

Thank You

I vowed vengeance against Iscar and his entire regime as I watched the propaganda on the state-owned media coverage. Hearing politicians brag about quelling uprising after uprising for the sake of keeping peace and prosperity got on my nerves. I turned off the half-broken TV then stood up from my crummy old torn sofa, leaving my dirty apartment to pick up my daily food rations at the plaza. The plaza is the only location where I could collect my rations. It was within six blocks, just up the hill from where I lived. Unfortunately, crime was running amok these days that it would be a challenge to return home unscathed.

I wore raggy brown trousers, torn shoes, and a plain old white shirt. I didn't have any usable shorts to wear during the scorching hot weather as of late. I strolled along the crooked sidewalk quickly to reach my destination. My primary goal is to eat breakfast this morning, or else I would be left with an empty stomach again.

I live in a large city called Donquest, located on the South Continent. Everywhere I went, there are propaganda posters on building walls, trees, apartments, houses, government buildings, offices, markets, and stores. Some read *ISCAR IS ALL OF US* while others read *IN THE NAME OF ISCAR*, all with Iscar himself posing and standing tall with both arms folded across his chest. There was no escape from his overwhelming influence.

The streets of Donquest have little to no maintenance. Every single street had cracks and potholes galore. Kids played on the empty streets as if nothing bothered them. Since many couldn't afford toys, most had to use their limitless imagination or the shabby environment, such as rocks and sticks, to entertain themselves. Homeless people were lurking around every corner who begged for any amount of money, food, or water. It was impossible not to encounter a homeless man, woman, or child. As I strolled across the ravaged street across my apartment, a family of three devoured a squashed banana piece dropped on the sidewalk, scrounging whatever they could like a flock of vultures.

I brought a few dollars in my pockets, sufficient to purchase rations. Citizens who lived in the slums, including me, received two food stamps per day through the mail with the date marked when they are to be used. The derelicts who didn't rent or own property had no such luck. They aren't given food stamps and instead must resort to stealing or scrapping whatever they found in the bleak streets of this miserable city. As I neared the plaza, I observed a massive line of people waiting to get their rations. Every passing day, more and more people seemed to line up. Only a few weeks ago, the market handed rations out five times a day. Now they are only being handed out three times a day. Whatever the reason may be, the distribution of rations only grew bleaker.

I lined up like everyone else. Another sheep in the flock, waiting to be fed. The plaza is one of the most gorgeous places in Donquest. The slums paled compared to how magnificently the government designed the plaza. The trees, bushes, and grass cluttered in this colorful place is the only paradise in the

slums. Comfortable benches laid out across the plaza so people could enjoy a marvelous day here. In the center stood a statue of Iscar. He wore his military uniform, standing tall and firm, posing, holding his waist with his hands. Vandalizing government property, propaganda posters, or statues is a serious crime that results in hard labor. The balcony on the second floor of the marketplace from where everyone would get their rations was my favorite place to relax. Unfortunately, it was recently closed to the public by city officials. At night, the plaza is closed to the public soon after they gave out dinner rations.

The sweltering heat soared as time dragged on. I looked at my broken watch, reading the current time. *8:02 AM*. They didn't start giving out rations until *8 AM*. However, that didn't seem to be the case. The marketplace was still closed for unspecified reasons. A small contingent of police officers stood at the entrance of the market, one of them with a megaphone in hand. Their voice boomed loud and clear throughout the plaza.

"Citizens of Donquest. We appreciate your patience, but we have unfortunate news that the rations will arrive an hour late. Please remain calm until rations arrive."

People were disgruntled when they heard the update. "What do you mean will arrive an hour late!" someone yelled. This would be a long morning, no doubt.

I waited patiently, but others were not. Some left while others grew restless. "Give us our rations!" Some were chanting. "Give us our rations!" The chanting continued. I sat down while still in line. My feet could hold no longer. The weather was heating up every minute that passed by. I was baking under the angry sun. Sweat was running down my forehead. My arms, hands, feet, legs, and armpits were all covered in sweat. I looked at the time again. *8:30 AM. Barely?* Time was not on my side today.

As I closed my eyes for just a second, I heard a fight break out. I stood up on my two feet and looked at the direction of the scuffle. A group of teenagers was trying to break through the marketplace.

"Give us our rations!" they chanted with the rest. The boys were armed with knives and throwing furniture at the marketplace doors. The police immediately apprehended the boys without a single scratch. The officers disarmed the teens and threatened to kill them if they didn't hold still. One boy spat in the face of an officer. The boy was rapidly greeted with a fist knocking him out cold. The other boys gave up any resistance after they witnessed their friend go down.

"On your knees now!" barked an officer, handcuffing the boys. More officers arrived at the scene and threatened to kill anyone else who tried to help the teens. They pointed their guns at the crowd.

"Stay back I say, or I will shoot you all like dogs!" threatened an officer. A hush silenced the crowd. The boys were dragged and placed inside a horse carriage. They were likely to be sentenced to hard labor for their mischief.

Things were quickly brought under control as the ration truck arrived. There were thousands still in front of me before I could purchase my rations. My stomach growled. I couldn't bear it anymore. The heat was unbearable. I was severely dehydrated. My lips parched. My mouth is as dry as the sizzling sun. I didn't know how much longer I could stand in line.

"Need water?" asked a gruff voice as someone tapped my shoulder. I looked behind and see a bald elderly man offer me a bottle of water. I didn't know who they were, but he seemed to know me somehow.

“You’re Luke Edwards, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Why do you care? Who are you?” I rudely replied.

“The Luke Edwards?” his expression spoke louder than his words. His jaw dropped, showing he had recognized me. “You’re the friend of Gabriel Ellis, the Vigilante who saved hundreds and courageously killed city officials.”

“No, I’m not.” I fearfully glanced around to see if anyone was listening to our conversation, afraid of my name slipping into the ears of those who have sought me.

“Don’t you worry young lad. I got your back. I admire everything you have done with Gabriel. Take this as a token of my gratitude.” He extended me a bottle of water to quench my thirst.

“What? I can’t take this from a stranger.” My voice was muffled from extreme dehydration. I could not listen to myself talk.

“You represent the last glimmer of hope that this world needs. You must take it,” he insisted. He continued to talk, but my vision blurred, and my hearing ceased. I collapsed to the ground unknowingly, laying flat on my back, barely able to see the elderly man bending down on his knees, opening the bottle of water. I quickly grabbed the bottle from his hand and drank from it. Never have I ever drunk water so quickly in my life, sipping the precious liquid into my system in mere seconds. The old man offered me his hand, and I politely accepted it. I stood back to my feet with his help.

“Thank you, sir, for the water,” I mumbled under my arid breath.

“No. Thank you young man for helping as much as you could to ensure the safety of the people in Donquest. You have inspired millions for what you and your companion have done in the past few years,” he explained.

“What are you talking about? I have inspired no one,” I quizzically asked.

The old man nodded. “You have inspired my children and grandchildren to do what we must do.”

“If you say so.” I shrugged at his comment, unwilling to accept any more of his kindness.

The line progressed quicker. I handed the merchant one of my food stamps and paid the money. We acquired our rations with ease. Today’s breakfast was a bag of bread. I thanked the elderly man one last time before we parted ways.

“I hope to see you around,” the old man nodded. I say nothing while he dematerializes into the streets. I returned to my apartment in one piece. No crime, no obstacles. I sat at the dinner table alone. The chair squeaked as I moved it in place, eating my bread in silence. Nothing to care about except feeding an empty stomach.

For the rest of the afternoon, I spent watching the *Deadly Games*, a reality TV show in which two people, one young male, and one young female, each in their teens, from each major city were pitted against each other in a battle to the death. If no one volunteered, city officials were forced to randomly select any two citizens from a lottery. The winner of the contest would win a year’s worth of unlimited rations for their respective city. It bummed me that Donquest did not win this year. The two hometown contestants were killed right at the very start. Talk about poor luck. Instead, a pair of lovebirds, by the names of Peter Miller and Katrina Evermore, won it this year for the city of Panama.

Later that evening, I returned to the plaza for more food rations. Cans of soup were handed out. This was by far my favorite ration. The city at night was not very well lighted. Street lights rarely functioned. The only well-lit places were government buildings and the plaza. The humidity outside didn't make for a comfortable walk at night, but at least I wasn't dying of thirst. This time, they handed the food rations out with no problems.

While going back home under the night sky, beggars demanded me to share my food. I said "no" to each of them while walking down the hill. One of them stood in front of my path back home. The beggar has overgrown hair and facial hair that hadn't been shaved for years. He smelled of a rotten stench as if he hadn't taken a bath in months and had wrinkles all over his face.

"Food please," said the man tiredly, like a dead zombie.

"No. I'm sorry," I replied.

Without warning, he grabbed my right hand in which I clasped my can of soup. I retaliated by pushing him back against a wall he had been lingering against. I shoved him too viciously that I accidentally slammed his head against the wall. A wicked crack emanated from the back of his skull. He slowly slid down against the wall and mumbled about something on his own, unable to listen to a single word he was uttering. He seemed to be out of it, not bothering to fight back. I could only assume he was in a lot of pain. I backed out, wishing no more harm.

I was almost safely back to my apartment, desperate to return before anyone else grabbed me, such as the beggar, and tried to steal my dinner. When all seemed to be okay, something caught my attention. I witnessed a group of thieves steal a kid's ration in the middle of a poorly lit street.

"Help! Someone help! They stole my food!" cried the kid. The thieves stripped something from the boy's hand. My instincts called to me, whispering that I had to do something about it instead of being a bystander. The thieves ran as soon as they stole what they wanted from the boy. I wasted no time running behind the crooks. My luck quickly ran out, losing track of their presence in the poorly lighted streets. They vanished into the shadows from where they had spawned.

I glanced back at the poor kid. His shoes were torn. His shirt ripped. His hair was messy. I looked at my can of soup, and for an honest moment, I thought of walking away and letting all of this go. My consciousness refused to listen to greed and selfishness. I shouldn't allow a poor boy left alone without food on the table. Gabriel would have done things differently. I would not be like him.

I approached the boy, trying to calm him down while he was sobbing on the ground, curled up in a ball. "Hey there. What's your name?" I asked.

"Billy," he continued to cry. "Those bad people stole my food. I won't have anything to eat tonight."

"It's okay, Billy. Did the thieves harm you?"

"They grabbed me and threatened to kill me if I didn't give them my soup."

I studied his arm and legs to see if he had any bruises. He had a few scratches and marks, but nothing too serious. "Billy. How old are you?" I continued.

"Seven. Daddy isn't going to be happy tonight when I bring back nothing. I'm scared. I don't want him to yell at me."

“Be a big boy Billy because there’s nothing you should worry about.” I tried to comfort the scared boy. I willfully showed him my can of soup., acknowledging that it would be another restless night without food.

“Is that your soup can?” he said, wiping his tears away with his dirty shirt.

I nodded. “Here, take it. You need it more than I do.”

“T-thank you, mister.” He stopped crying for a moment. “Now, dad won’t yell at me tonight.”

“You can rest easy tonight, Billy,” I gleefully smiled.

“What’s your name, mister?” he cheerfully asked.

“Luke,” I declared.

“Thank you, Luke, for not being like one of those bad guys. I didn’t know good people like you exist in a city like this. I have to go now.”

“Stay out of trouble, kid.” I nodded. He dashed his way back to his home, disappearing in the distance while I examined that nothing else would happen to him. Poor kid. He must have had a rough day. No one was safe from having their rations stolen. Everyone had to fend for themselves.

I returned to my apartment without running into any more mischief. The weight of the world had taken a toll on me, suddenly realizing that I have eaten little in the past couple of weeks. I had lost considerable weight and was woefully clunky entering my apartment, knowing I had an empty stomach tonight. I collapsed on my bed, exhausted from today’s misery. I could barely move my body, feeling no form of anguish. My stomach was empty, but my heart was full.