, but I don't fully understand that one myself. It's just the way I'm wired, or something. I can get the jungle to do things it doesn't want to. You can do it too, as long as you don't hurt it ... you just need me around. I just didn't tell you because I thought you'd leave, if you knew that the person who was helping you didn't even know *how* he was helping you. And I need your help, as the incident with my father proved; I can't do this by myself, the jungle will do anything to kill me. I didn't want you to know that, though, because that's another reason to leave: no one likes to be used."

"That's all you had to say," Karson said. "If you don't know, that's all you had to tell me. If you were afraid I'd leave, that's all you had to say. It helps to know these things, believe me. But I'm with you to the end, Timothy. I need your help, too, and it's the only way I'll find the Woman of the Lair."

Timothy nodded his head, and said, "You'll find her."

Karson had set out to find the Woman of the Lair to find answers on the reason for his son's murder. No one had told Karson that the Woman of the Lair knew what had happened to Karson's son, per se ... but there had always been rumors. Because of how much Karson had loved his son, it had been worth it, to travel this far, even if Karson didn't find any answers. But Karson was beginning to believe that the Woman of the Lair really did know what had happened to Karson's son.

Much of what gave Karson the hope about finding answers was Timothy. Timothy gave Karson hope that he hadn't felt in a long time. Sometimes, Karson had the feeling he was actually talking to his son again. Timothy looked so much like Karson's own son ...

Karson cared about Timothy enough that he would defend Timothy like his own son. He had resolved to do this after their conversation, their conversation of which had led to them walking in silence through the jungle.

"You think we're safe?" Karson asked, after they had been in silence for a while.

"Yes," Timothy said. "Jaguars are dangerous creatures, when they turn against you. They have a magic of their own."

"I'm sorry that had to happen."

"It doesn't matter," Timothy said.

At that moment, the jaguar came up to them. In the jaguar's mouth was the machete, holding it the way a dog holds a bone in his mouth. The jaguar dropped the machete next to Karson.

"Thank you," Karson said, picking up the machete and putting it back in the sheath.

The jaguar still did not seem to like Karson, but didn't look as though he would tear Karson apart if he had the chance. Progress.

The jungle couldn't stop Timothy while he was with Karson. By now, the jungle would have beaten them, murdered them. But something about Karson's presence allowed Timothy to survive. Timothy was honestly not sure what it was about Karson's presence, exactly, that was letting him survive. But he knew, that with the oppressive powers of the jungle, it was best not to question the type of magic Timothy had seemingly stumbled into.

Karson did not know the full story. The jungle was powerful, and could always (at least until now) kill off the people it targeted (always those trying to thwart the oppressive nature of the jungle). It always killed off its targets by sending out a storm of red rain, the jungle using the liquid to drown the victim. That had happened to Timothy while the same thing had happened to Karson, awhile back. But Timothy had believed he could escape it, and that had been all it had taken, except for Karson's presence. Karson didn't know it, but after Timothy had escaped the liquid, Karson had collapsed and almost drowned in the red rain ... but his unconscious belief that he could survive, coupled with Timothy's developing power to stop the jungle in its tracks, had let Karson survive.

It was sort of strange, how it all worked, but the bottom line was that they were doing this together. Something about Karson's presence empowered Timothy to beat the jungle ... and Timothy was of course okay with that.

The jaguar was an interesting case. The jaguar had been assigned by the jungle to kill Karson and only Karson ... but Timothy understood that the jaguar had never actually had plans to kill Karson. He had encouraged Karson to use his powers of protection ... he had never wanted to hurt Karson, just let him know he could defend himself if he willed himself to do so, as had happened.

The reason for the jaguar's loyalty to Timothy came from Timothy's ability to control the beasts of the jungle. The jungle was aware that Timothy had always had that gift.

But the jungle wasn't finished with trying to kill Timothy. It was why Timothy's father had tried to kill him. It had been a failure, of course, but the jungle would try again. As for when, Timothy didn't know. But it would happen, and Timothy would have to be prepared.

Seemingly, Karson's only weakness in the jungle came from his willful damage of the jungle. That was when the jungle could override Timothy's and Karson's powers against the jungle. This was a rule that could not be beaten. It was just the way things worked.

Which was why Timothy didn't understand why Karson took his machete, about five days later, and chopped down trees, knowing very well what the consequences were. Knowing very well that that was their weakness, that no matter how powerful they were, it didn't matter, because the jungle, upon being damaged, seethed with a fury that allowed it to override their abilities. The only reason why Timothy had managed to save Karson the last time Karson had damaged the jungle was because the damage hadn't been too significant.

But now the damage was severe. Before Timothy could say anything, Karson had already chopped down five trees. Timothy could feel the jungle bleeding, with fury, and it wouldn't be long before there was nothing Timothy could do to save Karson from his upcoming punishment.

Karson had, during his stay within the jungle, begun to pick up on its powerful nature. His understanding of the jungle being likened to its name had fully formulated. And he understood that Timothy was in great danger, that even Karson's power couldn't stop the jungle.

It was why Karson had made the best decision he could, and chopped down the trees. It had been to distract the jungle. It wasn't a wise decision, but it was the best decision Karson could make, because it would at least wound the jungle for a while. Even if it had its stronger abilities, that would take time.

Because the jungle was predictable. It went after those that hurt it most. And currently, that was Karson, wishing he could explain to Timothy why he was doing this, but knowing it was something that Timothy was just going to have to trust.

"I had to," was all Karson said, when he finally stopped assaulting the jungle.

Timothy, who couldn't process what had just happened, was silent for a moment, just looked in panic at the destruction. It had happened so fast, he had been unable to stop Karson ... and it was too late now.

"You shouldn't have done that," Timothy finally managed to say. "Do you realize what you've done?"

"I had to," Karson repeated.

"No, you didn't," Timothy said. "What were you thinking? Now the jungle can beat you."

"The jungle was going to kill you," Karson said. "I had to distract it."

"Does it look like the jungle was going to kill me?" Timothy said.

"It was going to," Karson insisted. "I had to distract it, before it made its move ... a move we probably wouldn't be able to stop this time."

"I won't be able to help you. All I can say is you've made a huge mistake. I was barely able to help you last time."

"The jungle didn't give me a choice. I had to destroy its chance of killing you—"

"Oh, don't you get it!" Timothy shouted. "You've broken the one rule you shouldn't have! Now your life's really in danger! You could die this time!"

"I don't think this jungle works on rules. It's like a dictator, doesn't have to play fair, stick to any rules. It almost killed you before. I sensed it was going to try again, so I had to stop it."

But Timothy could not be swayed. Because he knew that Karson had broken the one rule he shouldn't have broken. Granted, the circumstances were different this time, because he hadn't destroyed the jungle to prove he was a hotshot, had destroyed it to distract the jungle. But Timothy believed that Karson was just being paranoid. Because nothing was seemingly going to happen.

Now things could happen, and it was only a matter of time before—

Before Karson shouted in pain.

Immediately, Timothy said, "What does it feel like?"

"I don't know."

Timothy had looked away from Karson, in an attempt to focus, keep his cool. When he looked back, he saw that both of Karson's arms were barely attached to him, the wounds deep. It had happened so fast, and now Timothy wasn't sure what to do.

So he said, "I have to pick you up."

But Karson was in too much pain to hear this. Timothy needed to act, however, get Karson away from this spot, because here, where the damage was, was where the power of the jungle was also magnified.

So Timothy did what he said he was going to do, using all of the powers he could harvest to try to get Karson to heal. But it didn't work. The wounds just kept getting deeper and deeper, and it wasn't long before the wounds went to his legs, threatening to rip those off, as well.

For Karson, the only thing worse than physical pain was the pain he felt from the loss of his son. That wound could not be healed, Karson knew, with too much awareness. It was damaged permanently, that part of him.

The jungle put this pain in overdrive, reaching within him, controlling it. Karson had blacked out from his physical pain, but now, he was at the spot where his son had died. It was a small wood, where a kidnapper had chosen not to kidnap Karson's son, but kill him on the spot.

The past dictated that Karson would see his son after the fact, see his son strangled next to a tree. But the jungle was dictating that Karson watch the kidnapper, who was hard to see in the darkness, strangle Timothy, with Timothy crying out, trying to escape but unable to. And the most pathetic part was that Karson was there, and with all his toughness and strength and vigor, couldn't bring himself to move and stop the bastard from killing Karson's son.

"Dad, help!" Karson knew Timothy was trying to say, but among the strangulation, Karson heard something else, something that haunted him, refused to leave.

When Timothy was dead, the murderer brought the body to Karson.

"Here's the one you care about, more than anyone in the world," said the murderer, and then, he was gone.

Karson just held his son, wishing that he could have stopped the murderer, but knowing that he never could have.

This was all part of the jungle's agenda. Remind Karson that he couldn't have done anything.

Now Karson was in his room, talking to his wife. He could see himself telling his wife that he was going to leave, was going to be gone for a long time. He was going to try to find some answers.

Karson's wife just looked at him for a while. Then she laughed.

Something that hadn't happened before, but was happening now.

"You'll never find your son," said Karson's wife. "Why would you assume you could find that monster of a child?"

But Karson didn't say anything. He just let the jungle taunt him, because he knew there was nothing he could do about it.

But something unplanned happened. Karson found himself inside the jungle, found himself with his son. Here, the jungle was not an oppressive force. Here, it seemed as though the jungle couldn't do anything, no matter how hard it tried.

Here, they were safe.

"Timothy?" Karson said.

Timothy just nodded his head. Such a beautiful child. He was the age he had been when he had died.

But he was glowing. So slightly, but glowing nonetheless.

"I love you, dad," Timothy said.

Karson couldn't say anything. He just went to his son, and held him for a long time, believing that everything would be okay after all, that he just needed to believe. And even as he felt his body being ripped apart, ever so slowly, he didn't care, because he had his son, and that was all that mattered.

Timothy was beginning to understand that Karson had been a missing piece to beating the jungle. For as long as Timothy had lived, he had tried to beat the jungle's oppressiveness. He had done his fighting in a subtle fashion, so as not to attract attention to himself. The jungle was infallible with certain things, and had never sensed Timothy as a threat.

Granted, that had changed, because since Karson came on board, the jungle had tried to get Timothy killed on more than one occasion.

But the jungle was ultimately unable to do anything ... because Karson had distracted the jungle. What was more, Karson had a shield around him, it seemed, that prevented the jungle from doing anything to them, at least ultimately. Timothy knew that he was contributing to that shield, knew that Karson wouldn't be this powerful alone ... but Timothy knew, now more than ever, that he couldn't do it alone either.

Karson had a type of power over the jungle. This was proven when the rule that Timothy had believed could never be broken was broken nonetheless. Because Karson was fine now.

He woke up, seemed a little shaky, as though he wasn't sure what had happened to him. But then he explained to Timothy what he had experienced.

"But you beat it," Timothy explained. "I don't know how, but you did."

"It tore at me," Karson said. "It tried to change me."

"But you survived. Karson ... you're more powerful than the jungle. You shouldn't have survived, after what you did. The jungle should have been able to rip you apart. But it wasn't able to, when it came down to it. You were able to protect yourself from the jungle's evil. I mean look at you ... you're fine. It's as though nothing ever happened."

Karson nodded his head. Then he said, "Maybe we should get going. I've probably held you up."

"Not too long. And I've learned things. You really did save my life from this jungle, by distracting it. It seems as though you weakened it with your destruction, rather than making it stronger."

Karson didn't say anything for a moment. Then he said, "Well, we won't make it to the Woman of the Lair by standing here. Let's go."

Karson and Timothy reached the end of the jungle a few days later. Timothy told Karson that he had never made it this far, that they were in uncharted territory, a place that could never be reached. This was because they were near the lair.

According to the myths, the lair was invisible. But when they walked outside of the jungle, they would enter the lair.

But Karson was hesitant. He said, "It's too easy."

"But we're here," Timothy said. "We finally made it. Why are you stopping now?"

"I'm not," Karson said. "But ... hold on a moment."

But Timothy's excitement prevented him from waiting. He walked to the end of the jungle ... and then disappeared.

When Karson saw this, he almost smiled. He had expected this.

He walked to the end of the jungle with the jaguar following them, and then ...

And then he was back at the spot where he had entered the jungle, a long time ago. Timothy was standing beside him.

Karson had not expected this.

But he said, "It's not over."

Timothy was discouraged. He said, "I don't know what to do. It brought us back to the beginning."

"It's a trick, more precisely," Karson said. "It's trying to rattle you. Don't let it."

Karson pulled out his machete.

"You know this machete is special," Karson said.

"Yeah. It's designed with the power of the jungle."

"And if we use its own power against itself ..." Karson began, but not finishing.

"We could change what it did to us."

"I don't know how, though," Karson said. "This is still just a machete."

"But machetes *are* good at slicing through things. If the area surrounding us is just an illusion, we should be able to cut right through it."

Karson gave the machete to Timothy. Timothy took it, and hacked an area. It was just like slicing through air.

But Timothy did it again, refusing not to give up. And when he did this, he saw something strange happen: darkness began to pour through a slit.

"You see that?" Karson said. "Keep hacking."

So Timothy did. He created more slits of darkness, cutting away at the illusion surrounding them. It wasn't long before darkness was pouring in at more slits than the two could count. But Timothy kept at it, darkness pouring in through the slits as though it was alive. It wasn't long before the darkness surrounded them, placing them in an unknown area of darkness and mystery.

But Timothy knew where they were. They were inside the lair now. But he couldn't see anything.

"Karson?" Timothy called.

But only silence answered Timothy. There wasn't even an echo.

"Karson?" Timothy tried again.

He was greeted by the sight of a woman draped in light. She approached Timothy, said, "You shouldn't have come here."

But Timothy was not afraid. He had come all this way to prove to the woman that he could beat the jungle's powers, with Karson's help. So he said, "I have the answer to our problem. His name is Karson, and with his power, he can free all of our souls."

The woman shook her head. "You have it wrong, Timothy."

"What ... are you talking about?" Timothy said. "You have Karson now. You can do what you need to do with him to get your power, to stop the jungle. It was always your requirement, to have the one who could oppose the jungle. And now you have him."

"You're wrong," said the woman. "Now sleep."

And Timothy felt his eyes closing, beginning to understand that he had been wrong. The Woman of the Lair was not there to help them.

But it was too late, and when Timothy realized this, he was already asleep.

Karson awoke suddenly. The last thing he remembered was darkness. No doubt, they had entered the lair.

That was when he saw Timothy lying on the ground. The Woman of the Lair was standing over him, holding Karson's machete.

"You miss your son, don't you?" she said.

"That's why I'm here. I heard that you had something to do with it, and I want answers."

"And you will be getting them. But first, you have to trust me."

"How can I trust you? If you were the one responsible—"

The Woman of the Lair was too quick: she took the machete and stabbed Timothy in the chest. The machete began to glow green. At first, Karson was sure that Timothy was going to die from the wound of the machete ... but that was when he realized that there was no wound. The machete had indeed pierced through Timothy, but it had not created an injury.

The blade grew brighter the longer it stayed.

"You have something that I need," the Woman of the Lair said, and a moment later, was right next to Karson.

"I don't ... understand," Karson said.

"You will," said the woman, and then she stabbed Karson in the chest.

The pain was so intense that Karson blacked out.

When he woke up, he saw the woman was holding Timothy ... and he saw that Timothy wasn't the Timothy that Karson had gotten to know. It was, instead, Karson's son Timothy, if he had never been murdered.

"I owe you an explanation," said the woman.

"He's ... that's my son," Karson managed.

"Yes, I know. You see, the two of you share something that this condemning jungle doesn't understand: determination. I've always tried to free the people in this jungle, but haven't been able to do that, because the jungle is more powerful than me, and the people here don't have it in them to oppose an oppressor, and thus lack the determination I'm looking for.

However, I have taken the determination you both possess. I had to take your son a long time ago to refine that determination in you, Karson ... but in your case, it was enough.”

“You act as if all of this was easy,” Karson said.

The woman laughed. “No. I know it wasn’t easy. But your son’s determination to do what was right, to free the people here from the jungle’s powers, and your determination to find answers about your son’s death, is more powerful than anything this jungle can ever understand. It oppresses, but those that oppress right back, so to speak, are more powerful than anything it can try. That’s why you’ve survived, have made it this far.”

“But I thought my son was dead,” Karson said.

The woman didn’t say anything for a moment. Then: “I had to kidnap him, and fake his death. I had to put him into a new culture, to see if he would still possess that gentle heart of his, and the determination to do the right thing under pressure, when no one around him would. Clearly, he has. I’ve undone everything that this culture has done to him, though, and so what you’re left with is ... your son, as he would be today, if he’d survived. Though of course, he never really died, just grew up here in this jungle. But I hope you understand why I had to do this. It was the only way. The people here don’t possess the determination you two possess, the magic you two stir up. And because of that, I had to stage his death, and lure you here, so you could prove yourself and I could take that power. Though I must admit ... I did help you, a little. This machete is mine, but I gave it to you, Karson, so you could succeed, if you made the right choices on this journey, and used it wisely.”

Karson nodded, everything slowly making sense. Then, he looked at his son, and felt himself beginning to cry, unable to believe that he was seeing his son again.

The woman was gone a moment later. They were at the front of the jungle, Timothy lying on the ground. Karson went to his son, saw that he was glowing green.

The glow slowly began to fade. Timothy opened his eyes, said, “Are you really my father?”

“Yes,” Karson said, and hugged Timothy. “I am.”

“I’m ... I’m starting to remember what my life was like before. We ... we beat the jungle, didn’t we?”

Karson smiled. “Yes. We beat it. It couldn’t stop our determination, the magic.”

Now Timothy smiled. “Can we go home?” he said.