

**60 DAYS UNTIL
RECKONING**

-I-

From The Ashes

Darkness imprisoned me.

My right hand trembled. My friends watched. Some familiar and others that I didn't recognize. They stared down at someone. Someone I held in my arms. A white beam shrouded their face. My hands and fingernails smeared with their blood. Inside a room in the Grand Temple where I quivered in filth and sorrow.

I lost myself.

I woke in a prison cell gasping for air. Just a bad dream and it wasn't the first one. The same one every night for the past year. None of it made sense. At the end of each day, it wasn't the worst horror. Being subjected to The Children of Iscar was an endless nightmare. A whole twelve months living under their thumb was more like a lifetime. The same story every day. If someone tried to fight back, disobey, or escape, it resulted in torture or execution. The other option was to do their bidding at their mercy.

Through the bars of the cell window, I watched the sunrise. My damaged body shivered as the light touched my forehead. Camden supposedly "loved" us so much that he gifted us the comfort of the asylum to sleep inside. At least my friends and I had our own cells to sleep in. Not that it mattered. The bed I'd slept in was more frozen than a sheet of ice. The dirty blankets did nothing to ward off the cold. During the last winter, stalactites grew from the cockroach nested ceiling and drab walls. The cursed asylum was the last place I desired to spend the nights.

What pleased me every morning were the voices of my friends chattering past the walls as they woke up. They were the only thing compelling me to stay in the asylum.

We befriended a Brotherhood Knight named Drake. He was my age and spoke with an English accent. What grabbed our attention was how confident he was in our escape plan. We'd been planning it for months now. Drake understood the ins and outs of Solomon very well. Before The Children of Iscar stripped our livelihood, Drake worked cleaning sewers, toilets, and other jobs lower-ranking Knights and squires would typically be assigned. He remembered our names and faces but we couldn't say the same for him.

"Mackenzie. You doing fine mate?" Drake asked.

"I'm fine," Micah murmured quieter than a chirping mouse.

"How 'bout ya Jakey," Drake asked Jakeob.

"So damn ready to bust outta here," Jakeob whispered knowing a guard might be wandering nearby.

"Yeah, but ya buggers better not spill the beans. Have ya told Elisa and Gabe 'bout our plans?"

"Yeah. Does Finn know too?" Jakeob wondered.

"Yup. That bloody old man is one tired fella," Drake chuckled. "What 'bout ya Luke? Have ya told Johnny boy and Ryan the Myan?"

I didn't answer. Even if we escaped, there was no chance we could defeat Iscar. With the three Masonic Swords in his possession, he was unstoppable. What was there to do?

"Oi, Luke?" Drake said.

"No," I mumbled.

"Then ya should get your head out of ya arse and tell them unless ya want to get ya butt whipped by Camden."

A pair of guards arrived at our cell doors releasing us. Not for our freedoms but for our just deserts. They did their usual routine lining and chaining

us outside our cells ready to begin another long day of labor. From the back of the line, I saw my friend's faces. They all seemed okay for now.

Drake stood in front of me. Messy black hair and a smug face that was unwashed for weeks. His olive skin had tanned from being exposed to tedious long hours under the sun.

Jakeob stood ahead of him looking hardly different. His spiky black hair touched the back of his neck, but that was the least of his worries. He was anxious about his family who was imprisoned too. Camden promised not to touch them so long as Jakeob didn't break any rules.

Micah stood at the front. His ruffled blond hair had splotches of bald spots. His Aryan blue eyes had lost their color. Since the day Solomon fell, he hasn't been himself. Micah hadn't spoken to Elisa in almost a year and it took a toll on him. He hadn't taken a bath in a month or eaten proper meals. His face shriveled like he'd aged many years. He developed pink a few days ago and would often wake up in the middle of the night sobbing. It pained me to hear his cries that woke me. I could seldom sleep after those long nights.

The Children of Iscar barked instructions watching our every move. We marched toward the exit. The chains rattled with every step. The dragging of footsteps drummed the ground. The echoes of their whips smacked human flesh when someone slowed for a moment.

Nothing new.

Just another day.

Solomon. Our fallen city. Ash and ruin. Little of it remained. Every structure The Children of Iscar didn't need was brought down. Mostly the essential facilities remained like the taverns, blacksmiths, horse stables, armory, and the asylum. The air grew toxic. The sky was rarely blue. Always gray and dark. Every day, they burned our precious books and other useless furniture and debris and our precious flags and symbols.

I was fortunate enough to be paired with Johnny and Ryan. Drake worked with Gabriel, Jakeob with Elisa, and Micah with Finn. I was sent to the center of Solomon to construct brand new city architecture.

The once-proud city of Solomon was a shell of its former glory. Miles of rubble and desolation remained from the war. What little stood belonged to The Children of Iscar. Their flags marked with the cursive *I* were planted on our buildings. Fanatics yelled orders whipping disobedient prisoners which were commonplace. Statues of Iscar were placed throughout. The one closest to me depicted the Emperor in his military armor while saluting. A flat right arm extended forty-five degrees angled to the sky.

Each morning, the World Anthem played. The orchestral music blared through their speakers. Cymbal crashes, bass drums, and a triumph of trumpets awakened the city. Everyone had to stand and pay respect to Iscar who was shown on the screens hung on our buildings. I looked up at the screens and saw his cracked bronze mask shining down over us. Not angry or bitter as I expected. A hidden smile stretched across his lips. I listened to the lies he conjured from his fantasies. A prophecy he shoved down our throats and a place called paradise he preached to no end.

“Peace through power!” Iscar signed off.

My task today was to start the construction of a statue. It was to be a replica of Camden’s likeness. He loved himself more than anyone else.

“Johnny,” I stared at the boy as he carried over a small hammer. His yellow teeth rotted and his brown hair decayed. He’d shown a steady growth spurt. He inched closer to my height. Faint facial hair and a slightly deeper voice. Johnny turned to me and quickly looked away. He was no longer the enthusiastic or energetic kid from before. He’d changed since his brother’s death.

“You doing okay?” I asked gazing into his green eyes and getting a sense of what was going through his mind.

“You don’t have to ask me every time,” he hissed without making eye contact.

“Why not? I worry about you.”

“Worry about me? Why do you care so much? Cyrus was never my brother! Stop pretending to be him! I don’t want to talk to a murderer!” he snapped, tossing the hammer near my feet.

Johnny shoved me away in disbelief.

Murderer.

Johnny labeled me a murderer. I killed Isaiah. A traitor, but my actions crossed a line. The others were just as appalled. I broke The Brotherhood code to not commit murder unless in self-defense. I was no longer one of them.

I stared at the statue we were building while Ryan moved a bucket of cement to us. On one hand, I carried a paintbrush, and on the other, a chisel. Hours and hours, I worked to craft Camden his stupid statue. He expected perfection or else he’d make us sculpt it all over again. As the heat peaked during midday, the tools slipped from my sweaty palms. They allowed us to drink water every half hour. Some Fanatics wore lighter armor. A polished red and gray uniform as opposed to their scarlet and black military armor and helmet.

Our short meal break consisted of bread and water. The blandest food to fill an empty stomach. As Ryan and I ate our lunch in silence, I told Ryan about our escape plan. Ryan nodded. Not a word or sigh. I assumed he understood but I don’t think he cared as much as I did.

I looked around at the city and its walls and caught a glimpse of Drake and someone else working to rebuild a section that had been breached. The other person was familiar to me. The back of his light brown hair reflected the sun. His face turned away from us while he carried heavy bricks to the construction site. They were too far to see but I knew who it was.

Gabriel.

He disappeared behind a line of workers carrying a pair of shovels and a bag of cement.

We resumed our work on the statute that began to take form. Today's weather wasn't our friend. The heat worsened. The sun's rays stung my skin. My socks were soaked in sweat making it harder to walk. An exhausted Ryan ran out of water from his canteen. He dropped his tools, kneeling and begging for water.

"Water," he heaved.

I got on one knee and offered my canteen. With what little droplets remained, it wasn't enough and pleaded for more. We couldn't grab more water from the pipes until our next break.

"Hey, you two! Get back to work!" shouted a Fanatic.

"He needs water," I said.

The guard ignored our pleas. They screamed at us for not working. Ryan was on the verge of a heat stroke, but the guard berated him. I took action by removing my shirt and knotting it over his head like a hat.

"I said get back to work!" the Fanatic growled and threatened to whip.

Ryan collapsed to the dirt ground panting loudly. The guard dragged him to a sitting position and spat orders to his face.

"Do I need to send you to master Camden!" the Fanatic warned as he was going to lash our friend.

Ryan was half-conscious. His eyes twitched erratically. Dry saliva slithered from his mouth. His curly blond hair was covered in strands of wood and copper. I begged the guard to give him water, but he purposely acted deaf. The Fanatic showed no sympathy, just like the rest of them.

The guard pulled out his whip and ripped Ryan's flee infested shirt. Before they could strike his bare back, Johnny ran with his canteen in hand and offered Ryan water. The boy placed the bottle over Ryan's lips. Ryan chugged the cool drink.

"Thank you," Ryan mumbled.

“Let’s get working before they whip you,” Johnny said as we assisted Ryan to his feet. He was doing better now. I let him keep my shirt to help keep his head cool. I tried to say a simple “thank you” to Johnny, but he ignored me again continuing his labor.

He wanted no part of me.

We were almost done with the statute, but the guards ended work before dusk. They had other plans and those plans weren’t exactly in our favor. We were chained and taken to the front of the Grand Temple where various torture devices and tools were located. Prisoners circled the gallows as The Children of Iscar called it. Their torches gave light to the darkness to ensure we were witnesses of this treachery. Someone was to be executed via guillotine. The accused was brought forward. A blindfold covered his eyes until the very moment before his crimes were read to him. We were to be witnesses of an execution of a Brotherhood Knight who attempted to escape the previous night.

The Fanatics moved out of the way for Camden who was pleased with our hard work today. He walked with the sinking sunlight shimmering his light blond hair on his crown. The dark sides of his hair looked more grayish and faded with every passing month. He thanked every one of us like we were his. His phony smirk didn’t do much to convince me what he said was honest.

After several minutes of his rah-rah speech, he began to read the Knight’s crime of attempted escape. Camden made it sound like he’d caused disorder, chaos, and attempts to overthrow Iscar. Most of it wasn’t true and was used to instill fear. Camden was more heartless since becoming Warlord of Solomon. A man slightly older than me who like his master was in denial of any truth and bought into his own lies. They claimed to bring order and peace. War and death were all that resulted in their wake.

“Let this be a lesson for anyone here who attempts to defy the Messiah,” Camden declared, shoving lies down our throats. “For now the day of judgment has arrived for this heretic.”

The Knight’s arms and head were locked into the guillotine. He was so frightened that I thought he would die from fear. All I knew about this Knight was that he had light-skinned and brown hair with whip marks riddled over his the back of his body and was stripped down to his underwear. With what little decency he had left, he whimpered when he saw what was before him.

“Any last words?” Camden asked of the Knight.

The Knight didn’t reply. He couldn’t say a word. They’d inflicted irreparable damage to his psyche that he’d likely never recover from even if he was spared. Better dead than alive.

“Very well. Make no mistake that silence is a valid option. A fitting response from those who oppose us,” Camden said.

Camden’s men brought up another Knight who they believed was the friend of the Knight. They had done nothing, but because his friend said nothing in response, they would pay the same price. The friend was beaten to a pulp in front of us. He was ganged like a pack of hyenas chomping on a carcass. After the beatdown, he was dragged to a guillotine. Before Camden was done playing games, he babbled about how this was a good thing for them.

“In the name of Iscar, let these two dissenters reach paradise so their freedoms will be achieved,” Camden preached.

The two friends cried. The second one that was beaten shouted for The Children of Iscar to stop. He said his friend’s name “Dillon. Don’t let them do this!” Their voice gurgled with blood and tears.

The guillotines simultaneously dropped the sharp blades. I closed my eyes.

Razor met human flesh followed by the sound of two heads dropping to the dirt.

“Peace through power!” Camden declared as the Fanatics cheered. Standing beside me, Johnny trembled as he looked away.

After every long day of labor, Camden allowed us to gather in small groups. We could only gather with people in adjacent cells meaning I was restricted to Drake, Jakeob, and Micah. The four of us reunited in a single cell. One hour to talk. Seeing their faces most days put a rare smile on my face. We discussed how our days had gone and what we had done.

“It’s a pain in the arse rebuilding some stupid wall. Can’t wait to escape out of this bloody hell hole,” Drake said.

“How’s Gabe doing?” I asked him.

“Gabey’s doing fine. He don’t wanna be waitin’ no more. How ‘bout you Jakey?”

“Cooked food for these assholes,” Jakeob sighed. “It’s the worst when you’re being pushed around and having to serve a hundred meals.”

“How’s Miss Elisa doin’?” Drake wondered.

“She’s doing fine. Least she has somebody to talk to.”

I was shocked Micah didn’t ask about Elisa. He stared at the floor with a stoic expression. His right eye was pink and swollen while his left eye remained pure blue. He acted like a complete stranger rarely talking these days.

“Micah,” I uttered.

He looked at me with a shattered look. His pink eye blinked every second. He was my closest friend besides Gabriel. He didn’t deserve any of this. Not a second longer.

“What ‘bout you mate? Ya mind telling what ya did today?” Drake asked Micah.

“I um…” our dispirited friend stuttered. His moldy clothes stained the wall he sat against. “Finn and I did Camden’s bidding.”

“Bloody hate that wanker,” Drake murmured.

“I hate it,” Micah whispered.

“I’m on the same boat with ya mate.”

“I hate it!” Micah raised his voice.

“We all bloody do.”

“I HATE IT!”

The cell fell into silence. Micah’s inhumane voice left us stunned. Whatever Camden had done to him stifled the Micah I knew.

“Easy there. We’re all pissed off too,” Drake tried to calm Micah.

“Didn’t I tell you! I hate it!” Micah’s voice exploded. His eyes were wider than I’d seen in some time.

“Hey bud, take it easy. We’ll be back with Elisa and the others,” I said, tapping the back of his shoulder, but Micah threw his arms and shoved them back. He scrambled to his feet pushing me. The shove caused the back of my head to fall against the iron bars dizzying me. Drake and Jakeob jumped to their feet and told Micah to knock it off.

“You got a lot of nerves to talk about her!” Micah’s putrid breath hovered over my neck. “You didn’t even bother following The Brotherhood’s laws, didn’t you? I didn’t give a shit about Isaiah either, but the laws are first! You were always one to speak highly of them when we created The Forsaken, but you and your little buddy Gabe were the first to break them!”

“I’m-”

“ANSWER FOR YOUR SINS!” Micah’s black spit landed on my cheeks.

I tried to say something.

Anything.

But before I could reason, Micah grabbed me by the shirt tossing me to the floor and pressing his weight over my body. A flurry of punches ensued. I raised my arms and blocked the strikes but each fist packed a weight of a truck. Drake and Jakeob tried to pull us apart, but it was of little use. Micah landed a

stiff elbow on Drake who stumbled backward. Jakeob pulled me away creating distance from Micah but my unhinged friend threw a punch across his face.

I scrambled to my feet wrestling Micah to the ground and tried to reason with him. I wished no harm to him, but he resisted. He was an even tougher person in his current state. He had the strength of a bear who managed to wiggle his way from my grip. His fingers poked at my eye causing me to flinch. He landed a firm kick on my stomach knocking me down. I lost a gasp of air, flopping like a fish on land.

“You’re not my friend!” Micah shouted.

That’s not true! I wanted to say.

Jakeob jumped Micah from behind, but Micah ran backward squishing his weight against the stiff corner of the cell. Jakeob fell unmoving.

“Jakeob?” Micah’s voice shook thinking he’d injured his friend.

During the distraction, I grabbed Micah and trapped him in a rear choke hold. He had nowhere to go. He fought back to escape while my arms wrapped around him like an anaconda. His hair strands were stained by my blood. His breath deteriorated. His hands slapped at my shoulders. His fingers grabbed at my nose. He tried to poke at my eyes. But then he stopped. His resistance weakened. I would kill him if I held on longer. I couldn’t do this. This wasn’t the path I should take. Johnny would be right to call me a murderer if I didn’t stop. I heard his voice again calling me that over and over.

My instincts settled with reason.

I let go only to realize that a crushing elbow to the side of my skull spun my world in circles. Micah outsmarted me by feigning he had passed out. He recovered and landed an elbow on my temple. I nearly lost consciousness. My faint eyesight saw a deranged individual. His wide eyes fixated on me. He would not stop.

My life would end at the hands of a friend.

How I pitied him.

And then it stopped. I opened my eyes and saw my real friend.

“Luke?” Micah whispered as if he’d snapped from a trance. His dilated pupils shrunk and a look of shock consumed him.

Drake rammed his frame onto Micah and cuffed his hands with bed sheets. He stopped the insanity for a moment until our enemy arrived.

“By the holy saints of Notre Dame.” Camden’s baffled voice described the scene better than I could explain it.

-II-

Twist of Fate

I held someone in my arms. A person important to me. My friends looked down at us. The same dream that stalked me returned. I gazed down at the individual's life seeping away.

It couldn't be him!

Micah.

He lay lifeless. Purple skin and bumps disfigured his face. A black liquid oozed from his eyes and nose. White foam drooled from his mouth. A mirage deceived me. None of this was real. It couldn't be. I wept and screamed until I could no more.

I rolled my eyes and inhaled a stream of oxygen. I peeled the bed sheets away. Just another morning and dreadful day of labor waited for me. As the sun peeked above the mountains, I listened to Drake and Jakeob discuss what happened last night.

"Bloody hell's gotten into him?" Drake muttered.

"Don't know, but if he's listening right now, I'd forgive him," Jakeob replied.

Bootsteps and the dancing of a key chain down the hall interrupted their conversation. A silhouette stopped in front of my cell. I sat up and ignored the shape. I looked away and glared at a worm wiggling its way across the cell floor. I squished the creature with my boots. A splatter of goo stained my soles. If only I could do the same to him.

"Wakey, wakey!" mocked a voice while banging at the bars with his keys.

Camden stood there, bulky arms on his hips, a cheerless grin, and wide-open eyes, a scratch dragging down from his left cheek, taunting me. The stupid light blond hair above his head reflecting the morning sun and faded black strands on the sides infuriated me more. His dark uniform trimmed with gray hugged his body. His gaze stared through me as if I weren't even there.

"What do you want?" I barked, peeling my gaze away at the brick wall.

"You and blondie having a rough time?" He remained still and stunk of Iscar's stain. I sat on my bed, my eyes wandering and picking out one of the cracks on the cement wall before me.

"None of your business," I hissed as my fingernails dug into my palms.

"When friends in the Children of Iscar have a disagreement, we find ways to work things out," he blabbered.

"Great. Go find someone to annoy," I sighed, having no interest in being lectured. I felt a drop of blood lingering on my palm, ready to drip onto the floor.

"It's not too late to join us," he flaunted, and I couldn't stand the note of phoniness in his tone. I dug my nails in, even harder. Hatred shadowed my thoughts, but it wasn't clear whether it was hatred for him or myself.

"I want to see him," I desired to talk to Micah.

"What makes you think I'm just gonna let you talk to him?" Camden sneered.

"I just want to see him," I repeated as my right hand trembled. I tried to stop the motion but couldn't.

"Ain't that sweet. A coward looking out for another coward. Fitting isn't it? Tell you what, I'll play nice and give you fifteen minutes to talk to him before you start work today. Capiche?"

I looked at him again not wanting to compromise with my enemy, but he stood between me and a friendship that needed mending.

"Just take me to him," I grudgingly agreed. I needed to talk sense into Micah.

“Atta boy,” Camden chuckled.

A pair of guards opened the cell door cuffing me and was escorted three cells forward. As I passed the other two cells, I glanced at Drake and Jakeob eating their breakfast. Drake nodded at me like he’d approved of the decision while munching on a boiled egg. Jakeob's face was blank. Perhaps concern or maybe indifference. I don’t know if he thought I was the best person to fix Micah.

I was brought to his cell where he quietly sat in the corner where spiderwebs met. He was lost, staring at the colorless ground. Strands of his hair had fallen overnight leaving more bald splotches. His moldy clothes were covered in fleas and mosquitoes buzzing over his face and body. He ignored them, letting them feast on his blood.

“Make sure to give him his meal. Don’t wanna hear any complaining that he’s hungry,” Camden said, handing me two bowls containing a mixture of scrambled eggs and grapes.

I was uncuffed and shoved inside. The cell door was locked. A chill crawled up my spine. I was afraid for him. A bleak aura in the cell that devoured my spirit. I wasn’t certain I could get him out of this. He needed more help than the sound of my voice and words of encouragement. I wasn’t a therapist or a counselor but a friend.

“Hey bud,” I said while gently placing his bowl beside him.

I sat next to him and ate. My breakfast hardly satisfied the hunger my stomach yearned for. I wanted more food but seconds weren’t allowed. Food here was only meant to keep us from dying and keep us working.

“About yesterday,” I said.

Micah’s stare was the stiffest I’d seen from a pair of human eyes. He hadn’t blinked for a second. He smelled of dog food and wet socks. The collar of his gray shirt was punctured with holes. The cotton of his pants dangled to his calf. His black shoes faded from their original color. My fingernails were crooked

and stuck with dirt while Micah had no nails. His woeful shoulders and scrawny torso were thinner than mine's. He used to be bigger than me and to see him in this state was a punch to the gut.

"What I did to Isaiah, I-I don't know how to explain it," I continued. "Maybe I shouldn't have listened to Gabriel."

Micah remained silent as a library. Nothing I said got him out of this trance. He hadn't bothered to touch his food bowl. I had to get him to talk.

"Your sisters," I said, slowly leaning my head against the wall. I half-expected him to snap at the mention of his sisters. "I made a promise to help you find them. I-"

"My sisters?" Micah whispered. I barely heard the words from his mouth as he talked to the wall.

"We'll find them," I promised.

"Why do you care?" he asked, still not bothering to look at me.

"Because..." I stopped holding my breath. "We're brothers. Like you said, I'm the brother you never had. A brother helps a brother in need."

"Luke," he murmured my name as if it was his last breath.

"Yeah?" I replied.

"Have you ever felt beaten like the entire weight of the world has crumbled on your shoulders?"

"Yeah, plenty of times," I nodded repeatedly.

"Every waking moment, I feel it. Do you know what it feels like being close to death? Peaceful. When I'm not awake, I'm with my sisters, Ma, and Pa."

Micah spoke differently. His use of words disturbed me more than our foes who mistreated us worse than caged animals. Whatever Camden had done to him yesterday stamped out the Micah I remember.

"What did Camden do?" I asked.

Micah hesitated to tell me. He removed his tattered shirt and saw his fading tattoos. Some of the Roman numerals over his left chest were missing. He

carefully titled his body and showed his back. My mouth dropped. Whip lashes, scars, and stitches marred his back. I looked away trying to forget what I saw.

“Camden and I were close friends. Before the war began,” Micah said.

Friends? I almost blurted aloud. My jaw dropped at the revelation.

“Camden and I were closer than brothers,” he continued. “We trained together. We ate together. We fought together. We were sworn as Knights on the same day. Camden was one of us until...until he turned on us.”

Camden. A former Brotherhood Knight? How was it possible?

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I questioned.

“It don’t matter. He hasn’t listened since,” he shook his head.

Micah was right. No matter what we told Camden, he was stuck in his ways. Iscar used him as nothing more than another pawn he could shift the blame.

“Would you forgive him?” I asked.

“Maybe, Maybe not,” Micah shrugged. He hadn’t looked at me once. He talked to the floor as if it could understand him. Why would Camden not listen? What would make him cave into our pleas? Was there any shred of sanity left in him? Camden had shown nothing to prove that he deserved redemption.

“Camden waterboarded me,” Micah finally answered my previous question. “He said this was payback for chopping his hand.”

A storm of vengeance brewed inside of me. My body heat cranked to a fever. I was sick of it all. Micah’s pain. The pain of my friends. The betrayals. The lies. The trickery. I couldn’t witness it a second longer. And Camden. I’d kill him for doing this. I must kill him no matter what he spewed out of his forked tongue. I licked the blood from my hand and made a fist. I made a vow to Micah.

“You should eat your breakfast,” I said, trying to change the topic.

“Why me?” Micah ignored my concerns.

“You still got a lot to fight for. Are you going to let Camden beat you up again? We’re going to get out of here and find your sisters and kill Iscar.” I had to

get out of this prison to steer Micah into the right state of mind. It was the only thing worth fighting for.

“Why do you lean on hope? We lost. There’s nothing we can do,” Micah admitted defeat.

We can't give up! I almost shouted, but held my composure and pondered for a moment. A minute passed and remembered Donovan had spoken about the fourth Sword under his throne. From his shriveled face, shaky voice, and dying hair. On his deathbed, he revealed to me one last speck of hope. A slim chance that whatever it was might be enough to turn the tide. It had to be true.

“If it comes to it, would you do it for me?” he pondered.

“What are you saying?” I was quick to reply.

“I don’t know if I’ll make it.”

“But what about your sisters and Elisa? And your parents?” I raised my voice careful not to yell at my friend.

Micah paused. At last, he turned his head staring into my eyes. I saw the darkest pits of the abyss that drained his goodness. I heard an ethereal voice speaking to me. It was as if I could read his thoughts exactly.

Thank you. I heard him say without moving his mouth. Was this some kind of mind trick on his part or was my mind deceiving me? I looked around and saw no one else who could’ve said those words. Had I gone mad?

Micah leaned against the concrete picking up his food bowl and eating his breakfast. A relieving sight watching him dig into his meal. Like a vulture who found a carcass, he crunched on the eggs and grapes eating the entire bowl in a minute. Not a scrap of egg meat or juice from the grapes remained. I couldn’t read his present thoughts, but I sensed a fire inside of him. I don’t know how it was possible to feel what he felt, but I did. I also sensed his optimism that his family might be out there somewhere. He knew they couldn’t be dead.

“All right ladies, time to get working!” Camden shouted, banging the bars with the keys to open the cell door. The guards entered, cuffing me and Micah to begin our work.

Camden must die!

The sound of his voice irked me. The bubbling lava inside me would erupt any second. What Camden had done to Micah disgusted me. He’d neutered my friend into an empty shell, leaving him unrecognizable. When I got my hands on him, I would break every bone in his frail body, cut his intestines into tiny pieces, and spill his guts over the same soil we shared so that not even his family would recognize him in hell.

Damn him.

The weather was no different from yesterday. This summer was unusually hot. The sun poured buckets of fire on our backs. Water did little to quell it. Some collapsed from exhaustion. They were pulled aside and under the shade of buildings making our labor more difficult with fewer hands to help out. Another tedious day sculpting a statue for Camden. It would take extra hours to complete as prisoners succumbed to the heat. I survived the first half of work when lunchtime came. They lined us up mercifully under the shade as they distributed food from the tavern, the same one I killed Isaiah. I couldn’t remember that day for some reason. It seemed like a decade ago since that day. Having grabbed my food, I exited the tavern where Johnny came up to me and wanted a word.

“Luke,” he uttered my name.

I was perplexed. Not that I disliked it, but because he’d been in a foul mood. With bread and canteen in our hands, we sat at the other side of the tavern where the sun could not touch us.

“Something the matter?” I questioned.

“Sorry for being a dick. I shouldn’t have called you a murderer,” he confessed with a mouthful of bread crumbs on his lips.

"I've been told worse things," I downplayed his rudeness.

He half-smiled and muttered something. "I wanted to show you this little thing I stole from one of the guards." Johnny pulled out a knife concealed in his pockets. I froze, biting my lips, worried one of the Fanatics might've seen it. "Really nice, huh?" he chuckled.

"You shouldn't be carrying that around," I kept a low voice ensuring no one heard us.

"Come on. What's the worst thing that can happen?"

Johnny was oblivious to the consequences he could face for carrying a weapon. This wasn't the proper time to stir trouble. He might hurt or kill someone and pay the ultimate price.

"Return it where you got it from and forget about it," I scolded.

"These assholes deserve what they're gonna get," he cursed.

"Just stop okay!" I raised my voice. "We have a plan to escape."

Johnny smirked. He was arrogant enough thinking he could get away with anything. Just when I figured he was turning the corner, he threw it all away.

"Fine, but when you do it your way, then it's okay?" he rolled his eyes, throwing a tantrum. He stood to his feet walking away to talk to Ryan.

I crossed my fingers wishing he wouldn't cause trouble.

We finished Camden's statute before the night crept, but when one task was done, there was another waiting. The Fanatics instructed us to build a shrine for Camden.

The work never stopped.

On our way to the next site, my legs wobbled and the wax accumulating in my ears made me partially deaf. The stink of my body caused nausea and my clothes were drenched in sweat. I peeled the shirt from my torso like a band-aid, rubbing my hands clean of splinters. The grease of my hair slipped to my eyelids

and the dust in my nose made it difficult to breathe while the light breeze sizzled the sunburn off my burnt skin.

How I could use a bath.

As I gazed down at my feet dragging to the site of the shrine, a commotion grabbed my attention. It was all it took to end an uneventful day. It was just as I feared.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Johnny spat at a guard.

“Do I have to repeat myself, kid?” the guard dragged the boy by his shirt.

“Let me go!” he kicked and screamed.

“Bah, you really think we’re just going to let you go?”

Johnny resisted the Fanatic. I wanted to help, but the other Fanatics watched us and wouldn’t hesitate to interfere if anyone else moved a muscle to interfere.

I watched my friend be subdued by the guard. In a desperate move, he bit the guard’s finger and pulled out a metal object from his pocket. The knife cut across the Fanatic’s neck, wounding them. Other Fanatics ran to the scene and broke up the scuffle. It happened so fast that I must have missed the aftermath. Johnny was quickly disarmed and cuffed. It didn’t take long for word to spread.

Camden marched to the scene and checked on the Fanatic that was being attended to by a medic. They couldn’t stop the bleeding and died half an hour later.

“What the holy hell did you just do?” Camden demanded answers.

“I’ll kill you too!” Johnny’s dry spit landed on Camden’s face as his hands and legs were chained. He kicked and screamed but was too tired to get himself killed on the spot.

Camden laughed it off. “I like your arrogance kid. But arrogance has its consequences.”

Camden would surely execute Johnny for killing a Fanatic. I couldn’t allow that to happen.

“Take me instead!” I shouted at Camden. “It’s my fault I let this happen.”

With a disgruntled look, Camden turned to me. The heels of his military boots stomped the dirt. He towered a foot above me. Unafraid of his stature, I puffed my body and was one thought away from throwing my hands at him, but his guards stepped between us. I was a second away from throwing a fist but realized I was cuffed too.

“I should have expected nothing else from you,” Camden grinned. “but Johnny boy is old enough to understand that his action has consequences. Play by my rules and I’ll think about sparing his life.”

Camden ordered his pawns to cuff Ryan and bring him to us. They pushed him to the ground laying face down adjacent to Johnny. Both of them looked on in distraught. What twisted game did Camden have up his sleeve? I’d kill him right now and rip his heart from his chest even if it cost my life.

“I’ll let you be the judge,” Camden said, walking back and forth with his hands behind his back. “Option one. Johnny boy lives, Ryan dies. Option two. Ryan lives, Johnny boy dies. If you don’t choose before the count of five, I’ll just execute them both. Capiche?”

Why couldn’t it be me? How did it come to this? I should’ve snatched the knife from Johnny the moment I saw it. What have I done?

“One.”

I made a mistake that would haunt me until my last breath. I shouldn’t have trusted Johnny to behave. This was all my fault.

“Two.”

I couldn’t choose between them. Both are my friends. One of them would die because of what I’d done.

“Three.”

Donovan, Cyrus, Cairo, Brett, and now somebody else would join The Brotherhood’s fallen. They hadn’t been given a proper funeral and neither would the person I choose to sacrifice.

“Four.”

Damned if I chose one, damned if chose the other. I had to make a decision now and save the friend that has meant more to me despite my actions that led to this.

“Johnny,” I finally said. “Spare his life.”

With an empty sadness, Ryan stared at my shadow.

Betrayal.

If someone deserved to kill me, it was Ryan. He had every right to feel that way. It should’ve been me.

“See. That wasn’t so hard now was it?” Camden cackled, tapping the crown of my head like a small child. “Take him to the gallows!”

Their torches illuminated the darkness. Their guillotines were splattered in red from yesterday. Camden didn’t think it scared us enough so he hung nude bodies on nooses, some of whom were executed months ago. Their intestines dangled from their stomachs and their scalps were cut open. Their brains were swallowed by maggots nibbling on their meat.

Ryan would join them and the thought of seeing a friend strung up terrified me. Two consecutive days of an execution which hadn’t happened before. A noose was placed around Ryan’s neck. The only thing standing between his feet and the ground was the wooden floor.

Johnny shivered, perhaps scared at what was about to happen. He’d berated me for the past few days, but he was okay with me standing by his side. A river of tears trickled down his soft cheeks. Guilt for what his actions led to. We were both to blame for this travesty, but I should’ve been the one to have prevented it. And I didn’t. Unable to stop the madness, someone interrupted the scene pleading for an end.

“Stop this now!” they furiously demanded.

The flames from the torches bounced from their light brown hair.

Gabriel.

What Brett and Ryan had done to him two years ago seemed to be a blip of the past. He'd put it behind showing sympathy for one of his former enemies.

"I hear that every day," Camden mocked. "but being courageous and stupid don't match. A perfect match for the likes of you."

Cuffed and tired, Gabriel bulldozed his way forward but Fanatics halted his progress. He was overcome by their sheer numbers and was dragged away.

"I'm gonna kill you all! You fucking hear me!" Gabriel roared before being taken to the asylum,

Camden shrugged and resumed the process. Ryan looked at the faces of the crowd as if he was about to break down in tears. Gabriel tried to save him and I'd done the best of my ability to reverse the damage. We were forced to be witnesses. Every waking second of it. There had to be something I could do.

"Any final words?" Camden asked Ryan.

Ryan shed a tear. He looked in circles one final time. Lost and confused. He'd barely spoken a word to me since Brett died keeping the others safe from the same fate. And I failed them both.

Why did it have to be this way?

"Mom? Dad? Brett?" he muttered.

Ryan's last thoughts were of his mother, father, and best friend. His words stabbed a dagger in my heart of darkness.

"In the name of Iscar, let this dissenter reach paradise so their freedom will be achieved without any more prolonging," Camden preached.

The floor he stood on collapsed. Ryan gasped for air gurgling louder our gasps. He squirmed and twitched and kicked and punched the wind in front of him. He fought with what he had left. Johnny looked away plugging his ears wishing not to see and hear the end. I closed my eyes with him holding him closer to my shoulders.

"Mom! Dad! Brett!" Ryan gasped for a final time, but no one came.

I lost my will to fight for him.

The shadow of death loomed over me.

-III-

A Friend In Need

Elbows and knees scrapped. The Children of Iscar dragged me through hell and tied a noose around my neck. I looked at the distraught faces of my friends. The platform below me fell. I couldn't cry or scream for help. I gasped my last breath and saw Ryan's body hanging beside me.

I snapped back to reality. My hair and blankets were soaked in sweat as usual. I sat up touching the sheets and walls. My right hand trembled again. I couldn't control it. Finn had crafted me a new brace so I could work without the pain, but it didn't seem to fix the shaking that plagued me. A loud commotion muddled my thoughts. Nearby, someone screamed for help.

"He needs help!" shouted a guard.

I wedged my head between the rusty bars, trying to figure out what was going on. A guard opened the cell door down three spaces.

"The bloody hell's going on?" Drake asked.

Camden and a dozen or so Fanatics arrived at Micah's cell.

"Is he alive?" Camden asked.

"He's barely breathing," replied a guard.

"Take him to Finn."

"Yes sir."

I froze as the guards carried Micah's body out of his cell on a stretcher. I couldn't see his face, just his clothes and hair. He didn't move a muscle.

"Micah," I whispered his name as if it was my last word.

"What did ya planks do to Micah!" Drake spat at Camden who turned his attention to us. A blank look that hid something sinister.

"Nada," Camden shook his head.

“Liar!” Jakeob shook the bars and demanded answers.

Camden shrugged. “We found him unconscious. What did you want me to do? Babysit him?”

“You hurt him! I know you did you fucking liar!” Jakeob cursed.

“I’m always a man of my word. Now, will you excuse me, gentlemen? I have other things to attend to.”

“Camden, get back here!” Jakeob rattled the bars.

Minutes passed and we remained mostly silent. Jakeob and Drake believed it was Camden or one of the guards that did something. We didn’t know what else to say or believe. The Fanatics offered us breakfasts, but we refused to eat. We wanted answers. The guards ignored our questions. Someone hurt Micah and that bothered me. A half piece of bread was all they gave us. They were reducing the food we ate. I smashed the tray into the wall. I hated it.

“You all right mate?” Drake asked.

I did not respond and sat on my bed, alone.

An hour passed. I sat with my hands clasped to my knees hoping for Micah. I needed to see him and get to the bottom of this travesty. Camden and his cronies had something to do with it. Even if Micah succumbed to illness, they were responsible for the abysmal health he was in.

The Fanatics banged the bars with their swords shouting at us to wake up. They chained and lined us. A long day of labor had begun. They lined up Drake and Jakeob and everyone else, but they left me. Did they forget about me?

The asylum emptied leaving me the sole prisoner. A minute passed. Or ten? I didn’t know anymore and didn’t care. Camden knocked on my cell. I should lunge at him when he opened the door but like the coward he was, a pair of Fanatics entered first.

“Where’s Micah!?” I barked.

“He’s fine,” Camden answered.

“Is he alive?”

“If you say so.”

“What did you do to him!” I glared at his smug look.

“I did nada and neither did my men,” Camden lied and I knew it.

“Give me a goddamn reason why I should trust anything that comes out of your mouth?” I was losing my voice. “If you did something to him, I swear to god that I’m going to make sure that every drop of blood, sweat, and tear you have inflicted on him will be covered over your dead body!”

“We found Micah lying on the floor, unconscious, and barely breathing. We think he tried to commit suicide by hanging himself,” Camden lied again.

Suicide? Micah wouldn’t dare to do that, would he?

“That’s impossible!” I shook my head.

Camden. It had to be Camden. He wanted to kill Micah at night and tried to frame him for committing suicide.

Kill Camden. I must.

I lunged at Camden, but the guards were ready. I almost connected my fist to his nose. I was grappled from both shoulders and pinned to the floor.

“Let me go!” I kicked and clawed at their uniforms.

The guards cuffed my hands and chained my legs. They brought me to my feet to comfort Camden.

“You’re hanging out with me today,” he smirked.

“Fuck you,” I spit saliva into his eye wiping the snob from his face. I did not regret it.

Camden glared back and pulled a dagger from his belt stabbing at my gut. I collapsed and gurgled vomit and mucus. I gasped for air while my heart pumped a stream of blood up my belly.

“Bring him to me!” Camden howled.

A flimsy band-aid stitched my wound. That’s all these imbeciles gave me. It barely stopped the bleeding. Every time I inhaled, my guts cried for help. I

couldn't stand straight. I hunched and my lower back buckled under the stress. My body weighed bricks and the day had only begun.

The throne room was Camden's playground. The marble floors were molded with their footprints. The white walls had their flags hung up. Torture devices were placed on the edges. Tables were stacked with papers, books, maps, swords, shields, bows, and arrows. Camden's wife Becky slouched on the throne chair. A senile smile stretched across her face as she watched, pleased at our misery.

My first job was to clean the entire throne room. Camden brought Johnny to assist me. I had the urge to tell him about what happened to Micah. His master had nearly perished. I struggled to lean down or crawl on the floor when we scrubbed the floors with soap and a bucket of water. Every time Fanatics walked in, they purposely rubbed their dirty boots staining the floor again. A never-ending cycle.

"You okay?" Johnny asked.

I shook my head and continued the task. Johnny was more helpful than I expected. He agreed to do most of the cleaning while I whipped the dust from the tables and polished their swords.

"Luke boy! In here." Camden nodded to his room.

I waddled inside entering an unorganized room littered with junk. Books were displaced from their shelves, unfolded piles of clothes tossed around, crumbs of food scattered over the carpet, and broken furniture that needed fixing. This looked to be staged on purpose to overwork us.

"Make sure my room is spotless before dusk. Is that clear?" he commanded.

"Yes," I mumbled.

With a damp towel and a bucket of water, I cleaned every speck of dust I found on the wardrobes and desks. Johnny picked up the trash on the floor with

his hands and dumped them in a bag. Camden lay on his bed reading a torn magazine several years old.

“Make sure to clean my bathroom too,” Camden pointed at the room.

Like his bedroom, the bathroom was a complete mess. The toilet was clogged with human feces. The stench of diarrhea sent a sour taste up my nostrils. Using my hand, I covered my nose and began cleaning the bathroom. I unclogged the toilet with a plunger and cleaned the bowl and seat with a scrub and soap. I stopped for a minute to catch my breath. My heaving echoed. I grunted every time I leaned down. The blood had dried but the agony was impossible to bear. It was too damn hot in here. I pulled up my shirt and waved it to fan myself. My forehead warmed and a sore throat made me thirstier. Drinking water was not an option. Not until we got our break.

I pressed on and cleaned the bathtub and the black widow nests in the corners of the room. When I finished, my head boiled. With the back of my hand, I graced my cheeks and temple. My body temperature soared.

“Don’t you forget to clean the other room,” Camden pointed to the other room.

Johnny and I followed orders. We entered another bedroom cluttered with the same filth. This one was slightly different when we saw a small cage sitting in a corner. There seemed to be nothing until we approached it and saw an animal sleeping. I saw a friend I hadn’t seen in a year.

Falco!

The husky woke up barking and wagging its tail thrilled to see us again. Johnny and I were just as ecstatic to see Falco.

“Hey boy,” I said, petting the animal through the cage bars. “We missed you.”

Johnny smiled for the first time in a while. Joyful to see his best friend, the boy rubbed the back of Falco’s ears.

“Missed you so much boy!” he cried.

Falco responded with a soft whimper and playful licks, but the reunion was short-lived.

“What did I say?” Camden interrupted. “Quit wasting time and get back to work!”

“Why can’t you leave us alone?” Johnny’s temper triggered. Falco gnarled at Camden scratching the cage.

“I won’t repeat myself again or else.”

Johnny stood firm. He showed little fear. Stubborn perhaps. I was anxious that the boy would attack him and be sentenced to his execution. I wished to kill Camden, but he carried the same dagger that he struck me with and was accompanied by a pair of Fanatics wielding swords. And the pain in my abdomen had worsened. It was like having a terrible stomach ache. A death sentence if I foolishly tried what I did earlier.

“You don’t get to call the shots!” Johnny disobeyed.

Camden laughed. “You trying to be funny kid? That shit doesn’t work under my rules, capiche?”

“You’re an asshole!” Johnny spat.

“Say that again,” Camden took a step forward.

“I said, you’re an asshole!” the boy said it louder.

Camden cackled while faking an applause. “Kid, you shouldn’t be using that language. No wonder The Brotherhood deserved to die just like Cyrus.”

Johnny nearly landed a punch on Camden only for it to come up short. He’d stifled the attack in mid-motion. Falco barked, wishing he could jump into the action.

“A little close there kid. You’re quite the rebellious one,” Camden smirked. I feared the worst, but Camden shoved Johnny into me. I restrained the boy from further aggravating Camden.

“Luke boy. Since you can’t control your little friend, why don’t you teach him a lesson for us?” Camden demanded.

“What are you up to?” I panted trying to breathe properly.

“This little brat tried to attack me and you think that won’t go unpunished? Smack the runt with your fist in his nose and if you don’t hit the little shit hard enough, then you’ll both join the gallows.”

I stared into Johnny’s green eyes worried that I might hurt him. I’d watch him sob and share his pain. He looked at me and nodded. He wanted this. I was in pain already. What more did I need to go through?

“Do it,” the boy whispered.

“What? I won’t allow you to get hurt,” I wheezed.

“I’ll be okay,” he insisted.

Despite his frustrations toward me, he still demonstrated some concern for me. He was willing to sacrifice himself to spare us from a cruel fate. It was either him or the both of us.

I obeyed his demands. I wrapped my good arm into a fist since it was the only one Camden would permit. Thankfully, I wasn’t at one hundred percent. This wouldn’t hurt as much as it would. I took a deep breath before I did the unthinkable. He stood there with the utmost confidence. An unfounded maturity he’d found.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured under my feverish nostrils.

Johnny closed his eyes. With my left hand, I struck his nose. My knuckles cracked bone and tissue. Johnny crumbled to the ground. He did his best to not cry like the boy he was. Blood trickled from his nose and wept how I imagined he would.

“I’m so sorry,” I told him, but wouldn’t stop shrieking.

“How does it feel Johnny boy?” Camden sneered.

Johnny couldn’t speak. He rolled on the ground, wincing and covering his nose. I watched helplessly while I tried to clean his face with the towel I used to clean the rooms. Worst of all, Camden didn’t offer him any medical attention.

With a smug look on his face, he left the room. He basked in watching my friends suffer and it made me sick.

Camden must die!

“It’s okay,” I said, pulling him to his feet. A sliver of saliva and tears slimmed my fingers.

“My nose,” he bawled into my shirt.

I carried the boy back to his feet allowing him to rest his head on my good shoulder. We returned to the throne room in time for our lunch break but spent most of the time stitching his wounds. I wiped his wound with alcohol and a handkerchief. He wouldn’t stop twitching and kicking every time I touched his nose.

“It’s my fault,” Johnny’s tears dripped onto his sagging pants that exposed the border of his undershorts.

“It’s no one’s fault,” I reminded him.

“Ryan is dead because of me!” Johnny whimpered.

“Time’s up little girls! Back to work!” Camden cut our break shorter than what we were promised.

Camden must die!

There was no point in fighting back and making the situation worse than it needed to be. Not with my friend in this much pain. He was more important than vowing Camden’s blood on my hands.

Johnny could no longer help me clean the floor. As he recovered, Camden forced him to be his pet. Camden sat and watched me clean while resting his feet on Johnny’s back as an ottoman. He ate a bag of chips and a glass of water for his entertainment.

“Fill me the glass of water,” Camden ordered the boy.

Johnny obeyed and brought a full glass of water back to Camden. The stitched scar across his crooked nose infuriated me. I could’ve stopped him, but I froze like the coward I was. Johnny came back from the water jug with a glass

full. Camden took a quick sip but spat the liquid and intentionally dropped the glass cup on the floor shattering it.

“Too warm!” he barked and kicked Johnny in the ribs. “Clean it up and give me cold water now dammit!” But the boy stood back up, groaning and crying. He battled through it and grabbed the broom and dustpan and swept the glass away.

The day came to an end. No executions, but the day was the most excruciating thus far. Drake, Jakeob, and I gathered in a cell for tonight, but no Micah. They asked what happened to my belly where I was still in much pain if I made any movement. I told them the truth.

“That bloody wanker!” Drake raged as well as in Jakeob’s eye.

“I’ll kill him,” I promised them as I glared at a cockroach running in between the cell bars.

We discussed what we think had happened to Micah. Neither Jakeob nor Drake heard anything suspicious this morning to suspect someone snuck into his cell and brutalized him. I told them what happened to Johnny reassuring them that The Children of Iscar and Camden were behind it.

“These buggers must be quieter than a library,” Drake said.

“What if they didn’t do anything?” Jakeob wondered.

“Don’t be bloody ridiculous. Ya know well these wankers done somethin’ to the poor lad.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the knocking and opening of the cell door. The two Fanatics didn’t enter because Johnny was pushed inside. His nose was thankfully stitched in layers of clean bandage.

“Johnny? What are you doing here?” I asked.

“They said I’m staying at Micah’s cell for the night. Did something happen to him?”

Silent. We didn't dare to tell him what happened to his master. It would devastate him, but we couldn't hide it under the rug and pretend nothing was wrong.

"He got hurt," I explained.

Johnny stared at the ceiling, counting the number of bricks as I'd done before. I expected a more sincere reaction from him. Today wasn't his best day and maybe that clouded his mind. He lowered his head and sat beside me curling beside my shoulder like a kneading kitten.

"Well young chap, sure you heard we plan to get out of this bloody shithole." Drake lowered his voice at the mention of our plans. "I say if Micah is feeling better, we make our escape tomorrow night."

"How exactly do you intend on getting us out?" Jakeob inquired.

Drake pulled a shiny object from his pockets. A brass key. "Got this little shimmer," he grinned.

"Where'd you get that?" Jakeob questioned.

"I pickpocketed one of them buggers who patrol the asylum."

"You did it while you were chained?" Jakeob doubted.

"Bloody fucking yes. That's why I use my brain. Ya dimwits should use it more often," Drake quipped.

Jakeob shrugged. "Okay smart ass, how do we slip past their patrols in the streets?"

"I've snuck out and watched their patrol routes at night for weeks," Drake explained. "They got only two here and almost none in the streets and walls. They think they got us locked up nice and tight, but they 'bout to be caught with their pants down."

"And where do we go once we're out of the city?" Jakeob asked.

"We find and kill Iscar," I said.

"Jumping the gun mate? We can't do it alone ya know," Drake insisted.

"What else do we do?" I asked.

“I dunno,” Drake shrugged.

“The Resistencia?” Jakeob said.

“Gone,” I shook my head.

“We don’t know that for sure. What about The Sacred and The Kingdom?” Jakeob tried to make some sense.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “Even if we could, there’s not a chance we could travel across the world and expect them to have an army as formidable as The Children of Iscar.”

Jakeob and I went back and forth talking out what our next objective was. Defeating Iscar was our priority, but what army did we have? In our current state, it would take a miracle to defeat him. Was there anyone else out there that would ally with us? What mattered first is to escape and figure out our next move.

Our time together ran out. The Fanatics came in to take us back to our cells where I lay in bed, stretching my arms and legs while avoiding any stress on my abdomen. I didn’t need any sleep whatsoever. What I needed was a bath and we didn’t get one until Sunday. I scratched at every part of my body until the itching resumed. Fleas tried to nest their home in my hair. My feet reeked of spoiled cheese and my armpit sweat slipped through the holes of my shirt. Like a jacket slimmed in mud, I rolled to my side and licked the back of my hand and arms. My saliva wasn’t enough to make it comfortable to sleep. The Children of Iscar blew out the candles and lanterns, bringing the darkness.

I embraced it.

-IV-

Retribution

I held somebody in my arms. A white blur over their face blinded me.

Grief. Sorrow. Death.

The white glow dissipated. My friends entered the room to hear what had happened.

Billy.

The side of his neck punctured by a knife. William's body lay close by. I killed him but my friend was gone. His face shifted before my eyes. Another boy's face materialized.

Luka.

Skin tissue crisped by white phosphorous. Bone marrow exposed. Soot burned my eyes. It lasted for a short moment. His face shifted to someone else's.

Johnny.

Shot in the heart. I'd failed to save him. Their murderer appeared to be a woman whose eyes and hair were shrouded in the white glow. A gun in her hand. She grinned at having taken my friend's life. I wailed and begged for my friend to wake up.

Gone.

I rolled my eyes, screaming in pain. Alone in my cell, my soul echoed the asylum's halls.

"Luke. You all right mate?" Drake asked.

Everyone must've heard me. I sat up and took a deep breath.

"Just a bad dream," I mumbled.

"Johnny's okay," Jakeob said. "We heard you whispering and screaming about him."

I sighed hearing Johnny's loud snores drown out my chatter. He was okay, for now.

Our breakfast consisted of white bread and a quarter slice of rotting banana. Everything tasted like salt water. I regurgitated the bread and slid the tray away wishing to never eat this again. Then, the usual happened. Chained up and taken to begin today's labor.

Johnny and I were back at the throne room with Camden. Not much changed since yesterday. The same mundane tasks. Cleaning and organizing the throne room while Johnny was utilized as a servant for Camden's amusement.

"You're quite the loyal kid, ain't ya Johnny boy?" Camden mocked as he instructed him to get a glass of water.

Johnny nodded. He was in a lot of angst, but he understood that he must save his composure for what must happen later tonight. It should be our last day here assuming Micah recovered.

As our break began, Camden ordered us to meet him at the throne chair. He pulled a Cuban cigar from his pockets and inhaled and exhaled puffs of nicotine and toxic in front of us. The ash trickled to the spotless floor for us to clean after our break.

"I'm letting you both see Micah, but only during your break," he offered.

"Why should we believe you?" I frowned at Camden's folly smirk.

"Why shouldn't you Luke boy? We all worry for Micah. He was my friend and he's yours now," he said, inhaling another round from the cigar.

"Liar!" I spat.

"If that's what you want, fine by me," he shrugged. "Might be the last time you see that's if he doesn't wake up soon,"

"What?"

"You heard me. Hasn't moved since. Not my fault if you don't see him again."

Micah's condition worsened? If his life was hanging by a thread, I must do him a favor before it's too late.

"Let me see him," I shifted my tone but was still weary of any trickery.

Camden cackled and exhaled a stream of smoke that hovered into my nostrils. "Well, well, well," he clapped. "I like the sounds of that. A friend looking out for one another. That is until they stab you in the back."

"Just take me to him." I was careful what to say and not ruin the offer. I wanted to lunge and slit him by the throat, but I thought of Micah first and his well-being. He mattered more than this ingrate sitting and making a mockery of the throne chair by slumping against it.

"As you wish," Camden stood up and gestured at the Fanatics to take us to Micah.

He did as promised.

Inside the bedroom where Micah rested, there were large red curtains, a rectangular window, and a sofa that sparkled in gold and blue. This used to be Donovan's room, but most of the furniture was gone or moved around or desecrated. The audacity Camden had to tarnish the legacy of The Brotherhood's first Grand Prelate by having Micah rest on the same bed Donovan perished.

I sighed seeing Finn alive and well. He was occupied, using his medical knowledge and instruments to ensure my friend was recovering well. The guards removed our chains allowing me to meet with the Paladin. They watched us from the door to ensure we didn't try to escape through the window or discuss other matters. I hadn't seen the white streak on his hair and pale skin in months. That hadn't changed one bit over the years.

"Hey Lucas," he said as we embraced "Long time no see kiddo."

"How's Micah?" I asked, looking over his shoulder at my sleeping friend.

"He hasn't moved. He's gotta nasty bruise around his neck," Finn said.

Micah lay peacefully on the bed. Eyes shut, tanner skin, the same ugly clothes, and a purple bruise over his neck confirmed Finn's analysis.

"Did someone else do it?" I questioned.

"Don't, but his neck was wrapped with an object," Finn explained.

It had to be Camden. It must have been him or he ordered one of his guards to cover up his act. The whole thing was staged and I knew it. I stared at my battered friend pondering what was going through his mind. Maybe he was dreaming of his sisters and his family. How he missed them so much. I was certain he thought of them every night. Now than ever, he needed my support.

"Will he be okay?" Johnny asked.

"He sustained minor injuries and asphyxiation. A lack of oxygen in his system likely knocked him out, but I'd expect him to wake up any day," Finn said, checking Micah's pulse.

Camden lied.

Micah would make it.

A good lie? Micah wouldn't die.

Johnny watched his mentor with sorrowful eyes. There was nothing to celebrate until Micah was back to normal. I uttered a prayer to any god above wishful that he would recover today as impossible it may seem.

We sat down on the couch waiting for minutes and taking the time to recuperate our stamina before returning to work. I thought about what our next move would be after getting out of Solomon. Jakeob suggested we go to Imperium and kill Iscar. That has been everyone's goal for a lifetime, but it'd be a suicide mission. Our best bet was figuring out if The Resistencia, The Kingdom, or The Sacred still existed. Someone had to be out there. The Resistencia may be no more, but what about the others? We need their help. To defeat Iscar and end the war. And the fourth Masonic Sword. I hadn't told anyone about it. Was I the only one who knew? Someone else had to know about its existence. Was it the

key to defeating Iscar? He has three in possession. How could one Sword overpower three?

“Ugh,” a voice groaned.

I rolled my head and gazed across the room. His head and fingers twitched. He showed life. Awake from his slumber.

“Micah,” I said, jumping from my seat.

Johnny and Finn followed behind me.

“Where am I?” Micah groaned, flickering his eyes and adjusting to the light.

“You’re in His Highnesses’ old room,” Finn replied.

“Finn? Johnny? Luke? What are you doing here?” Micah’s eyes widened.

“We were worried about you,” I said.

Johnny approached his mentor. He responded with a heartfelt hug. “Are you all right?”

“Of course, but I am a little thirsty,” Micah chuckled, sparking our spirits. “Man, you’ve sure grown a lot. I mean look at you, you’re almost my height.”

Finn handed Micah a cup of water. He chugged it whole before I asked what I needed to know. “Camden and his guards found you unconscious in your cell. What happened?”

He lowered his head to the pillow and remained silent. Seconds passed and it wasn’t like him to take forever to spit out the truth.

“I-I don’t remember,” Micah answered in an unconvincing voice.

I believed that a guard attacked him, but for some reason, I didn’t buy that he didn’t remember. He withheld something that bothered him. Micah coughed mucus from his lungs spitting blood.

“You should rest first kiddo,” Finn said, handing Micah a handkerchief to wipe his mouth.

Micah groaned whenever he moved. I was too quick to ask him such a question. Having barely woken up, I foolishly expected him to have the answers I wanted. He'd been through a lot, but there was no chance I would trust Camden over Micah. We knew who the real enemy here was.

“Would you look at what the cat dragged back from the dead?” Camden mocked with a round of applause. I pivoted back glaring at Camden warning him not to meddle with Micah. “Aww, such a sweet reunion. You guys tugged at my heartstrings. How beautiful. How touching,” he faked a crying sound.

“What do you want?” I hissed.

“Easy there Luke boy. Time to get back to work. All of you including blondie,” Camden said.

“He's still recovering,” I looked around at Micah, defending him.

“Fine,” Camden rolled his eyes waving his light hair. “Keep a watchful eye on blondie.” He instructed his left guard to stay in the bedroom. “I'll play nice here and allow him to stay in bed today. But tomorrow, he's back to work. No excuses.”

Good luck with that asshole. I wanted to say. I obeyed and allowed them to chain me and Johnny back to work.

Johnny and I tried our best to not exhaust ourselves or find any more trouble with Camden. We worked without raising suspicion of our intent tonight. Thankfully, Micah was awake meaning tonight was the night to break out of Solomon. I'd miss Solomon for what it once held inside its hollow walls. Joining The Brotherhood of the Templar and the friends I made over the past few years would forever remain etched in my memory.

As the day dwindled, Camden had one last thing to say to us. He puffed another stream of smoke from the cigar as he slumped on the throne chair. “Someone decided to create a little havoc today.” I knew what that meant. He

wasted no time moving us to the gallows to watch. I hoped this would be over soon.

At the gallows, I avoided looking at the corpses hanging on a leafless tree. Ryan was one of them and I hadn't seen his decomposing body since that fateful day. The other strung corpses have been there for weeks if not months. Their skin and meat were eaten by animals such as worms and cockroaches and crows. Maggots and mosquitos had sucked the blood of each one except for the most recent victim. I closed my eyes as I passed near the tree. The stench of decaying bodies, piss, and waste grew unbearable that other prisoners vomited their last meal.

Cuffed with chains, everyone crowded in a circle listening Camden speak a lot of nonsense. His voice had grown insufferable by this point. He had a light screech underneath it that reeked of a coward who wouldn't know what to do if he fought by himself. Before my mind wandered off into the netherworld, the prisoner was brought forward. A rag covered their head, but their broad shoulders, larger muscle frame, and height gave me a hint. A strand of light brown hair curled to the back of his neck. It's who I didn't want it to be.

"For too long, this outcast has brought chaos and disorder to our glorious society," Camden blabbered. "He has harmed one of our own and for that, he must endure our retribution for bringing a sinful and disobedient character into our realm."

The rag over his head was removed. Gasps and jaws spread like wildfire. Gabriel.

Attempted escape and murder resulted in execution, but any other infraction resulted in whipping. I don't know if what Camden said was true about him assaulting a Fanatic, but things looked bleak for Gabriel. He wore no clothes exposing his hairy chest, back, legs, and feet. He only wore his black undershorts riddled with holes. Gabriel was tied to the whipping post. The humiliation he must endure had only begun. I long considered him to be my best friend and

couldn't do a damn thing to save him. I had to listen to his pleas for mercy. I had to smell the blood and filth. I had to taste defeat and suffering. I had to watch.

“In the name of Iscar, let this dissenter reach paradise. Let their freedom be realized,” Camden preached.

A Fanatic pulled a whip and lashed Gabriel's spine. Leather smacking bone echoed throughout the ruins of Solomon. He tried not to wince. He bit his lips groaning under his breath.

The whipping continued for a minute, and then another. Each whip seemed louder than the last. The welts on his back began to dig deeper. A layer of his skin was chipped away like melting ice. Gabriel held his composure trying not to make a sound of pain. He tried his damndest to become a survivor.

After more than a dozen lashes, they kept going. By now, the whipping had stopped but not this one. Gabriel had barely made a sound, but his breathing deteriorated to wheezes and coughs. Black and red cuts streaked across his bare back. He was down on both knees and sensed he was on the verge of leaving this Earth for good. There seemed to be no end in sight as the lashing intensified.

Camden had lied. The punishment worsened. Each whip was a visceral dissection of Gabriel who was showing signs that this was too much for him. He tattered to a knee clinging onto the post for dear life. Camden looked at me momentarily while I cried like a wimp. He wanted me to watch my friend die a slow grueling death. He would submit me into oblivion. Gabriel and I were still childhood friends. We'd lost our touch from time to time, but that made us stronger and wiser. If he died, what would be left of me? Would this be how I repaid him for all the things he has done for me?

My instincts called.

I must save my friend.

With chained hands and legs, I moved forward and shoved the guard in front of me. There was surprisingly little resistance from the line of guards who

spectated the crowd. I jumped in front of Gabriel before the Fanatic could whip him again.

“Stop!” I pleaded, raising both my hands and kneeling.

The Fanatic halted before lashing at Gabriel for the hundredth time. Camden stepped in, cackling like a parrot.

“Well, well, well. I can’t say I’m surprised that you came in to save your pathetic friend. Ain’t that sweet?” he mimicked a kiss.

Gabriel lay on his belly with his hands hanging from the post. The skin on his back was nearly scalded to the bone like a peeled orange. Barely awake, he took desperate breaths to recoup his consciousness.

“Why don’t you spare him and let me take the whipping?” I begged Camden to listen just this once.

“D-don’t l-listen t-to h-him,” Gabriel’s spit burbled in his mouth.

I glanced at him seeing death in his eyes. I wouldn’t allow Camden to finish the job. Not as long as I was around. He used Gabriel to lure me out and got what he wanted.

“Out of all the things you’ve said, this is the dumbest by far,” Camden sniveled at me. The shadow of his nose enlarged to the size of his ego. He walked toward me tapping the crown of my head. “but I gotta give you credit Luke boy, you got balls of steel. Doubt anyone here would volunteer to do something so foolish. I’m a nice guy ain’t I? So I’ll fulfill your little wish. Tie him up!”

The Fanatics knocked me to the ground landing a series of kicks and fists from every direction. They took off my chains, tore up my shirt, ripped my pants from my waist, stripped my undershorts, and bind me to the whipping post. I kneeled naked in front of thousands who would watch judgment fall upon me. Whatever came next would not be for the faint of heart. I was prepared to confront their wrath.

It’ll be okay, I stupidly thought.

Anxiety, fear, and shock hovered through the night. My friends screamed for help. Johnny, Drake, Jakeob, Finn, Elisa, and Micah. They would be witnesses to my indignation.

A Fanatic delivered the first lash on my bare spine. It didn't hurt one bit. Was I numb to any form of punishment?

Another lash struck my back. This time, it felt too real.

A third strike swiped my lower back which felt worse than the first two. The whipping sound quaked my fragile human self.

The fourth lash caused me to groan and bite my tongue. I didn't want to affirm to Camden that I was weak as he thought I was.

The fifth lash left me no choice but to accept my fate.

The sixth made my eyes water.

The seventh begged me for it to stop.

By the eighth, I was lashed to eternal damnation.

After each strike, my cries grew louder. I couldn't withstand such cruelty. I'd die on my own terms knowing Gabriel wouldn't have made it out alive if no one had intervened. Camden finally got what he wanted. The ingrate savored this moment.

"STOP THIS NOW!" Micah fiercely yelled. He was somewhere in the crowd. I could see him stepping forward hunching from the injuries he was still recovering from. Camden cockily raised an eyebrow, basking in my torment.

Micah risked it all by rallying the former Knights from the crowd to do something. It appeared as if they were ready to retaliate in mass. To do whatever it took to stop this. They'd seen enough. Some of them fought with punches and kicks. Micah limped forward in an attempt to save me, but Camden brought us back to reality when he pulled a child from the brewing mob and threatened to cleave his dagger in their neck.

“You fucking coward! Let them go!” Micah snapped, balling both fists ready to launch himself at the wall of Fanatics that had their swords and spears drawn.

I was unable to recall what occurred next as the whipping continued. My back was numb to each subsequent whip. The world crumbled and was tilted upside down. My body shook from the lashes that had been inflicted on me. I lost my memory from minutes ago. I couldn’t remember what I was here for.

“Please stop this god dammit!” Micah exclaimed.

My friends listened to the cracking of each lash chipping at my skin. I crumbled to the ground as vomit and mucus drooled from my mouth. I choked on the dirt my teeth had munched on. Becoming a voodoo doll stabbed in needles, I became paralyzed. Unable to move a muscle, feel a nerve, or sense a pulse, my eyes focused on Gabriel who lifted to one knee and stared down at me with a look of concern.

“Luke. Can you hear me?” Gabriel’s rotten breath calmed me. A tear of his landed on my hair. I struggled to keep awake or spell out that I was okay. I didn’t want to pass out and prove Camden right, but I succumbed to his malice. My filthy body exposed to their godless acts. I closed my eyes and kissed the earth one last time.

The fire from their torches faded into my dreams.

-V-

Escape

Dark clouds loomed. My most cherished memories trapped in damnation. A worthy punishment for my sins. This was my destiny. An emptiness devoured me. I didn't know what I was or what became of me. Human, a different kind of breed perhaps.

My beaten body weighed an anvil. I couldn't move a muscle even as I rested face down. Sunlight peeked through the barred window and despite the rays heating the dank walls, the morning chill scalded the marks riddled on my back.

Hungry.

Thirsty.

Filthy.

Freezing.

My fate was sealed and there was not a thing I could do but bear the torture. A carcass to slowly rot in his slumber.

Luke. I was half awake when someone uttered my name. The souls of the dead must've spoken to me. I rolled my eyes, finding myself resting on my bed. I moved my fingers and took a breath, cramping my abdomen in the process.

Alive. I was still alive.

Luke. Are you there?

I heard my name a second time.

Luke. Can you talk to me?

The voice whispered near me. I slowly turned my head to its side but there was no one here. Where was the whispering coming from? Behind the solid walls or was my mind deceiving me?

Luke. I think I can talk to you without being there.

The faint voice sounded like Micah, but he wasn't anywhere near. No one appeared to be in the asylum. The silent halls echoed my grunts and moans and he'd spoken to me like he was right beside me.

"How?" I said in my breathless voice.

No response. Was Micah communicating through my mind? As preposterous as it sounded, I focused my thoughts and projected them to him.

Micah. Can you hear me? I conjured the words into my mind.

Luke? Micah's voice replied. *It's me, Micah.*

Are we speaking telepathically? I asked.

Yup. he said.

How's it possible?

His Highness said that holding the Masonic Swords can grant the wielder strange abilities even after they've lost possession.

So they have a mind of their own or something?

I think so.

Where are you? I questioned.

I'm in the throne room. Are you okay? he worryingly asked. I could feel his emotions as if he was beside me.

I'm feeling a little better.

Micah stopped the conversation. Something had gone awry and I could sense things had taken a turn.

Micah? I yelled his name in my mind.

I gotta go now, is all he said before stopping entirely. I tried to stream my thoughts to him but my attempts were futile. A modest headache halted me from continuing. I was in much pain and conveying mental words didn't help matters.

The agony worsened and it wasn't from the bruises. An inner pain struck me trying to possess my soul. A sentience from within winced and cried for help.

Micah? I called him.

No answer.

A voice reeked of desperation. A lash pounded my spine, but nothing had actually struck me. I felt another whip and then another. The agony continued and heard screams that belonged to Micah. I couldn't help. I tried to communicate again, but nothing. A cascade of sweat poured from my hair spreading over my sandy skin. I slipped into a forgiving rest, unable to find answers.

"Is he awake?" someone said.

I rolled and opened my eyes and was welcomed by shadow. Numbness mired me like a wool coat wrapped around me. The pain lingered, a symptom of my weakness shedding from my embattled spirit.

"He's awake," said another faint voice.

A muggy night that blinded me, but I recognized their silhouettes, their voices, and their postures. Their eyes glimmered from the faint milky light of the moon. Drake and Jakeob had snuck into my cell with the key Drake had shown us.

"We're getting the bloody hell outta here." The outline from Drake's lips moved.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Jakeob protested.

"We don't have a choice mate." Drake shook his head.

"Luke isn't in any condition to leave," Jakeob's spit flew across the cell.

"Are you gunna let those buggers continue beating the bloody shit out of us?" Drake said raising his voice. His spoiled breath reached my nose.

"Gabriel can barely stand and Micah was beaten by Camden today. We can't leave this soon." Jakeob's eyes expanded under the moonlight.

“How long have I been out?” My raspy voice itched from a knot in my throat.

“Three days,” Jakeob said. “You did nothing but sleep.”

I pulled the blanket away and readjusted the pillow to my ribs. Nude and whipped to a pulp, it was a struggle to even think about the pain. Pain over pain stacked over another like layers.

“We brought ya your clothes,” Drake said, placing the stack on my bed.

I couldn’t reach to put them on. Not with the cramps and bruises stifling my will to move. My spine must’ve snapped in half and my ribs had caved.

Pain over pain.

Drake and Jakeob helped to sit me up and put on the faded gray shirt and my undershorts and pants on. Fortunately, they were quick about putting my clothes on.

“Thanks, guys,” I sighed trying to forget that they saw me naked.

“Ya,” Drake gave me a thumbs up. “Can ya stand up?”

I tried what he said, but not without a crack in my shoulder joint. Every tendon and ligament hurt, but I fought against whatever resistance I faced. I nearly stumbled, attempting to stand on my feet. My two friends caught me in their arms before I plummeted. They sat me back on the bed asking what they could do to help.

“Why don’t you drink something?” Drake said, handing his canteen. I snatched it from his smudge hands and frantically sipped the water into my brittle mouth. Relief fell back and as beaten as I was, I knew that we couldn’t stay here a day longer.

“We have to leave now,” I blurted.

“We have to wait before-”

“It don’t matter to me,” I interrupted Jakeob.

“You’re freaking insane if you think we’re gonna let you go out like this,” Jakeob refuted.

“Or we stay another night and get our arses bloody beaten,” Drake said. “Camden’s bloody pissed at us and we can’t stay here any longer in this stinkin’ place.”

“We have to leave tonight,” I said taking another sip from the canteen. “Like this?” Jakeob looked at me with worried eyes.

“I can handle it. And so can Gabriel and Micah and your family too.” I coughed almost choking on the water. I wasn’t on my last legs. My health was the least important matter. There wasn’t a better time to leave this ruined city than tonight. What mattered was getting the others out. Micah wanted to reunite with his sisters and that alone was enough reason to get out.

“If it’s what you want, then I won’t stop you,” Jakeob murmured, followed by a nod agreeing to leave.

Only a fool would stay here.

I hobbled on Jakeob’s shoulder, helping me maintain my footing. Every step I took was more insufferable than the last. I resisted the temptation to go back and sit down and pretend everything was okay. The three of us left the cell heading to the other side of the asylum where the rest of our companions were held captive.

The bleak halls of the asylum were nothing but dark memories. From day one, it was never a place I considered home. The Brotherhood locked me up for days and the silence made me forget what talking to other people was like. It was more of a cemetery than a prison to jail prisoners of war. A fitting atmosphere to lock up the worst kind of people such as Iscar, but even his wickedness may not be a fit for these halls.

With the key in his pocket, Drake opened the doors to their cells and woke them up. The first to be released was Jakeob’s parents and his younger brother named Jaimy. He had a similar appearance to his older brother, spiky hairy, and slightly dark skin, but shorter. I sat down on the barren floor observing

an ecstatic Jakeob reunite with his family. Holding his brother in his arms once again sent a radiant pulse in me. A glimmer of joy that I'd not tasted in years. His mother and father embraced him. All four together as one. It was everything one could ask for.

At least he had a family.

Our other friends were released. They were eager to see us again. Johnny was thrilled to see me alive. A faint smile stretched across his cracked lips. A broken nose didn't deter him from experiencing joy.

"L-Luke?" he whispered like he'd seen a ghost.

"We're getting out tonight," I groaned, holding at my cramping ribs.

"Are you doing better?"

"I can handle it."

"Trying to act tough aren't you?" somebody else said. A figure that brought a sense of normalcy.

"Gabe?" I said looking up. I recognized his voice but not his appearance. I saw him days ago but must've forgotten he ever existed. Why was he different from what I remember? What trickery deceived me? Had my hatred toward Camden bogged my common sense? Up close Gabriel was nothing like his old self. Longer light brown hair almost touching the back of his neck. Long sideburns, a beard, and sunburn marks scarred his face like a caveman. He hadn't bothered trimming his facial appearance. I'd seen him days ago but couldn't remember him looking like this. Gabriel hunched from the whips and was stitched up just like me, but he handled the wounds better. He showed little weakness.

"You didn't have to do that back there," he said, crouching beside me.

I stared into the windows of his soul ensuring I told him the truth. "I didn't have a choice."

"I know why you did it, but I didn't want to see you fall for Camden's games," he explained.

“You wanted Camden to kill you?” I grunted in between a breath.

“You know better that I can survive anything. Camden’s a little bitch. His threats don’t scare me,” Gabriel spat at a rodent scampering away around the corner with its tail tucked between its legs.

Elisa sobbed at Drake’s presence. “Thank you,” she said, bawling her eyes on Drake’s shirt.

“It’s my pleasure darling.” Drake stroked her hair.

“Where’s Micah?” Elisa asked.

“Micah is being held prisoner in His Highness’s old bedrooms,” Finn informed.

“We can’t leave without him. How do we get to him, Drake?” Jakeob turned to him.

“I dunno,” Drake shrugged his shoulders.

“I thought you knew Solomon by the back of your head?” Jakeob challenged Drake’s knowledge.

“I bloody do. Just not His Highness’s room. Only been there a few times.”

There was a window in the room. One that overlooked the ruins of Solomon and could be propped open. A risky idea considering the height of the Grand Temple. Might be the safest exit possible without alerting The Children of Iscar.

“From the window. We can help Micah get out from there,” I proposed.

“How? It’s too high up,” Jakeob wondered.

“One of us climbs up with a rope or something to scale the wall,” I suggested.

“I can do it,” Drake raised his hand. “Heights are my thing and I know where I can get a lasso to get us up there. We’ll get our mate outta there,” Drake nodded at Elisa.

We came to terms with how we would get Micah out. Not a bulletproof plan, but it would make a whole lot less noise than trying to slip past patrols inside the Grand Temple.

A thought occurred to me as we began to escape the asylum. How we would deal with the two guards at the asylum's exit. Where were they? I hadn't heard their footsteps or their muffled chatter. I asked Drake what he'd done to distract them.

"You'll find out," he grinned with his charcoal cheeks.

We left quietly so as not to wake anybody up. I leaned on Gabriel's shoulder as he helped carry me out despite his condition. I don't know how he did it but he fought through it.

"Thanks," I heaved.

"Don't sweat it," he replied. "Haven't forgotten when you did it for me."

Every prisoner was soundly asleep from a long day of labor. We promised to come back for them. We had to escape first and find some help to free this place. As we approached the asylum exit, my questions about the asylum guards were answered.

"How do we get past the two guards?" Jakeob questioned while we waited behind the corner of the hallway.

"Easy mate," Drake said walking over to the exit not fearing being seen. "I've done somethin' to keep 'em busy."

"What are you doing?" Jakeob angrily whispered.

"Those buggers forced me to make their coffee every evening. I jast'a put a lil dose of sleeping syrup in their cups they got in their kitchen." Drake laughed at the two guards with their heads lying down on the table.

We waltzed our way to the exit. Drake wasn't lying about the sleeping syrup. The two guards were knocked out, snoring louder than a lion purring in their dreams. Their heads rested on the table and their arms spread out holding

their cups of coffee that were still half-full. Drake and Jakeob stripped their swords strapped on their hips.

“Nighty night ya wankers,” Drake mocked.

-VI-

Judgment

The crescent moon streaked across the humid sky. I took a deep breath relieved to have escaped the asylum. Leaving the city was our priority and then figuring out how to defeat Iscar. I'd become numb to the body aches that waned with every passing second despite being a bit sluggish and moving no faster than a full step. We followed Drake to the Grand Temple. The giant walls and crystal windows loomed around the corner of the road we'd turned.

I must kill Camden.

I was tempted to stab the maniac in his sleep and foolishly risk my life to exact my revenge for the hell he'd put us through, but I thought of Micah and his sisters and my other friends who had endured so much. They needed me more. Should I throw it all away to taste blood?

"Is something the matter?" Gabriel whispered.

Webbed in my thoughts, I didn't realize I'd slowed down in the middle of the street. I was still leaning on his shoulder but I'd dragged our pace unknowingly. Someone could've caught sight of us in the open.

"I need to kill him," I muttered vengeful air.

"Camden?" Gabriel said as if his name was poison.

I nodded.

"We should get out of Solomon first, but we sure as hell can't let Camden get away with the shit he put us through," Gabriel tapped my shoulder and pressed on.

Drake led us to a horse stable once owned by The Brotherhood, but the doors were locked. He pushed and tugged at the doors rattling a chain on the other side.

“Bloody doors are closed. One of ya might be able to open it from inside,” Drake suggested.

“I can,” Johnny said, raising his hand.

“Why thank ya young chap,” Drake nodded.

Johnny wasted no time squeezing up and through a narrow barn window. His feet dropped to the mat and in a horse stall. The horses greeted him with a quiet neigh.

“We’ll get you guys safe soon,” he spoke to the horses.

Johnny untied the chains and opened the doors. Inside the stable, Gabriel sat me down on a haystack, resting my legs. We all sat in a circle catching our breaths while Drake discussed our next move.

“We use these ropes,” Drake grabbed a set of bulky ropes from the equipment room.

“You sure they can hold?” I asked.

“Ya. They’re stronger than a healthy buck.” Drake threw one of the ropes near my legs. I touched the stiff hemp ensuring it wasn’t old or torn. I was confident these ropes could hold a ton.

“Why are we sitting around waiting for Camden to wake up?” Gabriel said. The outline of his eyelids cast a shadow from the fire of the lanterns.

“These buggers got patrols at the walls for outsiders. They’re at their thinnest at ‘bout 3’o clock. I say we have an hour before we saddle up, rescue Micah, and leave this muggin’ place.”

We played the waiting game until Drake told us it was time to depart. What would stop me from killing Camden now? I could sneak inside the Grand Temple and finish it once and for all. I would be quick about it and no one would notice. The grim thoughts were washed away by Johnny who tugged my shirt.

“Something the matter?” I questioned while staring at the strands of his mossy hair.

“Sorry for what I said to you,” he said with his head lowered and tucked under his shoulders.

“It’s not like you hurt my feelings,” I said.

“It’s not that. I understand now why you killed Isaiah,” he said, raising his head. His green eyes glimmered from the flames of the lanterns. “He was a piece of shit.

I sighed. I didn’t know what to say in response. Of course I’d accept his apology but what of Cyrus? “Would you forgive Cyrus for lying to you?” I asked, peering at the shadow of his brow.

“Um…” Johnny stumbled, but spoke of him with confidence. “Someday maybe. Been seeing him in my dreams. He speaks to me all the time.”

“What does he tell you?” I asked hoping he would look at me, face to face.

“He tells me to stay strong and to trust the others so we can win and make a better world,” he said.

Cyrus. I whispered the name in my head, cutting a chill in the wind.

“But I don’t feel that way. After what happened to Ryan…” Johnny’s voice quivered as if his name was forbidden.

“None of that was your fault,” I said by placing my hand over his back assuring him I was on his side. “There wasn’t anything we could have done.”

“Why did you choose me?” Johnny’s eyes wandered over mine.

“I-I don’t know,” I said, hypnotizing his now orange eyes to believe the truth.

“Ryan didn’t have anything to do with it. You should’ve chosen me instead,” he insisted.

“Don’t say that. Neither of you deserved that,” I shook my head.

“If Brett was in your shoes, he would’ve chosen him,” Johnny said. He lowered his head in shame. He was right to say that. Ryan was our friend and I chose Johnny over him. Not because I thought of Ryan less than the rest of us. I

wished no harm to Ryan, but the gun was put on my head. Ryan died because of my decision.

Forever to remain.

Micah. *Are you awake?* I directed my thoughts to him, but there was no answer. Up above, we saw the designated window at a height of seven stories. Drake tied himself to one of the ropes and clamped portions of it against the sacred walls of the Grand Temple as if scaling a mountain.

“Keep a bird’s eye view of these wankers wandering ‘bout,” Drake said before he began to ascend.

Jakeob and Finn watched Drake standing below him to be used as cushions to break his fall in the event he did. Gabriel and I hid in between two empty structures, eyeing the street adjacent to the Grand Temple while Johnny and Elisa hid behind the buildings, observing from the other alleys. The lack of physical matter and city noise meant I could faintly listen to their mumbling from afar. Solomon no longer resembled the righteous society that it once was. A bustling city that thrived in kindness. Its people were free from Iscar’s influence and we’d failed them.

“So quiet,” Gabriel’s whisper echoed, almost like a yell.

“I could die happy here,” I said laughing at the silence.

Gabriel turned his head and agreed. “Yeah. It’s not so bad, but I’d like to die surrounded by women.”

“Seriously?” I chuckled.

“Fuck yeah. I’d get my pants all wet,” he said gesturing at his groin.

“And get stripped naked?” The pain from my ribs nudged at my guts from the laughter.

“Yup.” Gabriel pretended to unbuckle his pants and have a woman sit on him.

I giggled uncontrollably but quiet enough so as not to alert our foe. Using the back of my hand, I wiped the saliva from my mouth and cooled off listening to the murmurs and silence in the background.

“I can hear the old man and Johnny talking,” Gabriel said lying down with hands behind his head.

“Peaceful,” I sighed, lying beside him and gazing at the stars.

Gabriel nodded. “Reminds me of when we first met.”

“Sure does,” I agreed, seeing a fragment of my memory. The treehouse we spent whole days inside watching the city lights and cityscape loom and Gabriel playing his guitar when we were bored.

“The skies are beautiful just like this pretty face,” he quipped with a cocky smirk.

It was the taste of freedom that we have long battled for.

“You think someone’s alive, out there?” I asked.

“Mayhaps. Betcha your girlfriend didn’t go down without a fight,” Gabriel winked.

“She isn’t my girlfriend,” I said looking away.

“You’re blushing,” Gabriel teased me, cackling and mimicking a kiss.

I shook my head. “What about Alexis?”

“If Judith’s alive, then she must be too,” Gabriel believed.

I looked behind our backs and saw Drake had made it to the window. He knocked on the glass a few times. No signs of Micah yet.

Wake up. I said trying to establish the strange telepathy we were given.

“He’s awake,” Gabriel coincidentally said.

“Huh?” I exhaled a flabbergasted breath.

“Micah is awake. You don’t have to tell him. He already knows,” Gabriel assured me.

“D-Did you read my mind?” I tilted my head, raising an eyebrow.

Yeah. His voice echoed in my head. Gabriel grinned as if he'd discovered the keys to the universe's secrets but his lips didn't move. *Fucking awesome isn't it?*

I nodded. I looked back at the window and saw Micah. Drake instructed him to grab the rope. Beaten and all, Micah gingerly slid down with Drake beneath him for leverage. It took them a minute to descend but they made it safely. Gabriel helped me to my feet as we walked toward the group.

"There's our boy," Gabriel said as we approached Micah.

Micah was in better shape than I remembered. His face was scuffed and his elbows scrapped and lost considerable weight, but could stand and walk just fine.

Thank you. He said in my thoughts.

Micah saw Elisa. The two embraced. A sign that their relationship hadn't gone south. My heart felt a jolt and my throat made sure I couldn't talk by putting a knot in it.

"Why do they do this to us?" Micah sobbed on Elisa's shoulder where he rested his head.

I shared their emotion even if their conversation was between them. I smiled watching them back together. Micah broke down hurting me again. For two years we've been friends, but it was as if we had known each other for much longer.

"It's okay babe," Elisa whispered into his ear. "There's no need to be angry anymore. Let's get out and we'll talk more."

"I hate them," Micah replied with heavy grief.

"And I do too. Come on. You're my boyfriend, aren't you? You should be the strong one."

Micah wiped the tears and snapped back to reality.

"Thanks you two," Micah said to me and embracing Gabriel

I answered with a fist bump, one that Micah acknowledged. He was determined to do what we set out to finish. Find his sisters and defeat Iscar.

I promised to not let him down.

The once indestructible walls were being rebuilt by The Children of Iscar. Their work had barely touched the surface. Scaffoldings were in place and the bags of cement and shovels were scattered. Not a Fanatic nearby guarded this portion of the city. Drake said he'd found a possible exit by working near the walls a few weeks ago. To our right, the front city gates were closely guarded. Drake tossed a rope over one of the few standing portions of a wall scaling them with ease. He tied the rope from the other side to ensure it didn't fall back.

"Alrighty. Come on over," he lightly shouted.

I was told to go first but I implored that Johnny and Jakeob's family were first to scale over the walls followed by Finn and Elisa. The group listened and they scaled the wall first before me. The escape had gone as planned and without a problem.

"Your turn," Jakeob said, pulling the rope to me.

I nodded, the hemp tickling at my palms.

Micah was next followed by Gabriel and Jakeob. They would have to wait longer since climbing up would be the last thing I would be fit to do at the moment. My body stung like a hot knife slicing inside me, but I endured it. Every move I made grappled me from within. My lower ribs felt as if they were dislocated. I must've damaged a muscle or two with how weak I was. Jakeob helped me from below by pushing my feet and giving me extra leverage. Before I could climb a fourth of the way, a chatter foiled our intentions. Someone was approaching.

"Hide," Jakeob whispered. gesturing at me.

Knowing there was no chance for me to climb fast, I backed away from the wall and dropped to the ground, almost twisting my ankle in the fall. I leaned

on Jakeob's shoulder to jog away from the scene. We scrambled following Gabriel and hiding behind a row of thick bushes. The voices came from the direction of the gates that wandered past us in a minute or so.

"Clear," Gabriel muttered, but we remained in our position when the chains of the front gates creaked open. A lone Fanatic riding on horseback galloped into the city.

"What word do you bring from the Prophet?" questioned a guard.

"I have come bearing great news," answered the messenger. "The day of reckoning is upon us. Soon, we will thrust the world into paradise as the Emperor has promised. Master Camden will surely want to know."

"What do they mean by day of reckoning?" Jakeob's eyes wandered to Gabriel.

"Who cares? What matters is we get the hell out of here," Gabriel said.

"Wait," Micah stopped Gabriel from leaving the bushes. "I see Camden."

A scene unfolded before our very eyes. Camden appeared to have been waiting for the messenger to arrive on this night.

Kill Camden!

"The Prophet has given the word," said the messenger.

"Gather everyone this morning for we will begin the sacrifices to the Messiah," Camden ordered his troops.

"Who should we execute first sire?" asked a loyal Fanatic.

"Micah. I want to see nothing more than watch his useless friends cry."

Day of reckoning sounded like a purging of sorts and Camden's first order was to sacrifice one of us. Of course it couldn't have been someone else. When Camden figured out Micah wasn't in the room, he would raise the alarms and search all over the city, but that wasn't our worry. He might execute everybody else still imprisoned until Micah was found. It'd be too late before we might return to save them.

"What should we do?" Micah asked.

“We kill Camden,” Gabriel uttered the words first before I did.

“What about the others? They’re stuck on the other side of the wall,” Micah pointed at the rope that had been tossed back.

“They can wait a little longer. But we have to kill this asshole before he kills the others.” Gabriel’s red eyes locked into Camden as he mounted his horse.

After abandoning our cover, a shadowy figure ambushed Jakeob from behind with a sleeper hold. Gabriel and Micah retaliated against the attacker, pummeling them to the ground and yanking their sword. Another attacker came to aid their ally, but Gabriel stuck the sword in their stomach while Micah snagged the spear from the fallen foe. So much for hunting Camden down. The scuffle was noisy enough for the party at the gate to turn heads. We became the hunted.

“Run!” Gabriel shouted as we boosted back into the city.

Hustling along Solomon’s rined streets in the early morning hours drained the living inside me. The intense body pains returned. I couldn’t run for longer. I was out of breath rather quickly, falling to one knee, unable to catch up to my friends. Gabriel ran back trying to will me up.

“On your feet!” Gabriel shouted, offering his hand.

I grabbed his hand, raised me back up, and pushed me forward.

“Over here!” Jakeob pointed at a building any Brotherhood Knight would recognize. Wooden and polished, the structure was a smithy. Jakeob smashed a window with the handle of the sword slithering in to open the locked doors. The perfect place to grab weapons to even the odds.

“What do we do?” Micah’s panicked breaths ricocheted from the iron and back to our ears.

“We lure Camden and his puppets,” Gabriel panted.

I picked up a short bow from a stash and a quiver containing a few arrows. Gabriel grabbed a larger sword and Jakeob unsheathed the one he’d

snatched from the asylum guard. We spread out and hid in the blacksmith. The trap was set.

A parade of footsteps marched from outside. They rammed the wooden door, unbuckling the hinges and knobs. Camden stormed in, flanked by a small group of Fanatics and he didn't sound too happy. I hid under a workbench that wasn't too low for me to duck under. Still, I lowered my back shooting a stiff pain up my ribs and spine.

"Why don't you four little bitches show your faces like real men and fight me!" he taunted.

Will you please shut the fuck up! Gabriel conveyed his thoughts to me.

"Your day of reckoning will come sooner. Our glorious Emperor has finally brought peace and order while you all spit in our faces for the good we have done for every one of you," Camden blabbered.

My motivation to put an end to this sycophant skyrocketed to a temper I could no longer contain. The mercury from my thermometer exploded. I shuffled to my feet from under the workbench and placed an arrow right in between the eyes of a Fanatic. Startled by the sneak attack, the foe moved in the direction of the arrow, but Gabriel was ready. He slithered behind one of them and pierced his sword through their Adam's apple. The other guards noticed their ally had gone down and amid the distraction, Jakeob popped from under a table puncturing his blade through one of their hearts. He jumped out of sight before the others processed what had happened. Beside me, Micah threw his spear at Camden. The projectile found its mark, but a Fanatic pulled Camden away to save their leader. The remaining Fanatics rushed to Micah's last position.

I landed two consecutive arrows dropping two more Fanatics. Jakeob and Gabriel stabbed the remaining foes like vengeful killers of the night. Having lost his goons, Camden attempted to escape the smithy. I aimed to strike the back of his head but the arrow landed on his left thigh.

In a last-ditch effort, Camden tried to crawl out the open door, but Gabriel shut it close. He was trapped inside the smithy with us four.

“Stay back I say!” he begged, threatening to retaliate with his lousy hammer.

From all four corners, we surrounded him. He tried to stand, but Micah landed a fist that shut him up. Gabriel dragged Camden’s maimed body against the wall.

“I’ll let you all go if that’s what you please!” he squirmed and cried as the arrow burrowed deeper in his leg. The gash poured red and I grinned with joy.

“Like we’re supposed to believe your bullshit,” Gabriel crouched to Camden’s level, spit flying on his face. “We heard you yapping something about this day of reckoning. Care to tell us what the hell it is all about?”

“I don’t know much about it,” Camden lied.

Gabriel smacked Camden across his jaw and unleashed a flurry of punches cracking a bone. Every fist that connected was better than the last.

“Tell me or do you want me to make you scream?” Gabriel warned.

“T-The P-Prophet has his plans prepared for paradise,” Camden moaned as blood dripped from his nose.

“You mean to wipe out the rest of the population that is against him?”

Camden shook his head. “Y-You will be saved. Everyone will.”

Gabriel cackled. “What else do you want me to believe in? Unicorns? Goblins? Leprechauns?” Gabriel’s face shifted from amusement to hatred in a flip of a coin. He stomped the floor with fury and aimed the tip of the sword at Camden’s skull.

“NO!” Camden pleaded. His head lowered like a turtle cowering its head in its shell.

Gabriel stopped and pointed the sword elsewhere. He laughed again. Had something gone awry? I looked down on Camden. His pants were soaked. Had he

done the unthinkable? Jakeob and Micah burst out laughing. I couldn't help but make fun of Camden. The son of a bitch deserved to be mocked.

"Dude, did you just piss your pants?" Gabriel laughed hysterically.

Seeing that his life flashed before his eyes frightened Camden and the surprised look on his wide eyes and open mouth made it all the sweeter.

"Aww, did big Cammy piss himself?" Gabriel grinned.

"J-Just l-leave me," Camden stuttered and shook.

"Leave you alone? Like how you left Micah and Ryan alone? Like how Iscar left Donovan and Cyrus alone!" I snapped.

"I-I-It wasn't my fault," Camden lied again.

"Not your fault?!" I furiously spat. "Millions are dead because of Iscar and you! My family, my friends. Most of them are gone because of you!"

I had to end this. Now.

I balled my hands into a fist and without thinking further, I delivered a punch and another punishing Camden senseless. My knuckles cracked a few of mine, but the pain was gone. The pain of losing and suffering for years wasn't gone yet and doing this would ease it. The same feeling from before returned. Where I became something extraordinary. Where all common sense and reasoning dissipated. I saw Isaiah's face almost snapping my left hand from an untamed fury. I did not stop. My friends didn't restrain me. They accepted such brutality against our enemy. We had to replicate what they had done to us. We had to.

I didn't hold back.

Not for a second.

"Let him go!" barked a voice from the opposite entrance.

A young woman flanked by several Fanatics aimed their bows at us. A faint shimmer from the moonlight drew her frame, creating an imposing humanoid shadow. It was Camden's wife, Becky, and she'd arrived to save her husband before I could finish him.

“Kill my husband and you all die with him!” she threatened. Hundreds of Fanatics surrounded us. Micah, Jakeob, and Gabriel, They were my closest friends and I’d gladly die with them. I had to kill Camden now. As I turned around, Camden jumped to his feet and grappled me from behind, threatening to slit my throat open. He ended the standoff in a flash.

“Put your weapons down you shitheads,” he threatened my friends while I was at his mercy. A drop of his blood fell over my cheeks. He left my friends no choice but to drop their weapons. Camden had reversed our fortunes in a snap. I should’ve killed him sooner.

“Gather all the prisoners and take them to the gallows! We have some fireworks for our audience this morning,” Camden instructed, shoving my face to the ground and tasting the leather from the heels of his boots.

They covered our heads with rags, chained our feet, tied our hands, and dragged us through the mud to the gallows for our inevitable executions. The suffocating cloth over my head made it difficult to breathe. The morning sun blistered the back of my neck. Sweat drenched over my face and down to my neck and abdomen, trickling with the filth from my hair making my final moments a living hell. My body was still in pain, but it somehow wasn’t any worse. It became a part of me.

Camden blabbered for several minutes as I was down on my knees in front of the crowd of prisoners. I couldn’t see their shallow faces, only shadowy blobs and grains of rocks stabbing my knees. My friends beside me with their heads lowered waiting for our judgment.

“In the name of Iscar, let these four dissenters reach paradise. Their freedoms will be achieved without any more prolonging for the day of reckoning is upon us,” Camden preached.

The Fanatics removed the rags over our heads. The light blinded me. I slowly adjusted to the brightness until I saw the faces of my friends and the prisoners. All looked equally blank.

“It is only fitting that the first sacrifice must be the one who sparked the so-called World Revolution,” Camden declared. “We will show these traitors that violence is not the answer.”

As the guillotine was prepped, I’d imagined how it might feel to be decapitated. Supposedly, one was still alive for a few minutes even after being decapitated, being able to move the rest of their body for a little longer. The thought petrified me, but I wasn’t afraid when the world would be eternally dark for me. Maybe being alive felt the same as being dead, peaceful and horrifying.

“Following him will be the great traitor that has maimed my right hand via hanging.” Camden swore to lynch Micah’s body next to Ryan’s. His rotten corpse dangled loosely while the skin of his body had peeled away with insects wiggling inside his organs.

Desperately searching for an escape, I noticed the ropes tied to my hands were slightly loosened. They were a little too big on my wrists. They were so quick to chain us that they didn’t bother fitting the size of our wrists. A chance to break free? I had to wait for the right time. The corner of my eye caught Micah trying to loosen the ropes by squeezing his hands through the small gaps. The Fanatics did not look at him as they were busy holding the crowd under control. Yells, fists, and kicks came from the prisoners, but the Fanatics drew their weapons, instantly quelling the uprising.

“It’s unfortunate to see you go, Luke boy. I’ll always be your number one fan which is why I’ve chosen you to be my first sacrifice,” Camden smirked, tapping the crown of my head.

I was pulled to my feet and pushed in the direction of the guillotine. Before Camden spoke again, Micah freed himself and tackled him to the hell below. The distraction was the perfect opening. I maneuvered my wrists,

loosening the ropes and elbowed the Fanatic who escorted me. I yanked the sword from their waist and plunged it into their abdomen. More Fanatics swarmed to help Camden, but Gabriel and Jakeob scrambled to their feet tackling a few of the guards despite their hands still tied.

“Put the weapon down!” a Fanatic archer threatened with their bow aimed at my brain. The menace lasted a second as the crowd overpowered the line of Fanatics. The prisoners had nothing to lose. They trampled over the archer who was spooked by the stampede.

I focused back on Camden who poked at Micah’s pink eye. My friend cried and rolled over, holding his hand over the injured eye. More Fanatics from the city defenses reinforced their lines and regained control over the spawning insurgence. They subdued Micah and restrained him to the ground face down. Camden bitterly stomped the ground and kicked Micah’s temple with his knee, knocking him out of the equation. Camden set his sights on me and furiously trotted toward me.

“YOU!” he seethed with spit and mucus over his lips. He did not order his men to cuff me. He wanted to finish me off personally. “I gave you chance after chance to let you live and yet you and your friends are still the pathetic rebels that you are!”

The fury in Camden’s eyes was unparalleled. Volatile as a red giant star, he used his large frame and wrestled me to the ground. He tried to grab me from behind to attempt a chokehold, but the bastard didn’t know any better than not to do such a move. I wasn’t going to be outwitted by my own technique. He foolishly placed his hands over my mouth, but I gnawed at them with my yellow teeth.

Death or survival.

I chose survival, biting off his index finger. Camden winced from the dislocated bone. The socket of his finger oozed red like a broken water pipe. I couldn’t recognize what I was or who I became. But what I knew was that my

name was Luke Edwards and I wanted to kill this man. I wanted to kill him while he screamed and begged. I wanted to kill him until he suffered for every sin and treachery he committed. I wanted to kill him right now.

Becky jumped to her husband's aid, pulling him by his clothes. Blood smudged on my fingers, I licked it with the tip of my tongue. It tasted of Camden's flesh and that was fine with me.

Camden's men restored order by killing prisoners who overstepped their boundaries. The rest surrendered wishing to not be executed. My friends had done their best to save me. We tried but I was proud of them to have made it this far. My hands were tied again and I was dragged to the center of the gallows.

"Give me that fucking sword!" Camden cursed at a guard.

With his only good hand, Camden gripped the sword and spat in my right eye. I saw half of everything. A half-sun. half-Grand Temple. half-arms, half-legs, half-people, half-skies. My final view was of Camden glaring at me with demented red eyes. He wasn't going to wait for the guillotine to take me. He wanted to finish it himself. He always wanted this day to come.

"Say hi to Cyrus for me," he taunted.

The metal reflection of the sword swung at my neck. I closed my eyes, praying for a swift death.

It'll be okay. I wouldn't feel a thing.

What I felt instead was an explosion that rocked the city and a barrage of arrows whistling from the shadowy heavens raining upon The Children of Iscar. A storm of cannons from the harbor blasted them apart as they scrambled for cover.

Help had arrived.

-VII-

Liberation

Like a darting pin needle, an arrow struck Camden's arm. He dropped the sword before he could slice the back of my neck. I grabbed his blade but Becky jumped to yank it from me. The sword sliced my shirt, nearly cutting through my skin. Exhaustion overwhelmed me and I lost focus as Becky knocked me off balance and tried to plunge the blade into my heart. A tug of war ensued. My grip was slipping. She had every advantage over me. The tip of her sword poked at my throat. I gulped. A second away from doom.

But Becky was brought down by a figure with pitch-black hair. I grabbed the sword she dropped and looked to my right where my savior battled Becky. The fierce scar above her left eye and a dirty dress rang a bell.

Judith.

Both women clawed and scratched, digging their black nails into flesh. Micah and I untied Gabriel and Jakeob from their shackles while Camden was nowhere to be found from where I'd last seen him. All that remained were drops of his blood on the ground.

"He's over there." Micah pointed at what appeared to be our target.

The light blond hair on his crown made it certain. Like a sniveling coward, Camden was fleeing. A wounded animal limping stagnantly and clutching at the hand I gnawed. He was safeguarded by Fanatics near the front doors of the Grand Temple where he was mounted on a horse.

"We can't let this asshole escape!" Gabriel barked.

We chased the bastard, but more Fanatics stood in our way buying enough time for Camden to ride off. A strange hooded figure materialized behind us wielding a large bow and croaking the wood by pulling the string and

launching an arrow. More similar gray cloaked figures released a hail of arrows at The Children of Iscar who had no preparation for such an attack. An enigmatic woman with distinct eye colors was their leader.

Ivy.

She glanced at me and marched forward with her people known as The Sacred.

“It’s you,” I said as she casually wandered past me. Ivy nodded, instructing her people forward. Another round of Fanatics stormed from the Grand Temple forcing The Sacred to stand and fight. There didn’t seem to be an end to their numbers despite the ambush the strange cultists had unleashed.

“Where’s Becky?” someone asked through their winded breath.

I turned to see Judith standing tall and unscathed. I was elated to see her again and had a million things to tell her, many questions as well, but it wasn’t the right moment to be tangled in such sentiments.

“Judy?” I said with a half-smile.

She stared at me with her crisp hazel eyes, unmoving.

“We find Camden, we find her too!” Gabriel exclaimed.

Judith locked the wide killer eyes of her and ran toward the firefight where she suspected Camden had gone.

“Wait!” I shouted fearing she would get herself killed. Killed? I chuckled thinking Judith was killed by these Fanatics. A hardened person who defied insurmountable obstacles, she could do almost anything by herself. I knew better. She was a survivor and battled in uglier fights..

She was Iscar’s daughter.

Jakeob, Gabriel, Micah, and I circumvented the remains of a once-proud city. What little was left was sealed in the past. To have witnessed Solomon crumble shattered our pride, but not the will to resist our foe. Smoke plumes rose to the purple skies. A crunching sound beneath my feet as we traveled over the rubble

and the smell of smoldered wood and steel congested my nose. Hazy clouds hovered among the ruins while iron and wood alike clashed nearby. The battlefield I remembered once again dominated Solomon.

Judith had gone astray and into her own world. We'd lost her trail, but we pressed forward as The Children of Iscar retreated. Their scent was extinguished from Solomon and I could taste it. On this day, The Children of Iscar will reap what they have sowed.

An arrow whistled past Jakeob's spiky hair while another flew past in between me and Gabriel. We collectively turned around to see a group of Fanatics spawned from the haze. Our battle scars grew wearier realizing they were still on our tail. Their chase was relentless knowing our deaths would be a huge victory for their morale. They must've been instructed by Camden to hunt us down before abandoning ship.

"Over here, quick!" Micah pointed at the nearby Colosseum.

The crown and archways of the Colosseum peaked to our left. The early sun kindled the limestone. A dirt road ahead, we evaded their attacks and made a run to the Colosseum blossoming from the horizon where cream walls and pillars blended with the steel and wooden doors. The doors to the interior were locked, although we could climb our way up and through the archways. Gabriel scaled the pillars by himself. He willed through the pain and quickly climbed to the second level.

"Grab my hand," Gabriel reached for Jakeob.

Jakeob jumped, holding at his wrist ascending upward. I was next, but my body aches persisted, impeding me from making the climb that was much taller than the city's walls. My friends noticed my troubles and didn't waste a second to help.

"I got you, bud," Micah said, using his shoulders as leverage for me to stand on. I recouped my balance and grabbed Gabriel and Jakeob's hands

simultaneously. My knees and legs were scrapped against the rough edges of the balcony. I exhaled when the archway peered above me.

Micah followed next, but he struggled to climb up on his own as well. From the road, the Fanatics had caught up to us. He looked back at the mob. His instincts told him to get out of dodge as an arrow bounced from the limestone almost connecting Micah's right calf. In unison, we reached out to our friend pulling his entire weight. I dragged him to his feet to continue our ascend up the Colosseum. His darkened hair rotted of feces that I looked away avoiding the stench.

“We gotta move on b-” Gabriel spoke but an explosion from a warship cannon erupted from the Colosseum. The rumble from the blast unintentionally knocked me onto Micah. We both slipped and plummeted back to the earth below. My entire weight landed on top of his lower torso, knocking the breath from our lungs.

I shook off the dust crawling on all fours. Human bodies were scattered at the crater, body parts were dislocated, while some Fanatics were cooked to a crisp.

“Micah!” I tried to pick him up on my shoulders.

Micah wheezed in tremendous pain. He'd fallen onto his back. Something wasn't right. A fractured bone or something else had crippled his ability to stand properly. I stubbornly ignored his will to let him fall behind despite the danger I put myself in. I did what I could. I dragged him by the collar of his gnawed shirt.

The smog cleared and the few sparse Fanatics had us cornered. I glared into their eyes showing no trepidation. I made it clear that I wasn't going to leave Micah. I wanted to do this on my terms, not theirs. I stood firm with one of their bows aimed at me. I held my breath and closed my eyes waiting for death to creep over me.

A Fanatic fell down and then another. I couldn't see through the smoke what exactly happened to them. I looked to my flanks seeing a swarm of people had joined me, wearing ragged clothes and not a uniform or specific armor to distinguish them. It's as if they'd travel through a portal.

The Resistencia.

More Rebels appeared from the clouds of ash suffocating my lungs. Amidst the clanking of swords, a friendly face emerged.

"We got him from here," Melaney said, wearing a bandana over her forehead.

Besides her was a Rebel who I didn't recognize. A slightly dark-skinned young man about my age with a muscular stature and black combed hair.

"You go on and help Judith," said the unnamed Rebel in a Spanish accent. "We got your amigo safe."

Gabriel tugged my shoulder, handing me a sword from a deceased Fanatic beneath our feet. "We gotta finish this," he said.

I nodded in agreement as we set off to find Camden and Judith.

Jakeob, Gabriel, and I found Judith pressing her way to the horse stables where the Rebels fled. A lack of horses seemed to spur confusion among the Fanatics who turned against each other to escape the city. The symphony of war scared the animals off loose across the city. We caught up to Judith where she'd surveyed across the street, stalking the enemy.

"Where's Camden?" I questioned her as we hid around the corner of an abandoned home.

She didn't answer. Her eyes wandered erratically trying to find Camden and Becky. From afar, something caught her gaze. Her eyes locked onto something. Without uttering a word, Judith chased after two figures, dashing to the city's collapsed walls.

We followed Judith zig-zagging around the horse stables. The two figures moved faster as we zeroed in on them. I quickly realized that they were our main targets. Becky stayed behind, seemingly surrendering with her arms behind her back. Judith approached her, but Becky revealed a pair of katar's attached to her wrists. They clashed again holding nothing back.

As I advanced to Camden's position, a dozen Fanatics intervened. I glared into their shriveled eyes and laid waste to my foes. A burst of adrenaline exploded through my body. The surge reinvigorated my thirst for murder. They bowed before me while my friends stepped through them until Camden was the only thing remaining.

Camden dragged himself away on the dirt like a legless dog. Before I could get my hands on him, Becky jumped in my path. Judith was nowhere to be found.

"You won't get to him!" she spat, extending her katar and arms.

Becky was a strong individual, but my veins pumped with vigor. I wasn't going to allow Camden to get away. Not this time.

Becky began with a spinning attack, but I dodged and shoved her back with authority with my sword, shattering one of her katana's into crumbs. I had the advantage, but it was short-lived. I paid the price when my body betrayed me. My flimsy eyes tried to shut me down, but I resisted the urge to fall by continuing the aggression. As my weapon struck her's, Becky pulled a switchblade from her belt and struck a gash on my bloody arms. I overcame the agony and grabbed her right arm, stripping the other katar from her wrist.

I had her under control. She tried slipping from my grip, scratching by spitting at my arms and face as I yanked the switchblade from her hand. Out of desperation, the tip of her boot struck my groin. My mouth dropped to the ground.

Gabriel once called this feeling like having scrambled testicles. He was right. It was as if they'd been kicked up my stomach and triggered every nerve.

Of all the things I had endured up to this point, nothing made me cry uncle till the unpleasant blow that brought me down in a quick second. I ate the grains of dirt into my tongue, rolling and cursing in excruciating pain. A sitting duck, vulnerable for an easy kill. No matter the urgency, I couldn't scramble to my feet and fight off Becky. She dragged her feet, grinning with sharp teeth knowing she would be the one to kill me.

In a blink, an arrow struck her dark heart before she could even swing the sword. The arrow was followed by Judith's katana slicing at her neck for good measure. I glanced to my left from where the arrow originated. Red hair, gray eyes, green and leather attire.

Judith and Alexis lowered their weapons, hustling to my aid.

"Are you okay?" Judith asked, placing her hand over my shoulder.

"What do you think?" I moaned, rolling on my back and grabbing at my groin.

"He's getting away!" Gabriel barked, sprinting at Camden who was riding out of the city on horseback. Alexis raised her bow and fired an arrow from a great distance. The projectile missed by a few feet as Camden slowly faded from view past the breached city walls. He'd slipped from our grasp, again.

"Camden, you little shit!" Gabriel cursed, tossing his sword like a javelin. "Get the fuck back here!" I expected Gabriel to chase after Camden. Instead, he turned back to us. Gabriel despised being unable to settle a score, but he had a change of heart.

"I got it from here," he said to Judith and Alexis. Gabriel lifted me from the ground, a testament to his strength, resting me on his shoulder and laughing at me. "She got you good. Sure as hell don't want to experience that again."

"I think I figured that out the hard way," I snickered. "You still care about me?"

"Why wouldn't I? Did you forget the promise we made when we were kids?"

“Nope,” I shook my head. “Someday, I think we should settle the score.”

“Deal. Since I saved your ass several times, I owe you a kicking,” he mocked.

At the Grand Temple’s entrance, I sat at its doorsteps surveying the aftermath. The battle for Solomon came to a close with the Fanatics having surrendered or been eliminated. After a year, we were finally free. Free from the shackles, but at a cost. The humanity, the ruins, the powder, the smoke, the fire, the wood, the metal. All history. Death at every corner. Those who survived mourned their losses.

Family. Friends. Homes. Lives.

All gone.

Close by, Melaney found Judith and Alexis. They embraced grateful to find each other safe, but no Michael. Next to them stood the same Rebel who had helped save me and Micah at the Colosseum. He came up to me and introduced himself to me and Gabriel.

“The name’s Javier,” he said as we shook hands with him.

“Luke,” I grunted thanks to a tendon on my right shoulder that could snap at any moment.

“Fancy seeing you folks here,” said a voice crossing a street from the east.

I turned around seeing Micah and Elisa back together with the former leaning on Jakeob’s shoulder. Micah’s lower torso was wrapped in a bandage, holding an arm over his rib cage.

“Will you be okay?” Gabriel asked him.

“Finn said I probably broke a rib,” Micah groaned as Jakeob helped sit him down on the doorsteps.

“Geez. That’s not good,” Gabriel sighed.

“But I feel like I’m on top of the world,” Micah beamed. “Got my girlfriend and you guys. That’s all that matters.”

“And you all forgot about us?” interrupted an obnoxious voice with their white streak over their black scuffed hair. “I’ll be damned. The gang is back together,” Finn said, arriving alongside Johnny, Drake, and Jakeob’s family.

“It’s bloody great seeing you mates again,” Drake said, taking a seat beside Micah.

Johnny was visibly ecstatic. The first time I saw a genuine smile on his face in eons.

“We won,” he sat beside me, cheering our victory.

“There’s still much work to do,” I mumbled.

“Camden got away, didn’t he?” Johnny asked, gazing into the pain in my eyes.

I nodded and yawned as my eyelids flickered at random intervals. “We’ll find him and beat Iscar.”

Johnny sought justice for Ryan. The more we saw eye to eye, the more I trusted him. Any time he was in distress, I didn’t quit on him. Now, his mind opened to the complexities that structured every challenge. His mind was still young, but he became more self-aware of what was going on.

A playful bark startled me as if I’d woken up from a short nap.

“Hey boy!” Johnny exclaimed as Falco happily jumped on his lap.

Falco licked Johnny’s smudged face and wagged its tail with pure joy. I petted the animal while it tickled its tongue on my wrist.

“The pooch missed you kiddos,” Finn chuckled.

A pair of gray cloaked figures carrying their large bows walked up to us. They removed their hoods showing their faces.

“We meet again,” Ivy spoke first. To her left flank stood the Mistress’s servant, Raihan.

“Thank you,” I bowed my head.

“How did you guys find your way here?” Gabriel stood up and confronted the unpredictable faction known as The Sacred from Great Arabia.

“The Resistencia summoned us to their call. We can never live in peace without The Children of Iscar breathing down our necks and decimating our holy lands.” Ivy did not blink in between her words.

“What about The Kingdom? Their warships nearly killed us.” Gabriel looked around.

Ivy nodded at the harbor where many dark-skinned people disembarked from the warships. Led by King Malik and Queen Kenya alongside their most powerful student, Khalon, the heavy warrior that pushed me to the limits at the Trial of Kings. They arrived at the footsteps of the Grand Temple marching with their long pikes, oval shields painted with a purple and red lion, and buzzed haircuts.

“The Kingdom have arrived at place Knights call home,” spoke Malik in his broken English. The King donned a crown made of feather and gold, a necklace made of the rarest beads, and sandals at his mostly bare feet.

“The Brotherhood welcomes you, your Royal Highness.” Finn bowed as he’d also done during our travel across the seas.

Malik bowed back and pivoted to me. “And you. You proved yourself to be defiant against enemy. You earned prize.”

Khalon was instructed by the King to hand over a large bow. Khalon set aside his heavy mallet, which brought back nothing but daunting memories of the coma I survived, He grabbed the bow teetering on his back and stepped forward, dwarfing me like the sun and earth placed side by side. It wasn’t just any ordinary bow either. Forged in solid wood and iron with cunning sharp edges, I was in awe at such a glorious weapon. It was slightly heavier than the one I’d used. This one was unique and crafted with the utmost care.

“You did well brave one,” Khalon said as I humbly accepted The Kingdom’s gift.

“Thanks.” I bowed before falling and dozing beneath a black curtain.

-VIII-

Reconstruction

Their coffins dampened the mood. The woes of losing our leaders had finally set in. We gave them their proper burial. I missed the silver Knight armor I once wore so proudly. That didn't mean I was no longer a Knight by heart. Being one meant so much to me. Those we lost were more than just friends or mentors. They were everything I had.

“Today is not only a day of mourning, but a day we must cherish.” Micah addressed the audience from the Grand Prelate's balcony wearing the silver armor and blue cape. The coat of arms over his chest had faded. It was odd seeing him wear it for the first time in a long time. I stood behind him alongside the others heeding his words. “The Brotherhood remains strong even in the ruins of our beloved city. Today, we are grateful for our allies from the East that have come to mourn by our side. Our Highness and His Excellency will never be forgotten for they will remain an untamed memory. And our countless brothers whom we have lost.”

Micah fought back the tears trickling down at our fallen brothers resting in their coffins.

“Tell ‘em how you feel,” Gabriel whispered into Micah's ear.

Micah nodded and gazed at the humanity assembled. A wide array of people from all walks of life. The Brotherhood, The Resistencia, The Sacred, and The Kingdom. Knights, Rebels, Zealots, and Warriors alike.

“His Highness spoke to me not only as a leader but as a father. He once said that death isn't something one must be afraid of. It should be something we all must embrace. A green heaven, he called it. Where birds chirp in joy, where the green trees are untainted, where the blue skies are clearer, where the white

shores purify our minds, where the sun rises and sets, and where the ground is blooming, freed from the flaws of our world.”

Micah paused to catch his breath.

“And Cyrus. He was more than just our Supreme Knight. A teacher and most importantly, a brother I loved. His legacy will burn in our hearts for the thousands that he saved. And when he died...”

Micah paused, choking up between his lines. He remained strong and willed himself to finish what he had to say.

“When he left us, I was lost. I saw only death and despair. I...I um, I thought I lost it until my remaining brothers, got me through and to keep finding something to fight for. On this day, I ask that you join me my brothers and sisters in our finest hour for it will be our last breath. *Et prout vultis ut faciant vobis facturus esset.*”

The Knights saluted but it wasn't the Brotherhood salute. They followed the same gesture The Sacred had taught us, raising their hand and extending their thumb, index, and middle fingers to the sky.

The coffins were moved to the memorial courtyard before they were to be buried. The courtyard was an ocean of grass, oak trees, light posts, and carnations of various colors. A calmer place than the adjacent courtyard for lounging. Birds sang from the trees as if giving their respects. I noticed one was a nightingale. Brown feathers and a reddish tail singing with charm in its chirps. Its harmony spread through the cooler winds gracing the human ear.

Gabriel and Alexis stood over Brett and Ryan's coffins. Gabriel donned the silver armor and black cape synonymous with The Brotherhood as he observed Brett and Ryan.

“I don't blame them for what they did,” I said to Gabriel.

Gabriel remained silent. He recited something to himself. A Brotherhood prayer. A calm whisper hushed the wind.

“The light beckons and may your rest be eternal.” Gabriel placed their respective crosses over their coffins and saluted. “I forgive you, my brothers.”

Gabriel mourned. Forgiveness wasn’t easy, but I sensed Brett and Ryan would accept his plea. Even if they were no longer here, the two wouldn’t be erased from history. We would speak of their legacy and engrave their names for future generations to behold. The tombstones were engraved with their names and years.

Brett Forester (2083-2101)

Ryan Kizer (2083-2102)

I walked to Micah who stood between two graves holding Elisa’s hands close to him. His blue cape swirled from the wind gusts. An oak leaf crunched beneath his steel feet as he stepped forward. One of the graves belonged to someone who had been laid to rest. The other was empty because a coffin was being prepared to be lowered. This particular grave was smaller and suited for a younger person.

Too young.

A knot in my throat constricted my breathing realizing who was inside the coffin. I regretted knowing who it belonged to.

Luka.

The coffin Micah watched over was engraved with the name *Jared* on the epitaph, the Black Knight I killed.

I killed him?

I killed his friend.

“I know you didn’t mean to kill him,” Micah said while staring at his friend’s grave. “He was a good man. Forced me to join the Black Knights. Showed me the rifle he shot Judith with. Apologized to me when I got shot at the bridge. Shouldn’t have listened to him.” Micah paused and walked over to the

other grave. “He asked me every day how he could improve his sword technique. We trained together most days.”

“He helped me take down the drones during the invasion,” I said remembering Luka’s bravery.

“He was never afraid of danger.” Micah agreed and saluted at the boy’s grave decorated of white carnations. “The light beckons and may your rest be eternal.”

I stepped away and gave Micah some space as he endured the emotions when Luka’s casket was lowered.

I wandered to Cyrus and Donovan’s graves. Their tombstones were piled with hundreds of red flowers and roses. Ivy was present showing her respect for Cyrus.

“Wish we had more time,” she said in her soft-spoken voice. “He fought hard to keep a bridge between my people and his.”

“How long did you know each other?” I asked.

“Many years. Kept his promises. Never broke one.”

“He kept The Forsaken together,” I said. “He tried to keep The Brotherhood’s hierarchy together when it began falling apart.”

“I saw him more than just a friend,” she confessed what I suspected. “When I heard that he was gone, it didn’t feel real. Is this what sadness is?” Ivy stared at his coffin. A dead face spread across her. A tear rolled down over the cut on her cheek. She never expressed this much emotion until now. Ivy had grown to care for him. A connection. A bond she had with an individual outside her realm something her people weren’t exactly known for. Judith stood by Cyrus’s coffin. Even though they knew little about the Supreme Knight, she acknowledged what he meant for The Brotherhood.

“I’m sorry for your friend,” Judith spoke in a broken voice. “I wished we could’ve worked together more often.”

Judith had barely known Cyrus since meeting him at Sanctuary. They got along rather quickly. Both were groomed to take the helm for their respective factions. I turned to my left where Johnny stood by his fallen brother. Though they weren't related, the boy missed him. Everything Cyrus did to protect him for many years. Finding him abandoned and alone and taking him into The Brotherhood. Johnny's final words tarnished their last moments together. An act that still plagued him.

"Big bro," Johnny wept, wearing his rusted armor while wiping the tears with the back of his hand. "Thank you for everything. The light beckons and may your rest be eternal. Love you Cy."

Elisa handed Johnny a bouquet of roses. The boy gently threw the flowers one which was a white carnation accidentally mixed in the bundle. He burst into a sea of tears after throwing the bouquet. Elisa hugged the boy tightly like her own kin. One by one, Jakeob, Drake, and Johnny recited their last words to Donovan. His coffin was the last to be buried. The first and only Grand Prelate that had lived. The city he created was left in shambles, but we promised to rebuild it from the ground up and construct a better one.

"Gunna miss ya, champ," Drake said as the black bandana over his head waved to the fanfare of horns humming to the sky.

Gabriel and Micah recited the words together and saluted. "The light beckons and may your rest be eternal."

The rest of the Knights saluted along with them. The horns cried for their leader.

His Highness was laid to rest.

At last.

After everyone had dispersed, Falco stayed behind sitting obediently next to Cyrus's grave, howling for his master to return.

A day passed and little changed. I don't remember what happened yesterday or this morning. I think the leaders convened to talk about our next phase. Counterattack? Or are we rebuilding for longer? I think there's going to be a victory celebration tomorrow before we head off somewhere. Why can't I remember what I did this morning? I remember somebody dying in my arms again. Cyrus. I think it was Cyrus or Donovan.

I wandered the halls of the Grand Temple heading to my destination. The marble floors echoed to the rhythm of my footsteps. Louder than ever without many Knights and Templars who ruled this godly haven. Micah demanded to speak to me in private in his room. I arrived at 7 o'clock like he asked me and knocked on his door. The knob twisted and the wood creaked.

"Come in," Micah said with a blank face and his tired eyes glossing the reflection of the sunlight from the windows. The top of his hair was a mess from lying down on a pillow. He offered me a seat on his bed. His room was left a mess by The Children of Iscar. Trash and food littered on the floor. Crooked picture frames and missing shelves. Clothes and hangars were tossed all over. Footprints and dirt stained the carpet and floor.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked sitting on his messy bed.

"I asked Gabriel and Jakeob to come a little later so you three can help me out with something that's been itching me." Micah stared at me with two beautiful blue eyes that were cured of their pinkish tint. He was acting odd. Nervous and defensive as if hiding something important. Why didn't he just say what he wanted to tell me?

"Spit it out, bud," I said.

Micah reached for his closet and pulled out an object wrapped in a plastic bag. "Kenya gave this to me."

He extended the palm of his hand showing me a ring case. He opened the box and inside were a pair of gorgeous silver rings sprinkled with the shiniest

diamonds and rubies I'd ever seen. The rings bounced the light of the room like a treasure chest filled with gold.

"I thought this is would be a perfect gift. Pretty ain't it?" he said.

"Micah. Are you proposing to me?" I quipped. "Why didn't you tell me sooner that you loved me?"

He chuckled and playfully elbowed my ribs. "You wished this was for you."

"Then why did you bring me here to show me this?"

"The ring is for Elisa and the other is for me. I'm going to ask her to marry me," he clarified. "I brought you here to ask if you'll be my best man at my wedding."

Best man?

Yup, he nodded after hearing my mind.

Micah thought of me that highly? I fathomed to discover such praise. Maybe my compassion when he was at his lowest point opened his eyes to how much of a person I meant to him. Micah is one of my best friends and he wanted me to be a part of a monumental moment in his life.

"I can't see why I'd say no," I answered.

"Really?" he asked again.

"Mhm."

"Oh, man, you're awesome, Luke," he jumped from his chair with a cheery grin. "I thought you wouldn't agree to it. I owe you."

"You don't owe me anything," I shook my head. "Don't forget that I'm helping you find your sisters."

"Thanks," he nodded. "But first, I have to do this for Elisa."

Someone knocked on the door and in came Gabriel and Jakeob.

"Fancy seeing you boys here," Micah greeted them.

"Luke's here," Jakeob said with a scratched photo camera in hand.

"What's all this about?"

“I’m asking Elisa to marry me,” Micah explained.

“Wow. Congrats man,” Jakeob patted Micah’s shoulder.

“Well look at you?” Gabriel snickered. “Our boy Micah is growing. You’re confident she’ll say yes?”

“Yup. Gabe, I’m gonna need you to ask Elisa if she can meet me at the courtyard. Jakeob, you got that camera ready?”

“Yeah,” Jakeob said, meddling with the camera.

“All right. Let’s get this going,” Micah said as we began to depart.

We left Micah’s room and headed to the courtyard where a gentle breeze had settled in the evening. Micah insisted that around this hour, the sun transformed into a translucent orange color when receding beneath the horizon. The perfect place he thought it would be to propose to Elisa.

“This is it,” Micah murmured in a shaky voice.

Our friend appeared to be uneasy, nervous perhaps. Maybe it was the cool wind or the fact she was overly anxious whether Elisa would say yes.

“Don’t you worry, bud,” I said. “No way she’d say no.”

“Hope you’re right,” Micah’s teeth chattered from the impending night. “Should’ve brought a coat. Think I need to take a piss too,” he chuckled.

“Dude, just relax, okay?” I tried to calm him.

“Okay,” he shivered despite wearing his Brotherhood armor. “I think Gabe should be with her any minute now.”

Jakeob lounged around, cleaning his camera so Elisa wouldn’t suspect something. Expecting Gabriel to appear from the stairway to the Grand Temple, Johnny showed up instead and noticed us waiting.

“What are you guys doing here?” Johnny asked.

“We’re waiting for someone,” Jakeob replied while wiping the lens of the camera.

“Who?”

“She’s here,” Jakeob said, hiding the camera behind his black cape.

We glanced at Elisa and Gabriel. They were both laughing and teasing each other. Gabriel cracked jokes with her and was flirtatious, but held back when he saw Micah.

“I-I-It’s cold out here,” Elisa’s teeth chattered. “What’s the meaning of this anyway?”

“Y-Yeah, what’s going on g-guys?” Johnny’s voice rattled. “W-W-We should all go get dinner now. I-I’m k-kinda hungry.”

“I have something to tell you,” Micah spoke to Elisa.

Elisa stared into her lover’s eyes with a mixed expression. Love? Happiness? Sadness? Almost as if she felt embarrassed that Micah would confess something they only knew. It would turn out to be the biggest moment of her life. Micah pulled out the ring case from his pockets and opened it. Elisa put both her hands over her mouth, surprised at what she saw. Everyone else looked on with joy on their faces.

“I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment,” Micah announced. “Tomorrow might be our last day before who knows what might happen next and I’d regret it if never asked you.”

“Micah. I-” she stuttered. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

Micah dropped to one knee and extended his arm. Jakeob’s camera began taking pictures, one after another of the breathtaking scenery. The sizzling orange of the sun lined below the shadowy clouds while the stars above us winked in approval. Goosebumps tickled over me as Micah asked her lover the most important question of her life.

“Elisa. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed with excitement.

My friends erupted in a choir of cheers and applause. Johnny whistled and stomped his feet in celebration. Elisa ecstatically took the ring from the case. Micah helped her put it on. In return, Elisa placed the other ring on his finger.

The sunset smiled in a dazzling aura. The light illuminated the darkest pits we'd journeyed thus far.

The couple concluded their moment with a kiss under the expanding twilight.

-IX-

Wayfaring Stranger

I helped tighten his vest and gauntlets and used a dust roller to clean his royal blue cape. He asked me to polish his sabaton, the Knight foot armor. The armor shined with the excellence of a Grand Prelate. After Micah was fully dressed and groomed, he combed his ruffled hair to a more professional appearance. The curls of his blond hair slicked from the gel he put on. He shaved the strands of facial hair that lingered. A refined presentation for the biggest day of his life.

“How do I look?” he asked, dusting the coattails of his cape with the back of his hand.

“I think Elisa will be very pleased,” I said dusting off the last speck of dust from his armor.

“You saying that I’m looking hot?” he giggled.

“For once, you actually don’t look like an idiot,” I quipped.

Micah laughed at my sarcasm. He was in better shape and mood compared to the past few weeks when he appeared to be on the brink of death. I recognized him again. His nails were neatly trimmed and his hair grew back and didn’t rot from feces and fleas. He smiled brighter than the glossiness of his blue eyes.

“I’ll be heading to Gabe’s room to see if he’s ready. You should get suited up,” Micah said.

I nodded and returned to my room and sighed at the unwelcome sight. It would take several more days to clean the mess left by the Fanatics where they had littered. Most of my clothes were missing and the furniture was either moved elsewhere or disassembled. The only thing left untouched was the black stone with the phoenix engraved that Ivy had given me. It was left alone in the drawer I

had placed it. They probably thought it was a piece of junk and ignored it. I grabbed the stone in the palm of my hand thinking it was some silly moniker that symbolized me because I helped The Sacred restore their water supply. It might just be a silly myth fabricated by their beliefs, but the more I thought about it, the more I believed it was somehow true.

After taking a quick bath and shaving my sideburns, I unzipped the garment bag Judith and Alexis had left in my room this morning. Inside was the same suit I wore during the propaganda videos. The black, yellow, and red vivid tuxedo with a flamboyant design and the dress pants with dark curved lines. The colors radiated like a dreamy sunny day. I cherished this gift so much that I couldn't touch it with my dirty hands. I washed them at the bathroom sink, but the lash on my back bothered me when I bent even for a little.

I removed my shirt and pondered at the stitches riddled on my torso and the countless red markings that scarred my back. I nagged about them every day. I gazed into the bathroom mirror wondering what today would be like. It almost didn't seem real to me. None of it seemed normal. Micah was getting married. We should be fighting today, not celebrating an insignificant victory. My hand trembled as I walked back to my bed and picked up the tuxedo seeing my bow resting next to my bed. I urged myself to grab it thinking I'd heard screams, explosions, and fires outside. I took a deep breath and noticed nothing was wrong except that Iscar was still out there. The World Revolution was far from over. Tomorrow, the leaders of the factions will decide if an alliance will be formed.

A knock on the door caused me to flinch erratically. It was unusual for me to overreact to such a simple sound. For just a second, I found myself frightened and alone.

“Knock, knock,” someone said.

I shook my head and ran to open the door. There stood my friends. Micah in his glamorous wedding armor. Gabriel wore a dark-colored suit like mine which was also handmade by Judith and Alexis. Jakeob wore his Brotherhood

armor with a much larger black cape that made him look bigger than his usual size.

“What’s taking so long?” Gabriel smirked.

“Yeah, bud. You were taking your sweet time. I was shouting ‘knock, knock,’ like a bazillion times,” Micah said.

“I-I had a lot of stuff on my mind,” I fumbled my words.

“Let me guess, you were thinking about Judith,” Gabriel winked.

“No. Not at all.”

“Well, I think she likes you.” Gabriel mimicked a kissing sound.

“Forget about it.” I shook my head. “Has it crossed anyone’s mind that we’re fine with this?”

“What are you talking about? Tonight oughta be fun. Cheer up and enjoy the party, man,” Gabriel said tapping the back of my shoulder,

“Maybe you’re right,” I scratched my head agreeing that I’d gone a bit crazy.

“Here let me help you put on your bowtie,” Gabriel said.

I cooperated with my friends as they helped groom me for tonight’s festivities. Micah used the same dust roller I used to clean his tuxedo. Jakeob polished my black dress shoes all while Gabriel wrapped the bowtie around my collar.

“And you’re all set.” Gabriel nodded.

I stared into the bathroom mirror for a second, this time all dressed up. This still didn’t feel right to me. The darkest memories were sealed away like they’d never happened.

Handsome, I thought, grinning at the mirror.

“Because you are,” Micah chuckled. He’d heard my thoughts.

“You both look like a million bucks,” Gabriel heard my thinking as well.

“Why? Because I have a fine ass,” I joked.

“Speaking my language aren’t you, Lukie? You should chill out because I can kick that fine ass of yours with my two arms tied behind my back.”

Micah and Jakeob exploded in laughter. Despite Gabriel’s threats, I was delighted that we were back together. Maybe today wouldn’t be bad after all.

Just like the old days.

The wedding ceremony unfolded inside the church at The Grand Temple. A perfect romantic setting suited for the two lovebirds. The white walls were kindled from the noon sun that slipped through the cracks of the dome above. A large crowd gathered consisting of people from every faction present. The church was enormous but every seat and inch of space in the back was packed. People bumped into each other as more flowed in. Those who couldn’t fit inside listened to the ceremony from outside the doors.

Elisa walked down the aisle with Finn as her escort. A fanfare of horns was played by Brotherhood Knights as she made her arrival. Instead of wearing a typical wedding dress, she wore a light cream silk dress with diamonds that sparkled. The same dress Ivy had gifted her in Great Arabia. The most stunning dress I had seen any person wear. Everyone was bewildered at such beauty with jaws dropping to the floor.

Micah was next. He was escorted by Kenya who wore a gold dress that touched the ground, pebbled bracelets, and a black and silver necklace. The moment he gazed at Elisa in her silky dress, his eyes never shied away from her as if a spell were cast on him. The soon to be wedded couple didn’t speak a single word until the priest told them to. Their eyes were firmly locked. Their hands grasped tightly. Their smiles were infected with satisfaction.

Happiness.

The same emotion when I killed Isaiah and William, but why? It made me feel better. Did that make me a monster like Johnny said? The itch for creating chaos was irresistible. I needed more of it.

The pair recited their wedding vows. Promise after promise, I knew their love for one another was inseparable. They hadn't looked away since their eyes paralyzed each other. The priest declared his final statements before pronouncing them husband and wife.

"I Micah Santos, take you Elisa Angeles to be my lawful wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part."

"I Elisa Angeles, take you Micah Santos to be my lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part."

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride," the priest announced.

Micah kissed Elisa's ruby lips. The crowd exploded in a thunderous round of applause and cheers. I clapped along and congratulated both on their newfound life. The couple happily marched their way to the exit with a rain of roses falling from the halls above.

The festivities were held in the Grand Temple ballroom on the second floor. I sat at a table alone, watching the celebration. The music was orchestrated by The Kingdom who brought their instruments such as drums and maracas. I was delighted to see my friends in a great mood. The exotic atmosphere was difficult not to put a smile on our faces, but this was all strangely oblique to me. There were copious amounts of food at the tables and of course, Johnny had countless servings and got seconds a few times. Not to mention that there were many alcoholic drinks including beers, whiskey, and rum. Gabriel, Micah, Drake, Finn, Javier, and Khalon were the heaviest drinkers by far.

As for the dancing, Micah and Elisa were at the center of it. Elisa's dancing lessons with Micah had come in handy. They moved to the beat of the music almost seamlessly. Johnny was another surprise dancer who was electric

for his age. More joined them and The Kingdom unsurprisingly consisted of many great dancers considering it was rooted in their traditions. The Sacred including Ivy and Raihan didn't join in on the celebration. This wasn't their thing although they greatly appreciated the food. They promised to stay up all night guarding Solomon's outskirts and walls to ensure no threat could ruin the night. We were thankful for taking up such a task.

"You look handsome today!" somebody said. I rolled my head seeing her run toward me to take a look good at me up close.

"Shouldn't you be saying that to Gabe?" I raised my right eyebrow.

"Already did. He gave me permission to bother you," Alexis giggled.

"Hi Luke," Judith said after catching up to Alexis.

"Hi," I answered in an emotionless tone.

"Need some company?" she asked as they both took a seat.

"I'm fine," I said without looking into Judith's hazel eyes. Not that I disrespected her. I needed some time alone and tonight probably wouldn't be the night. Judith wore a scarlet red dress while Alexis wore aqua blue one. The same satin style dresses with different colors from The Resistencia Headquarters during the anniversary festival. They decided to join me at the table ignoring my objections.

"You seem extra quiet today" Judith continued.

"I'm not in the mood I guess," I mumbled with a half-hearted smile. Very little made sense to me. I wasn't acting who I thought I was.

"Is something the matter?" Judith questioned.

I barely noticed that I was staring at the center of the table where the condiments and sugar were staring back. Despite a vibrant atmosphere, I was not in the right mindset. There was still a lot left to accomplish before things were truly under our control. Iscar and Camden were still out there lurking in their precious Capital. What if this day of reckoning Camden spoke of is true? What if Iscar's prophecy was happening right now without any of us being aware of it?

What if they were waiting for us to come to them? Why haven't they counterattacked?

"I need some fresh air," I said under my breath.

Judith and Alexis heeded my wishes by leaving me alone. I exited the ballroom and outside a looming balcony from where I surveyed an empty Solomon at night alone. The dead lying in the ruins called my name, but I shut my mind off focusing on what was next.

Happiness.

I yearned for happiness yet was anxious about what tomorrow awaited. This might be the last time everyone was here. I might lose a lot of my friends in the coming days, weeks, or months. The price we must pay to start anew. So long as Iscar was alive, we couldn't find true happiness. Being alive or dead was equally a cruel fate. I don't know if I'll get to see the end of it. I just wanted everything to be over.

"Fancy seeing you here." A voice behind me interrupted my thoughts.

WHAT! I angrily spat. He flinched. He heard my exact thoughts in his head.

"Wow, easy there. Something's the matter?" Micah calmly said, raising his hands and slowly walking toward me.

"Just needed some fresh air." I backpedaled my frustrations and focused on my friend's concerns.

"Judith told me you've been acting a little odd. Thought you might need something," he continued.

I took a deep breath and eased my foul temper. "Don't you think this seems too good to be true? I mean we're having a great time and all, but this isn't over."

"I'm listening," Micah nodded.

"We're not all going to make it," I whispered.

I know, Micah conveyed his thoughts. He knew it to be true, but we remained hopeful.

“When we were stuck inside those crummy old cells, you promised me to help find my sisters,” Micah said. “So long as we find them, it’d be worth everything I’ve had to get through to see them again.”

“We will,” I promised. “But don’t forget that this isn’t over until Iscar is dead.”

Micah paused and stood by me gazing at the ruined city and the milky moonlight shining upon its gloriousness.

“I might be one of those who doesn’t make it out,” he said as he stood beside me looking from the railing.

“Don’t say that,” I shook my head from his insanity. “You got more to lose than me.”

“That’s not how it usually goes,” he said.

“You don’t fear death, do you?” I wondered.

“I fear the pain before dying,” he replied.

Why would he say such things? Was he completely out of his damn mind? His breath stunk of alcohol, though he appeared somber. Maybe it was drugs or some other substance I wasn’t aware of.

“You two are on a date?” Gabriel mockingly interrupted. He’d listened and watched us from the doors to the balcony.

“What’s up Gabe? We’re just talking,” Micah said turning around.

“Heard you boys yapping in this big nogging,” Gabriel said, pointing at his head with his index finger.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“Me? I brought this for you.” Gabriel handed me a bottle full of whiskey. He playfully urged me to take a drink. His breath also reeked of alcohol and could barely walk straight. He would’ve stumbled over me if he’d drank a few more bottles.

“Just a little sip. It's no biggie,” he blabbered with shuttering eyes.

I grabbed the bottle and sniffed the scent of whiskey. It smelled of water and medicine. This would be my first drink. Alcohol never piqued my interest even at my current age. I took a quick sip of the novel liquid that deteriorated my taste buds. The potent flavor tingled my tongue and soured the corners of my mouth. Gabriel and Micah laughed at me for not being able to handle a shot of whiskey.

“I can tell that's your first one,” Micah cackled.

I embarrassingly spat out part of the drink and wiped my mouth with the sleeves of my suit.

“I've had three already,” Micah bragged and tapped my shoulder like he was proud that I was initiated.

“Three? That's a rookie move. I've had six,” Gabriel burped.

“What are you three up to?” Jakeob entered our conversation.

“Just talking.” Gabriel took a sip from his whiskey. “How many drinks have you had?”

“Just one,” he said, raising one finger.

“How are the pictures looking?” Micah asked.

“They're looking great,” Jakeob gave us a thumbs up. “I don't have a place to print them, and the battery is limited, so it might be a long time before we see them.”

“You know, I think the four of us make a great team,” Micah said.

“We made Camden piss his pants.” Jakeob laughed with us.

“And his wifey had to save him,” Micah laughed louder.

“We're amigos,” Gabriel said, taking a shot from the whiskey. “The four amigos to be precise. You three will also be at my wedding.”

“That's one way to put it,” Micah agreed. “Been an honor being back together.” He extended his arm and held out a fist bump. “Let's promise that

we're all friends for life. If one of us breaks that promise, it is up to us to hold each other accountable. We are still part of Cyrus's guild."

"Love to hear it," Gabriel took another sip of whiskey and shared a fist bump.

"It's what Cyrus would want," I said, doing the same.

"For Cyrus," Jakeob said as he joined us.

These three gentlemen were truly my closest friends. We swore to look out for each other. Our combined energy pulsed between us. I sensed their wisdom and strength fuse with mine's. For a moment, I saw their minds. Gabriel remembered his childhood and the day we met, sitting in his treehouse on that first night. His newborn sister he helped feed, growing up together in the slums. Micah fished with his sisters at a river. A golden retriever he called Blue and whistled to him when he needed him. A young boy Micah met that helped him on his journey. Jakeob helped his younger brother train to become a Brotherhood Knight someday. A caring family he still had alive and glimpses of their old home while carrying his old camera.

Our bond would never wither.

We returned to the ballroom where the night had grown livelier. The energy was infectious. Reinvigorated, I finally took part in the festivities. The music amped me up more than before. Judith invited me to dance. She was more enthusiastic than I was despite her serious nature.

"Come on!" she grabbed my hand like a frolicking child.

I was somewhat embarrassed to be dancing with her. I'd rather do it myself, but it wasn't that I didn't like Judith. She'd forced me out of my comfort zone.

"Aren't you having fun?" she giggled.

"S-Sorta" I stuttered.

“Oh, don’t you be lying,” Judith dragged me every which way to get me to dance with her. I followed her lead in shame. I shuffled my feet trying my best to keep up with her.

“There you go!” she exclaimed.

A mellow song played. Judith slowed our pace. I looked behind her shoulders seeing Gabriel and Alexis dancing together. Gabriel winked back at me for some reason. Micah and Elisa had all the attention on them being the newly wedded couple. They held each other as if nothing could break them apart.

“What are you feeling right now?” Judith muttered into my ear.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m just a guy trying to survive.”

“You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

“A little,” I confessed.

“Luke,” she said, hypnotized by my eyes. “They should be afraid of you.”

Judith squeezed my hands. I liked her, but I was ashamed to say such things in public. I kept my secrets hidden hoping she would guess my feelings. She saved me many times even if we didn’t see eye to eye once upon a time. A pugnacious person capable of giving me the fight of my life. We butted heads and battled because of different ideologies. Now, we were against a common enemy. I truly cared for her. If only I could say it aloud.

From my peripheral, I saw the outline of her head lean forward and felt her lips press on my cheek. I turned to stone. Ants crawled over my hands. I was too shy to return the favor. My ears were burning, and my feet locked to the ground like ice.

“Your face is all red,” she chuckled.

Did I love her? I couldn’t say for certain, but she was also one of my best friends. The music paused for a few minutes ending our dance. All eyes were back on the ballroom stage where Melaney sat with a piano in front of her. She

cleared her throat and began playing a soft tune. I recognized the notes and the beat. It was the song her brother wrote. How could I have forgotten so quickly?

*I see, I see, I see you.
Oh, my darling.
I know you few.
Will you be my starling?*

*I whisper to your ear.
How much you want to see.
Did I tell you here?
At the giving tree.*

*I see, I see, I see you.
Oh, my royal queen.
I know you few.
Will you be my scene?*

*I whisper to your ear.
How much you want to see.
Did I tell you here?
At the endless sea.*

A round of applause exploded from the crowd. I was awestruck at her voice. Her brother surely smiled down at her. It was like hearing Michael for the first time again beneath The Resistencia Headquarters. Those were much simpler days.

“He died at Sanctuary protecting me,” Melaney had told me a day after our liberation. Her hands were shaking, and her lips curled when she uttered the

news to me. I couldn't remember what had happened since. I stared back at the stage trying to forget.

Gabriel walked to the stage with a guitar. It was his turn to sing his song. This would be his first time singing in front of a crowd. He sat on the piano chair and stroked the guitar to a soothing beat. Gabriel's deep voice sang the lyrics to a folk song I hadn't heard since the first day we met. The ballroom came to a silence listening to his melody.

*I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger
Traveling through this world of woe
There is no sickness, no toil, nor danger
In that bright land to which I go*

*I'm going there to see my father
I'm going there no more to roam
I'm just going over Jordan
I'm just going over home*

*I know dark clouds will gather 'round me
I know my way is rough and steep
But beautiful fields lie just before me
Where God's redeemed, their vigils keep*

*I'm going there to see my mother
She said she'd meet me when I come
I'm just going over Jordan
I'm just going over home*

A more vociferous applause erupted. This was the best Gabriel had sounded. Never in a million years would I've imagined he'd sing this song again. I sensed Judith felt moved as I did. She dazzled me with her sweet hazel eyes. I held her hand tightly urging her to keep a semblance of unity to what was ahead.

The celebration winded down into the early morning hours. I'd fallen asleep at the ballroom and was unable to recall what happened the night before. I'd barely drank anything. Was it the small sip of whiskey that knocked me out? A few ounces did this to me? I groggily picked myself up from the cold ground with a light headache. As I wobbled toward the exit, I accidentally kicked an empty bottle of whiskey rolling to Drake and Finn who slept with their heads against the wall. Beside them were more empty bottles of whiskey.

"Mornin' mate," Drake said rubbing his red eyes. His shirt was drenched in booze and the same with Finn who was unconscious and had his thumb in his mouth.

"Morning," I yawned.

"Where ya heading off to?" Drake asked.

"Gonna sleep in my bed."

"That Judith chick kissed you right in the mouth, didn't she?"

"What? No," I shook my head.

"Why so evasive 'bout it, mate?" Drake scoffed.

"It's none of your business," I said walking away as Drake giggled behind me.

I exited the ballroom and made my way downstairs and wandered the hallow halls of The Grand Temple until someone decided to call me out.

"Brave one," said a man's voice.

I groaned, wishing not to talk. I turned around and saw Raihan of all people. Why him? He was stirred by some anomaly and it seemed to involve me.

"Something the matter?" I yawned louder.

“Ivy. She has called you to meet her now,” he explained. “She’s returning to the Grand Temple with someone who arrived at night asking for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with me and see for yourself.”

“Ugh,” I sighed. “I need some rest, okay?”

“This is very important,” he insisted.

I rubbed my eyes trying to keep awake. I had no choice but to heed their concerns. At any moment, I could’ve tumbled and passed out on the floor, but someone was asking for me. A lot of people knew my name, but if they weren’t a Fanatic, then who else could it be?

I followed Raihan guiding me to the main doors of the Grand Temple where a crowd gathered. Johnny found me and ran saying something so urgent I woke up a second time. I couldn’t sleep no matter how much tired I was.

“Luke! Oh man, you won’t believe this!” he panted.

“What’s going on?” I squinted to get a closer look.

I bumped past the crowd where Ivy looked down at the body of a woman that immediately struck me. The Sacred placed her damaged body on a stretcher. White silky hair and casual clothes. I remembered her wearing a fur coat and a wealth of jewelry on her neck and wrists. Her face was swollen, her hair smudged, and her cheeks stained with mud.

Grace.

-X-

Crowning

Exhausted. She'd traveled from the Capital. It normally takes weeks on foot from Imperium to Solomon, but Grace managed it. That compelled me that she was here for a reason. Finn said she was in stable condition though it might take her days to recover from her injuries. She was underweight and malnourished. No different than living in the slums with how poorly conditioned she was.

I spent the early afternoon hours taking a nap. While resting, the High Council deliberated on who would be the next Grand Prelate. Due to a lack of numbers, Finn, Elisa, and Drake were now part of the High Council and because of my actions against Isaiah, I was no longer a Brotherhood Knight or Templar. I was barred from partaking in their decisions and stripped from my rank and duties.

After waiting till the clock struck noon, I left the room and ventured to the Temple Grounds where the High Council would announce the new Grand Prelate. There, a crowd of Knights had gathered anticipating to hear the crowning of their new leader. I watched from below the balcony near the few thousand Knights falling in formation. A fanfare of horns howled across the ruined city. The Knights stood at attention. A figure stepped forward looking down from the balcony on his kingdom to rule.

Micah.

No doubt in my mind it was going to be him. That day came sooner than later. His blue cape slithered the marble floors of the Grand Temple. He carried his mighty halberd and stopped at the edge of the balcony to salute The Brotherhood. The Knights saluted. He recited The Brotherhood oath and was sworn in as their Grand Prelate.

Sollempniter iuro me thronum Magni Praelati fideliter exequi et pro posse meo, Fratrum Templi, conservare, protegere ac defendere. Et prout vultis ut faciant vobis facturus esset.

The horns erupted and the Knights cheered. The Brotherhood hymn played. They all sang with praise and honor. I couldn't help but quote the words with them.

We are valiant men. We are courageous men. For we shall fight for here and then.

We are the soul of life. For our loyal hearts our homage pay. We respect thee, Templar.

For our Grand Prelate awaits. Light give us strength for we shall win today!

I walked up the mountain of stairs and to the throne room. Inside, there was a lot of chattering and conversations. I met with Micah and was one of the first to congratulate him.

“Thanks, Luke,” he said as we embraced.

He handpicked his Templars including Bishop, Guardian, and Prelate. Micah chose Jakeob to be Bishop, Drake as Guardian, and Gabriel as Prelate. Elisa made history by becoming the first female High Templar. Johnny was also old enough to be promoted from squire to Knight. He was eager to become a Knight and we celebrated with him. As for me, I'd no longer dress in Knight armor. I wore my old clothes that made me recognizable like any other commoner. Dark pants, black leather jacket, and boots.

“I think it's time we get the others inside,” Gabriel suggested to Micah.

“Agreed. There's much work to do,” Micah nodded.

The leaders of the other factions were welcomed. A critical moment that we must take advantage of. One by one, they entered the throne room. Judith, the Overseer of The Resistencia accompanied by Alexis, Melaney, and Javier. Ivy, the Mistress of The Sacred, accompanied by Raihan. Malik, the King of The Kingdom of the Sahara, accompanied by Queen Kenya and their fiercest Warrior, Khalon. I stood beside the newly sworn Prelate as he began to speak.

“The Brotherhood and I thank you all for liberating our fallen city. We are forever in your debt,” Gabriel began. “Some of us may have not seen eye to eye, but I ask each of you to set our differences aside and put an end to the menace so that we may have a future. I am pleading for the leaders of The Resistencia, The Sacred, and The Kingdom to join forces with The Brotherhood to coalesce into a union. The four groups combined to make what we shall call The Forsaken.”

The Forsaken?

Gabriel intended to use our guild’s name. The one Cyrus led. The one I named. His legacy was to be enshrined by the conjoining of the factions.

“We will never rest unless we bring war to Iscar’s doorstep,” Gabriel continued. “We will not cease the fight until Iscar lies dead in a pool of his own blood. For decades, he has wiped out billions and threatened our existence. Our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren depend on us to bring them a life of peace. On this day, The Forsaken becomes not only what guides us to a better tomorrow, but ensuring that people have a right to live, to breathe, to eat, to drink water, to sleep, and to prosper without a tyrant breathing over our necks. Our future is in our hands.”

Gabriel’s words spoke of childhood. The dream we pursued. A world where we could exhale from the mindless cruelties of a world government that knew no bounds. Iscar had ruled for too long. We must put an end to it.

“If we are to win this war, do my people get to live in peace? And will we have a voice should we appeal to something we deem incorrect?” Ivy challenged. Her bewildered eyes fused with doubt and hope.

“Your people will fulfill their sovereignty and be granted a voice that we will listen to loud and clear,” Gabriel walked up to her and swore what he said. “The Forsaken will only intervene should a foe threaten our prosperity or the prosperity of others.”

“I trust the words of Cyrus. My people will join the war in his name,” Ivy bowed her head. “Too long has Iscar’s imperialistic crusade ravaged our lands.”

“And we shall be Mistress,” Gabriel nodded. “I understand that I’ve made mistakes that have brought friction between our groups. We must triumph against the greatest threat to have rivaled us.”

“You are brave prodigies, especially you young one,” Malik said, staring at me and Gabriel with a stiff look. The Kingdom never smiled or showed any expression. Stoic faces that all looked the same, but their words carried weight and were among some of the best hand to hand combatants I’d seen.

Gabriel marched in front of Malik and The Kingdom. “We will gladly honor your Kingdom with the respect it deserves,” he said.

“Then the Kingdom is at your service,” Malik declared.

Gabriel saluted. “Your warships will be of great use Your Majesty. We will conquer Iscar by land and sea.”

The Resistencia had yet to agree to join The Forsaken. They should’ve been the most obvious ones to accept the alliance, but Judith appeared unsure. A blank face didn’t comfort me. What was going through her mind? Was being the new Overseer too much for her? She lowered her head in shame for unknown reasons. Reasons that were clearer in the instance I remembered. What Iscar had said of her, I couldn’t believe it to be true. She wouldn’t dare to say it aloud, would she?

“Judith? Do you and The Resistencia declare yourself allies of The Forsaken?” Gabriel asked.

“This is all my fault,” Judith said on the brink of tears.

Everyone stared at her confused. I was afraid of how the others might respond to such revelation, but she was no traitor. She couldn’t be. I feared for her.

“Excuse me?” Gabriel questioned.

“Iscar is my father,” Judith uttered a curse.

A collective gasp permeated the throne room like a disease. Judith escaped her father’s grasp for the better. Not a chance she would have gone this far without standing here. She had the option to side with Iscar on the day Sanctuary was attacked. I expected someone to call her a traitor and it was who I expected.

“How could you!” Gabriel clamored.

“I left my father because I knew who he was. Maxwell wouldn’t have taken me in if I had told him the truth,” Judith said with regret.

“You lied to us!?” Gabriel raised his voice.

“I know him more than anyone else here and I want to overthrow him just like all of you,” she pleaded.

“Do you know what he intends to do with the powers of the Masonic Trinity?” Micah asked with a mellow voice that showed no signs of hostility.

“He wants to transcend to what he calls paradise,” Judith replied.

“What the hell does that mean anyway? And why should we believe anything you say?” Gabriel glared.

“Paradise is his vision of the afterlife. Iscar has a deep hatred toward humanity. He had a woman he loved. When he sparked a revolution of his own, she was mutilated and tortured by the People’s World Government as punishment for the uprising. My father’s tactics worsened, seeking violent means to avenge her. His actions led to his exile from The Brotherhood of the Templar. Since then,

millions joined his revolution to fight injustices. They've bought into his lies and intend to sacrifice everyone in exchange to achieve paradise."

"She's right." A distinct voice from the throne entrance broke the conversation.

Grace.

All eyes turned to Finn and Grace who had recuperated from her injuries. She hunched, unable to stand straight but held onto Finn's arms to maintain her balance. Whatever she had to say was more essential than her health.

"Time is ticking," Grace warned.

"Grace?" I uttered.

"It's you," Gabriel said. "What has brought you here from the Capital, Fanatic?"

"I'm not your enemy nor am I loyal to Iscar," Grace heaved. "You should be thankful that I weakened the signal that allowed you to interrupt Camden's wedding."

"Great," Gabriel rolled his eyes. "What makes you think we're going to believe you?"

"I worked at the Iscar Media Network," she explained. "I had to escape the Capital because he knew I wasn't on his side. I met Luke at the city and directed him to put an end to your hostilities and rally against Iscar."

"Why the hell did you ally with her?" Gabriel's spit landed on my neck questioning my loyalty. I took a step back expecting he might throw a fit.

"She helped me and Johnny escape the Capital or else we wouldn't have returned," I replied. "Continue talking Grace. You are welcome here."

"Very well," she leaned against the wall to maintain her composure. "What Judith said about Iscar is true. He intends to destroy all life on this planet to avenge what he lost."

"But how can he do that with the Masonic Trinity?" Micah asked. "Couldn't he just fix the world?"

“Whatever rationale he once had vanished many years ago. He’s a man without reasoning. He believes himself to be a god. He will use the Swords to bring doomsday.”

“His Highness never told us this,” Jakeob affirmed. “The Masonic Trinity can only control the different aspects of reality, not bring an end to it, or can it?”

“The wielder possesses extraordinary powers that humans desire,” Micah shared what he knew. “His Highness sealed them away so no others can be tempted to exploit their use.”

“Time is short,” Grace wheezed.

“How much time?” I asked.

“A month. Thirty days at most. We must mobilize now!”

“Just shuut, will you?” Gabriel stormed toward Grace trying to make sense of her. Gabriel believed Grace was some crazy lady who had just traveled across the continent. I worried he might jeopardize our alliance. “Now tell us the truth and stop with this end of the world judgment day shit!” Gabriel spat in her face.

“Gabe. Stop this,” I pleaded as I stood in between their paths.

“I’d bet a fucking city she was sent by Iscar to spy on us. Same with your girlfriend over here,” Gabriel scowled, drawing his sword and pointing at her neck.

“Stop!” I yelled.

Before Grace could respond, a rumble throttled the ground. Everything shook. An earthquake of sorts caused the earth to sway back and forth like a rocking chair.

Everyone dropped to the ground with hands over their heads. Screams and shouts echoed through the chamber. The walls and ceiling danced side to side. A chandelier fell ten yards to my left, spilling wax from the candles. Fortunately, no one was near it.

After a long minute, the moving stopped.

A long silence.

A chorus of perplexed mumbling and shouting followed. Nobody had a clue what just occurred. I rose to my feet ready to dive to the floor again expecting more aftershocks.

“Is everyone okay?” Gabriel shouted, assuring no one was harmed.

The magnitude of the earthquake felt unnatural but not as deadly as it should have been. An unexplained force that was unseen. I knew something was amiss when Finn called us to the balcony. From there, I looked at the city. Some structures had crumbled but most were intact. People scrambled out in the streets like frightened ants after a foot stomp near their colony.

“Something wrong with the sun!” Finn pointed at the skies where a crescent silhouette crept over the sun.

“Is that the moon?” Jakeob whispered. It appeared to be that but how was it possible?

“We have to make sure everyone is safe in this city. This meeting is adjourned for now.” Micah declared.

Everyone evacuated the Grand Temple in the event of an aftershock. I studied the damage the earthquake had caused. There was minor damage inside the Grand Temple and in the nearby buildings, but the unfinished structures The Children of Iscar left behind were obliterated. People congregated near the main entrance to the Grand Temple. Many asked questions. Nobody had answers.

The partial eclipse remained steady. It wasn’t supposed to last more than a few minutes, yet it persisted longer than that. An abnormal phenomenon that was not under nature’s hands like someone was in control.

“Do you think Grace is right?” Gabriel asked me as we exited the Grand Temple “Or is she just some crazy chick? There’s a damn eclipse as soon as the ground shook.”

“We should ask Judith if she knows what’s going on,” I said.

“If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t trust her one bit,” Gabriel sighed.

Gabriel tagged along and helped me find Judith amid a sea of people. Judith was surely aiding her people who needed the most help. I bumped into Javier who was doing just that near the fountain at the front of the Temple.

“Have you seen Judith?” I asked him.

“Haven’t seen her amigo, but I saw Alexis going to the harbor. Judy might be with her,” Javier guessed.

Gabriel and I trekked to the harbor. We arrived there watching from the slope overlooking the docks. People congregated at the ocean below.

Ocean?

There was no ocean. I gazed at the horizon curious as to why the water had receded. The Kingdom’s ships were gone too. The ocean floor exposed. A limitless field of sand and seaweed and fish flopping as if the world had gone mad.

“The fuck is going on here?” Gabriel cursed under his breath.

“It can’t possibly mean that, can it?” I said in disbelief. I stared at the horizon anticipating the worst. I saw it. An ocean wall swallowing our view.

“Get everyone to the Grand Temple!” Gabriel’s voice panicked, pivoting to everyone to retreat.

Before I left, I saw Judith and Alexis imploring a crowd of intrigued bystanders to find higher ground. Some were more interested in catching fish for their meals. Others simply wandered around searching for answers. A group of kids built sandcastles and sand mountains. All clueless to the impending destruction I gazed at the horizon again.

And I saw it.

The blue wall approached the city.

I froze. Sheer terror drained my heart from its veins. The city bells rang. Everyone was ordered to take immediate shelter inside the Grand Temple.

I watched Judith and Alexis running their way to higher ground alongside those who were skeptical of the obvious threat. I ran down to them, alerting others along the way. When I caught up to them, we ran back to the Grand Temple where a massive crowd surrounded its stone walls. Gabriel guided people inside in an orderly fashion, but as the waves came within a mile, the crowd became frenzied. Most were already inside, but Judith wasn't anywhere nearby. I'd lost her again.

I ricocheted among the crowd like a pinball trying to find her. I slipped from the humanity searching everywhere my eyes wandered. Then I heard something. A voice. Or at least I thought I heard Judith's voice. Someone shouting at something. Close by at a ruined building, I saw Judith digging up a pile of debris. What was she doing?

Not wasting a second, I ran to her.

"Judy!" I yelled her name.

Judith moved the pile of debris with her bare hands as if looking for something.

"Mama!" cried a child's voice.

My mind flipped a switch hearing someone so young crying for help. I helped Judith remove the rubble, but the child was buried under a mountain. It would take far too long to rescue whoever was trapped underneath. I continued and tried to dig up the hapless girl. I broke a fingernail or two scratching and clawing at wood and steel pipes. A splinter cut across my left hand. Like a bee that had drilled its stinger into my skin, I tried to peel it away, but did little to ease the needle.

I looked west where the ocean once was. The wave loomed. Its crescent shape foamed into a behemoth about fifty feet in height. There was no time.

Gabriel and Alexis arrived to lend a hand. With our combined efforts, our pace hastened. We uncovered the top of the rubble to find what appeared to be a small girl no more than six years old buried beneath the destruction.

“Hold on a little longer!” Judith shouted words of encouragement.

The little girl cried profusely. She was frightened and scared like the rest of us. I doubted she even knew that an enormous wave would flood the city underwater. When it seemed we had freed her, there was one last weighty concrete chunk trapping her legs. I clamped my feet to the ground and tilted my weight to my upper body to pull the last piece that had her pinned, but it was simply too heavy for me. My battered spine almost contorted from the pressure.

Gabriel came to my aid. We furiously tried to pull the enormous piece of junk that was heavier than a dozen grown men. Despite our best attempts, we couldn't budge the heavy object. Judith and Alexis joined in too, but the four of us still couldn't budge the damn thing. With no one else nearby, our final moments seemed imminent. The wave blotted the eclipse and the girl remained trapped.

But it wasn't a wave that blocked the eclipse. A burly man dashed to the scene swishing past me like a hurling tornado. A man of his stature suddenly made a difference.

Khalon.

He lifted the pile of debris with ease. We joined Khalon and removed the concrete. The girl was freed. Judith dragged her out and carried her akin to a newborn infant in her arms. We sprinted toward the Grand Temple where everyone else watched in trepidation. The stone doors creaked as they were closing. Jakeob and Micah yelled and waved at us to make it inside.

Taking my last breath, we slipped through the cracks.

-XI-

Countdown

The waves rammed the Temple's walls smashing through windows and doors, extinguishing candles, knocking furniture, and submerging the first floor in seconds. Our rooms, the cafeteria, and the hospital were left underwater. What mattered was that we were safe. We climbed the staircase to the second floor where everyone watched as the water flooded the glorious halls.

"Are you okay?" Judith asked the girl we rescued.

The child answered with a sly nod. "Mama!" the girl shouted, running toward a woman. With open arms, the mother hugged her child. A mother nearly lost her daughter this day.

"Thank you for saving my daughter," said the mother, almost in tears.

"You are most welcome," Judith smiled.

I turned around overhearing Gabriel speaking to Khalon. "You saved our asses back there, big man," Gabriel praised.

"You were fearless saving child. Forsaken is brave. It why King joined you," Khalon said.

"You got more balls of steel than all of us together," Gabriel chuckled.

"You. Luke are bravest. Your friend beat me Trial of Kings."

Though I didn't technically win the Trial of Kings, The Kingdom believed I'd impressed them, but I wasn't pleased with how it ended. It seems I gained respect from Khalon for being a worthy opponent. I somehow survived him. Just barely.

I looked around at people's faces. Some were confused, others on their toes. Many were anxious that the worst was yet to come while most were studying the interior of the Grand Temple for the first time. Many asked

questions about the anomaly. No one had answers. There wasn't much else to do but wait until the water receded.

"Snow!" Alexis blurted.

I peered through the windows where Alexis and Judith scouted the outside. The weather had shifted before our very eyes. The others looked out the window witnessing the same strange turn of events that had our jaws dropped.

"Snow in the summer?" Jakeob asked.

"What the fuck is going on?" Gabriel cursed.

Dark and gray clouds hovered over Solomon. It'd been an hour and things were getting weirder. An earthquake, a partial eclipse, a tsunami rolling in and destroying what was left of Solomon, and now snow in summer. Mother nature had no control over this. When things couldn't get any more bizarre, the sky changed colors. A dancing mirage of red, blue, yellow, and green. Rainbow colors. Was my mind playing tricks?

"This freaking me out." Alexis chewed her fingers.

"That's an aurora borealis," Micah clarified. "That only happens at the Earth's poles. It shouldn't be happening in a place like this."

"The end is coming," Grace murmured.

"Is this the reckoning Camden spoke of?" I wondered.

"Yes," I heard her breath among the chatter of people. "There's little time left. We must get to Iscar before he destroys the planet."

"Oh, great. Is he gonna bore us to death by masturbating himself in his tower? Gabriel quipped.

"He will use the Masonic Trinity to eviscerate every living being on Earth. This is just the beginning," Grace explained.

"A month?" Jakeob asked. "That's how much you said we have."

"Thirty days." Grace sighed.

"Thirty fucking days!" Gabriel lost his mind. He confronted Grace face to face demanding an end to her supposed lies. "You gotta be lying!"

Grace shook her head in disagreement. “Thirty days at most to get to Iscar and stop him from succeeding.”

“How the fuck do we get to Iscar in thirty days? Speak, dammit!” Gabriel erupted almost laying a hand on her. His spit landed on her face causing her to flinch.

“Gabe. There’s no need to speak to her like that,” I said standing in his way. I was prepared if Gabriel chose wrong. “Grace. Is there any way that we can get to Iscar in such a short time?”

“I know some people in the Capital who have turned against Iscar,” she continued. “Most have already formed a resistance group called The Coalition. We’ve caused havoc for a year trying to disrupt city operations to expose Iscar’s lies and manipulations.”

“I assume you’re the leader of their group?” I asked.

“Yes.” Grace nodded.

“Ever since you came here, this shit happened!” Gabriel snapped and pointed to the aurora lights. He stomped the ground and smacked the window with his fist. “Who the hell do you think you are, huh?”

“It’s okay, baby,” Alexis said, restraining him from hurting Grace.

“Even if we get to Iscar, he’s still in possession of the Masonic Trinity,” Jakeob added. “Not a chance we can defeat him even if we assemble the largest army possible.”

“The archives!” a light bulb flickered in Micah’s head. “There’s gotta be something in there that can give us an answer.”

“You sure of this?” I asked.

“Positive,” Micah nodded. “Luke. Jakeob. Why don’t you guys come and help me find clues His Highness left around?”

I quickly agreed and so did Jakeob. Gabriel backed away from Grace without looking at her. He left with Alexis as she spoke to him about cooling off.

No one had done a better job than her keeping my friend under control. Whatever she said changed his attitude in record time.

Inside the archives, not a single book was left behind except the pounds of dust and cobwebs on the empty shelves. A silent room where I could hear the crawling of spiders drilling their long legs on the peeling wood. A trio of rodents scampered from the opposite entrance when we entered.

“The books. Where did they take them?” Micah asked.

We searched every nook and cranny of the archives. Camden and The Children of Iscar must’ve disposed of them to erase The Brotherhood’s history. Beneath a bookcase, I swept the floor below it. I grabbed a smushed object that tangled the tip of my fingernails. A ball of mold and hair that smelled of antiques. I threw it aside and dusted off my hands.

“Camden must’ve burned them all,” Jakeob revealed. “I remember seeing his crew burn a pile of books months ago.”

Micah shook his head in disgust. “Can’t say I’m surprised. Now that you mentioned it, they couldn’t have burned them all. His Highness kept a hidden bookcase at the High Council. We should go check it out.”

Micah and Jakeob attempted to open the bookshelf that led to the secret entrance to the High Council and down the spiral stairs, but the book that was used to open the door was no longer there. There was no other way to open it that I knew of.

“How do we get through?” I asked.

“There’s another way through, but it’s outside the Grand Temple,” Jakeob said.

“So, now what?”

“We probably blow it up or something,” Jakeob suggested.

“How?” Micah scratched his forehead.

“Javier said something about using bombs to blow up the city walls to distract The Children of Iscar,” Jakeob explained.

Micah sighed. “These walls are sacred, but if there’s no other choice, I’ll bite.”

We returned to the archives to speak to Javier who was distracted by the dumping of snow over Solomon. It’d become a blizzard in less than an hour. With every passing minute, the water slowly transformed into ice. The strange colors in the sky lingered but lost their lust as the fog from the storm blinded our vision. We told Javier what we needed and didn’t waste time heeding our problem.

“*Por supuesto amigos*,” Javier gladly agreed as he grabbed his black bag of explosives on his back that weighed bricks but carried it around like a bag of candy.

“Thank you,” I nodded.

Back at the archives, Javier pulled out a bundle of dynamite sticks. He placed them where we had told him the entrance to the High Council was. The vibration of the explosion would surely cause damage to the archives, but it mattered little. We backed away and watched from the doorway waiting for Javier to light up the cable line.

“I think the explosives are all set, *amigos*,” Javier gave us a thumbs up.

“Shouldn’t we cover our ears just to be safe?” Micah asked.

“What do you think, *guero*?” Javier scoffed.

“*Guero*?” Micah wondered. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nada. So, you want me to blow this sucker up or what?”

“Yes, please,” Micah nodded.

Javier lit a small match igniting the long cable line. We covered our ears, crouching behind the wall, and tucked our heads waiting for the explosion to rock the Grand Temple. Sure enough, a temblor rattled the dust from the Temple’s

walls. The blast blew through the wall leaving behind a scent of soot and charred wood. A shoddy speck of light glimmered through a smokey gap.

We wandered the path inside. The damp hallway brought back lost memories. It was the day I first learned about the High Council when Johnny helped me trespass into this secretive place. When things were much different. How naive I was to think Donovan wouldn't have noticed me. I gazed down at what remained of the meeting place. The bottom was flooded too. Chairs were floating like rafts and papers that were sitting on the circular slab were drenched.

"Where's this hidden bookcase you speak of?" Jakeob questioned as we stepped down the stone spiral stairs.

"At the bottom. The water doesn't seem too deep to have damaged it," Micah said.

We stopped at the last step where the water leaked from a crevice at the edge of the room. I surveyed the High Council but there were no doors or other cracks that might indicate an opening. Without forethought, Micah stepped into the chilly waters.

"Oh, shit!" The words slipped from his tongue. "Water's friggin' cold, man!"

"Is this *guero* friend of yours this dumb?" Javier whispered into my ear.

"Yeah," I quietly chuckled looking at Micah and pretending I hadn't spoken of him as he moved to the other corner of the room pushing his weight against a section of the wall. He graced a row of bricks with the back of his testing to see if one of them moved. After touch three, he seemed to have pushed a hollow brick. He turned around and spoke.

"The water's gonna get inside if I open the doorway," he warned.

"We got no other choice?" Jakeob asked.

"N-No," Micah shivered.

"I can get inside before it floods," I suggested.

"Y-Yeah, that might h-help."

I dipped my toe into the chilly water that Micah had complained about. He was right. The cold water slithered through my socks and skin like quicksand. The sharpest cold to have ever stabbed me.

“Oh, God!” I yelped.

“I-I told you it was c-c-cold,” Micah shuddered as I swished through the water where Micah waited. Our teeth chattered like rattlesnakes.

“W-What do I grab?” my body shook.

“I-I don’t k-know. A-A book. G-Grab each one you see,” he replied.

“Y-You better hope there’s a b-bookshelf,” I said.

“J-Just grab what you c-c-an. A-A-re you r-ready?” Micah’s hand hovered over the brick.

I nodded trying to maintain my composure. The burning cold was dropping my body temperature at a fast rate. I could barely feel my blood moving. I gave him a thumbs up and Micah pushed the brick. A door slid open the moment he did so. The water poured inside the tiny room with a single bookshelf and no books.

No books!

“T-There’s n-nothing i-inside!” I shouted.

“W-What!” Micah exclaimed. He swam and peeked at the same bare bookshelf. “H-H-How? K-K-Keep looking!”

I searched the corners and peeked the small gap at the back of the bookshelf and found nothing but candles being extinguished by the water. The High Council flooded rapidly sinking the room almost completely. I swam out of the room giving up on the search. Micah and I rushed back to the staircase empty-handed.

“You guys find anything?” Jakeob asked.

“N-n-n-n-ot a thing.” My voice stuttered as the frigid temperature knotted my throat.

“Micah, you all right?” Jakeob checked on our friend. He didn’t seem okay after spending minutes in stingy waters.

“C-c-c-c-can’t f-f-feel,” he stumbled on the stairs in a frightening scene.

“Micah!” Jakeob’s panicked shrill frightened me. He and Javier carried Micah back to the archives while I followed behind trying to understand what was happening. They laid him against the side of a bookshelf demanding that we remove his armor.

“B-B-Burning,” he whimpered.

“Get him a coat! Hurry!” Jakeob told Javier.

After Javier had left to get some help, Elisa ran in anxious at what all the commotion was. Jakeob filled her in. I sat across from him suffering similar symptoms, but I wasn’t feeling the burning he mentioned. He’d spent a longer time than anyone could reasonably handle cold waters.

“B-B-Burning,” his voice dwindled.

Piece by piece, Elisa stripped Micah’s Knight armor. His body hadn’t stopped twitching since stepping into the water. Jakeob left the archives to find more help.

“W-What’s happening?” I asked.

“He’s suffering from paradoxical undressing,” Elisa clarified. “His body feels like it’s burning rather than freezing.”

“H-How do you know?” I said while rubbing my hands and tightening my body for warmth.

“Finn taught me. He said he saw it many times from Knights who traveled the mountains in the winter. I’ve been trying to become a Paladin just like him,” she admitted.

Elisa working with Finn? Never did I think that would happen, but she was best at helping people. Elisa removed Micah’s cape and under armor, down to his undershorts. She hugged him tightly. Not the first time I’d seen them do this.

“W-W-What are you d-doing?” Micah asked.

“Keeping you warm,” Elisa murmured to his ear. She then gifted him with a warm kiss on his cracked lips making sure he trusted her.

More sounds of running feet came from the hallways to the archives. Javier and Jakeob returned bringing someone along with them.

“Take this,” Gabriel said to Elisa handing over his gray Knight coat that was typically used during the winter months. Elisa wrapped Micah with the coat. I’d watched our friend near the brink of death plenty of times now. We had done our part to save him even if it meant giving up something we needed. My body was still numb, but Jakeob shared his coat to ease my worries.

“T-Thanks,” I shook as helped me wrap the wool over my body.

An hour passed and Micah’s condition stabilized. On my end, I’d recovered to normal. I chose to sit right by him needing to discuss more important matters.

“Doing better?” I asked as I stared into his cold blue eyes.

“A whole lot better,” he murmured staring back into mine. “Felt like a bad fever.”

“About that book you’re looking for. You got any other leads?” I wondered.

“I don’t know where His Highness placed it,” Micah shrugged. “Maybe he hid it somewhere he wanted us to figure out, but this isn’t like him to do this.”

“Any guesses?”

“I don’t know, man. Wish I could help you look for it, but my body still feels a little rough. Brr,” Micah said drying his hair with a towel.

A voice talked to me. A thought perhaps? A memory not long ago? It wasn’t Micah’s. It was scruffy and old.

There is a fourth Sword...Under my throne...Only way to defeat Iscar.

Those were Donovan’s exact words before his death. Should I tell Micah what Donovan had told me or should I keep it secret from him? Everyone would

know about the fourth Masonic Sword the moment I spoke of it. The peril it might put us in should someone be tempted to misuse its energies. Maybe it's the Sword and not a book we should be looking for.

"His Highness told me that he kept something secret under his throne," I revealed.

"He told me the same thing," Micah said to my disbelief.

"Hold up. He told you about the fourth Sword?" I continued.

"He told me, you, and Gabe."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" I pulled at a loose strand of hair.

"It's been a long year. Totally blanked out on that. Tell Gabe and figure out if you guys can find it."

"No need to tell me," Gabriel interrupted. He'd listened to our conversation probably in his mind. "His Highness entrusted us three which is why he kept it between us."

"Find it without me," Micah instructed.

Gabriel and I nodded and left the archives.

We searched under the throne chair for any signs of an opening or clue. I knocked on the floor hoping to reveal any cracks or loose tiles that may expose something. Gabriel did the same but found zip.

"What if he lied to us? You know just straight up bullshitted us," Gabriel said.

"Why would His Highness mislead us," I shrugged. "I think everything he did was for a purpose."

"His Highness wasn't exactly in a happy mood when he left us. Just saying," Gabriel theorized.

I moved Micah's weapons from the tile they rested. A spear, harpoon, and halberd. Underneath them, a different sized tile caught my eye. I squatted and

graced my fingertips over the squared tile that sounded different when tapping my knuckles against it.

“Hey, Gabe. Think I found something,” I said waving at him.

Gabriel walked over checking the same ground. He tapped his hands against the loose tile that created an echo when struck. He stomped his foot against it confirming something was down below.

“This appears to be it,” he said shuffling his feet across the ground. Gabriel and I pushed the throne chair singling out the tile. He stomped the ground several times but the floor did not break or unravel an opening. “The hell is this made of?” he cursed kicking at tile repeatedly. “Fuck this.” Frustrated, he stomped the tile with such force that he fell through like a cannonball on thin ice. I ran over looking down and seeing he’d plummeted into a small pit coughing dust particles.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he wheezed. “Just landed on my ass.”

“There’s something next to you,” I pointed at a large treasure chest behind him.

Gabriel cleaned the dirt off his armor. He groaned from the pain of the fall but picked himself up, crawling on all fours to the moldy object. He gingerly opened it so as not to damage the contents. Inside, he found the exact two things we were looking for. A Sword and a book. Gabriel reached out and handed me the Sword first. The blade weighed the same as the ones I’d held before. The Sword was colored in a fiery red and orange blend. Not a single other thing seemed extraordinary with this specific Sword. It didn’t react or show us a sign when I held it in my hands. I didn’t know what powers this one possessed.

“I believe this is the book Micah was looking for,” Gabriel said as he climbed back up.

“Guess we’ll find out,” I replied, wrapping the Sword in the cloth it was found in.

We returned to Micah who confirmed that we'd found the book he was looking for. It had no title on the back or front covers. Only a drawing on the front cover of the three Masonic Swords positioned on separate pedestals with their respective colors.

"This might take me a while to figure it out," Micah explained as he cracked the first few pages.

"You got any clue what this one does?" I showed him the Sword.

"Nope," Micah shook his head. "I gotta read every single word from this book first. This might take a while."

Sunset at dusk was unlike any other day. The partial eclipse lingered as the snowstorm calmed for the evening. This was the first time I saw a setting eclipse of any kind. I had no idea what the term for that would be, but it was a phenomenon I doubted I'd ever see again. With Micah still recuperating from his mishap, Gabriel asked the leaders of The Forsaken to convene at the throne room for one more assembly. We had to leave first thing tomorrow morning and march our way to Imperium in a month.

"Anyone got an idea where we can start?" Gabriel asked the leaders.

"There's a military base not far from here," Grace spoke. "A two day walk, max. We can be there two mornings from now, It's the base from where they attacked Sanctuary and Solomon. We can catch them by surprise after what has happened. They may be thinking we are rebuilding the city or buried beneath the mess."

"A perfect ambush against the Fanatics. It should be our first target," Ivy agreed.

"The King sees little hope with low numbers. Do you have people to spare?" Malik asked Grace.

"Yes," she answered. "Thousands are waiting to join us. It will take weeks to liberate the cities, but right now we would stand little chance if we

marched directly to the Capital. It would be wise to rally as many people as we can before the final battle that awaits us.”

“Then it should be priority number one. The Brotherhood could use new recruits,” Gabriel nodded.

“The major cities are vulnerable to an attack,” Grace elaborated. “Iscar will gather every Fanatic he can to protect his precious tower where he hasn’t been seen in a year. The Capital has descended into chaos for the past several months keeping him distracted. ”

The leaders unanimously approved the strategy. Judith agreed too without saying a word. She’d spent her time looking at the floor as if she wasn’t welcome. Was it because of Gabriel? She couldn’t be afraid of him. She was never afraid of anyone.

“We owe this to everyone who never made it this far. We don’t stop until our enemies are all dead,” I said. The leaders shared my sentiment. One that sounded unlike me, but a vision that must be realized if we are to achieve the impossible. Tomorrow, we begin the counteroffensive and give ourselves a chance to halt Iscar’s reckoning.

For better or for worse.