

# THE FORSAKEN

## First Strike

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**In Memory of Aaron Nunez**

1999-2016



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## Thank You

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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 statute of Iscar. He wore his military uniform, standing tall and firm, posing, holding his waist with his hands. Vandalizing government property, propaganda posters, or statutes 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 drank 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.

## Riot

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I awakened from my slumber to a visceral headache. My left arm was equally in pain. I had slept with my entire body over my left shoulder. I couldn't move my arm without anguish creeping through my skin. *8:17 AM*. I was late for breakfast rations. I hastily slipped on my shoes, dashing out from my apartment as if it was burning to the ground.

I ran to the plaza without a hitch, but there lingered a mammoth of a line. The market didn't have their doors open.

"Not again," I whispered.

"We apologize again for any inconvenience," said the same officer with the megaphone from yesterday. "The rations will arrive at *9 AM*."

I wasn't surprised one bit. Food was scarce these days. People starved to death more times than not. Donquest was fortunate that it gave any food to its residents. Instead of waiting in line, I hid under the shade of an abandoned, rundown candy shop. Today would be another hot, muggy day. I would not bank on the same elderly man who helped me yesterday to hand me an extra bottle of water.

I felt the summery heat blast my face. The shade was keeping me from suffering another collapse. I waited several more minutes for the rations to arrive. When my watch struck *9*

*AM*, I looked around to see if the truck had arrived. Nothing. *9:05 AM*. Nothing again. I grew weary. People began demanding their rations.

“Give us our rations!” the chanting commenced.

Another five minutes passed. Then ten. The officer with the megaphone stood up in front of the balcony this time around. “Ladies and gentlemen. We once again apologize to inform you that the breakfast rations will not be arriving this morning. Please come back to purchase your lunch rations at noon.”

“Give us our rations!” The chants from the mob grew louder. The situation was worsening by the minute. People began lobbing rocks at the police. A warning shot was fired up at the cloudless sky by the officers. The crowd backed off, frightened by the gunshot. I decided not to partake in any of this.

I scurried back home without a single ration. It was bizarre that the city would be running so low on rations. I had no clue what was going on. If the city didn’t sort things out, then things could get dicey. A small child walked towards me as I traveled along a crumbled sidewalk with two adults behind him. I instantly recognized his face.

“Hey! You’re the good guy who gave me the soup last night,” said Billy.

“Yeah, it’s me again. I hope the food was delicious,” I smiled back. “What are you doing here, and who are they?” I asked Billy as the two adults stepped forward. A man and a woman with similar torn black clothing and shaggy black hair. Facially, the man looked very similar to Billy.



“This is my mom and dad. I told them how generous you were,” he explained.

“Hi there,” I said shyly, waving my right hand.

“So you’re the one who helped little Billy last night after a couple of thieves stole his rations,” said his dad. For a second, I thought he would scold or even attack me for helping their son.

“Oh, it was no problem. I tried my best to catch the thieves, but they got away. I couldn’t leave a kid without something to eat after he was mugged in public,” I responded.

“We can’t thank you enough for your act of kindness. I bet the Vigilante would hunt down the thieves and have completely forgotten about my son,” Billy’s dad implied. “Aren’t you the one who they call the Angel of the Night?”

“No, no, no, no.” My voice stuttered, denying any association with that infamous nickname. “Could you please keep your voice quiet? You don’t know who might be watching.”

“So you are?” said Billy’s mother. “No one has heard or seen you in months. It is great to meet you.”

“I gotta go now.” My voice was nervous. The palms of my hands were shaking. My throat numbed.

“Hold up, you can’t just walk away from us,” urged Billy’s dad. “Everyone in this city needs to know who you are.”

“No, they don’t. People who support me will surely face the same repercussions. I can’t risk putting the lives of others,” I blatantly refused.

“Hm. You surely are an interesting fellow. You knew who

the Vigilante was then?”

“Yeah, he was a close friend of mine. He’s now probably dead after he helped me steal some rations. We both got into some hot water and sentenced us to 90 days of hard labor. I haven’t heard from him since, so please leave me alone,” I explained with little purpose into my words.

“Now that’s the spirit,” replied Billy’s mom, excited for some strange reason. “Feel free to stay at our place at any time.”

“No. I’m not going to put any of you in harm’s way. I have to go now. Goodbye.” I quickly left them alone. I had no clue what to think of their words. They seemed generous, offering me a place to stay, but I already had a home. I didn’t want anyone harboring me. Anyone who housed a criminal is punishable by death. I didn’t want Billy’s parents to face the same punishment that mine did. Never in a million years would I allow something like that to happen to anyone else ever again.

I returned home, safe and sound. I had nothing but a television remote and the TV itself to entertain myself. There was not a single thing on television that I found compelling to kill time while I waited to pick up my lunch rations at noon. At least my left arm was feeling much better now.

I lost attention to the current programming and instead focused on a small picture frame of myself, my mom, and my dad next to the TV. I was about eleven when we took the picture. The three of us at the local park where the trees bloomed during the spring and the sky was clear. Ten long years felt like an eternity. They were no longer around to seek their guidance. I

was to fend for myself.

I turned my attention to another photo frame of my friend Gabriel and I. It was a picture of us at his house when we were about eight years old. Just two small boys who had nothing to worry about except how we would fight the bad guys someday. We made a promise to protect others. *Punish the Unjust*. I still remember saying those crucial words to him a few years back.

I returned the picture frames to their original position and decided to take a bath to wash off the unbearable humidity. I remove my shirt as I started turning on the faucet above the bathtub. Water was not flowing through.

“Come on. COME ON!” I cursed.

There was no running water, meaning there was none for today and had to wait until tomorrow. I looked at my reflection through the cracked mirror just above the sink. I had to think about my next move. *Think, Luke*. I whispered in my head. *11:28 AM*. I had to get back to the plaza and grab my lunch rations. I put my shirt back on, grabbed my money, and the food stamps.

Yet again, I encountered Billy and his parents. I crossed to the adjacent sidewalk, avoiding them like the plague before they caught a full glimpse.

“Hey, it’s you again,” said Billy’s dad across the street. “Look, we are sorry to have exposed who you are, but we wanted to talk to you on a more serious note.”

I moved faster while ignoring them, but the father kept talking to me louder with each subsequent word. “We live right here on this street. We have food!” I stopped in my tracks and

looked back at the small yet friendly family.

“Did you say food?” I replied. My voice echoed across the street.

“Yes. We have food. Join us for a little while if you’re hungry,” the man kindly answered while the trio entered what appeared to be their apartment right in front of them. I changed my mind by crossing the street and entering past the unlocked door to their apartment. It was oddly similar to mine, though most apartments in the slums all look the same on the inside. I see the family of three eating peacefully at the diner table. There was an empty chair waiting for me.

“Come sit and enjoy the food,” said Billy’s dad. There was a small bowl of brown rice waiting for me. I gingerly approached the empty chair, quietly taking a seat. I grabbed the spoon next to the bowl and dug in. The rice was utterly delicious.

“So Billy, how was school this morning?” asked the mother.

“Bad.” said a very worrisome Billy.

“Bad? Why bad?”

“The bad kids won’t stop making fun of me because I’m too short for my age.”

“Have you told your teacher about the bullies?”

“Yeah, but they do nothing about it. Nobody cares,” he sighed.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I wish there were something that we could do about it. What about you?” she asked, turning to me. “How have you been holding up?”

“I don’t know. Just living a life like anybody else these days,” I said truthfully.

“Where are your parents? Do you have a family?” she asked. I was quiet for a moment. I didn’t want to talk about my family. Why did she bring up something she likely already knew?

“It’s just me,” I said with no motivation or desire as I stared mindlessly at my bowl of rice.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to talk about it. I hope this makes you feel at home. It’s the least we can do.”

“Thank you for your hospitality. How did you get this much food for one day?” I asked a question that lingered in my thoughts.

“We have some food stocked up from the past few days. A few days ago, a mailman accidentally gave us far more food stamps than we needed. I think he mistook our apartment with a different one. The family living there must be huge!” she happily explained.

“You three must have been very lucky,” I commented.

“Mhm, make yourself at home. Don’t be ashamed to ask for more food.”

“Now that we’ve gotten to know you better, you mind telling us your name, son?” asked the father. I blankly stared down at the empty rice bowl. I was still hungry. I should ask for more, but I didn’t want to take more than what I needed.

“His name is Luke,” Billy filled me in.

“Luke eh,” his dad seemed intrigued. “It is nice meeting you,

Luke.”

“Luke. What a wonderful name!” exclaimed Billy’s mom. “Billy, would you like to go to the park later this afternoon?” she asked her son.

“Boy, would I like to!” He sounded very thrilled, similar to when I was much younger and when my parents would take me to the park.

“Sorry, but I have to get going now.” I suddenly sat up from my chair without hesitation.

“Where are you going to next?” asked Billy’s dad.

“Home,” I lied. I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes before noon. I had to get to the plaza and get my rations.

“Come back anytime,” smiled the mother.

I left the house, making another trip to the plaza. I reached the plaza in the nick of time. To my disappointment, the truck hadn’t arrived. Late again, it seemed. This was happening much more frequently that I didn’t bother lining up for rations. I was growing skeptical by the day.

“Give us our rations!” the chanting brewed once again.

I sat down in front of the same candy store from earlier today to protect myself from the melting heat. I waited for several more minutes and no truck. I heard the dragging of footsteps from my left. I could only see the battered pants of the person who seemed to recognize me. I gazed up, ensuring it was exactly who I think it is.

“Not you again?” I spoke first. “What do you want from me

this time?”

“Relax lad. I came looking for you this morning,” replied the elderly man from yesterday. “I see it in your eyes. You want those rations like everyone else, don’t you? I’m afraid the city will stop giving out rations for good.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked puzzlingly.

“My son is leading an underground group known as The Resistencia,” he explained. “They warned me how resources are running low to the point that millions will die from starvation. Iscar has secretly authorized the purging of lower-ranking citizens like us. He will do so by starving millions around the world by refusing their rations. I’m certain the news media didn’t tell you that, did they?”

The sands of time came to a freeze when he broke the news to me. “H-How do you know this? And how can you expect The Resistencia to result in any different from every other uprising that has taken place?” I stood up, demanding a definitive answer.

“I know more than you could ever know,” he continued. He then removes something from his pockets and shows it to me. It was an earpiece. “I use this to communicate with them several miles from here. Quite an extraordinary device, ain’t it?”

“If you say so,” I said unconcernedly. “Look, I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Iscar will just wipe out The Resistencia off the map as he has against hundreds of other Revolutionary groups. Buzz of will you?”

“What will you do once rations are depleted? What will you eat in the coming weeks? Time is running out. Millions will

perish. There is much more to fight for than just helping citizens. I appreciate what you have done for the city by giving your food to others and misleading authorities that are aggressively trying to arrest people who haven't committed a darn crime. You aren't the Vigilante of the Night like your friend Gabriel, but many people have called you the Angel of the Night for accomplishing many things without breaking the law."

"It was the path I chose," I answered, defending my actions. "Some people liked me. Others believed I should have followed in the footsteps of my friend by killing the unjust. I'm not that kind of person, so leave me alone already."

A loud commotion suddenly interrupted our conversation by the marketplace. We turned our heads in the direction of the disturbance. "HE HAS A GUN!" yelled people from the crowd.

"What's going on?" I asked the elderly man. I couldn't see the uproar with the sizeable crowd dispersed throughout the plaza. I moved closer to see what all the fuss was about. The old man stayed behind in front of the candy store. I got close enough to see someone holding a gun. It was a civilian, not an officer. They were holding a rifle.

"Stay back!" said the man nervously while holding the gun. His hands were shaking. He seemed to have no clue what he just did. He was probably around my age. He wore ragged clothing like most of us and had long shaggy hair that hadn't been trimmed in months.

"He's bluffing. Look at how nervous he is," said an officer. "He won't pull the trigger on us. Put the gun down kid, and



nothing will go wrong. We can take it the easy way or the hard way. Your choice.”

About a dozen officers in full black and blue body gear, and anti-bullet proof armor inched closer to the man. I feared the worst outcome possible. “Stay back!” yelled the man again.

“We got you surrounded. Give it up!” barked an officer, who steadily approached him from behind.

“I-I-I just want food. That’s all. I want food,” the nervous man continued to wave the gun.

Just as he finished his sentence, the mob charged and ambushed the police in a hurry before they had time to react, knocking some officers to the ground and ripping their guns from their hands. The plaza instantly transformed into a brawl. I immediately backed towards the candy store.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said to the old man. As much as I didn’t need much from him, our lives were both in peril. I heard more gunfire and chaos sprawling. The brawl quickly became a riot. People began throwing rocks, glass bottles, and fists to the police. Those who successfully stole guns from the officers fired at point-blank at the police. Others fled from the scene, scrambling to get back to their homes. Everyone knew what was about to happen soon. A heavy black police van pulled up in front of us, blocking the street ahead, impeding my way back home. I glanced around for an alternate route.

“Over here,” I told the old man, pointing to an alleyway on our left. He quickly reacted, moving a little faster than I expected. Gunfire from the police rained upon citizens in the

background. They now had the authority to kill rioters and arrest anyone outside for the next 24 hours. Once we were out of their sight, we stopped a moment to recover our breath.

“It looks like we’re safe for now,” I panted. “Hey old man, do you mind me asking what your name is? You still have a lot of explaining to do.”

He turned his attention to me, staring deep into my eyes “Morgan.”

“Morgan? That’s your name? Where do you live?” I questioned.

“Just two blocks east from here.”

“Please tell me. How do you know who I am? I know you know more than what meets the eye.” I spoke to him with a serious tone, trying my very best to make him spit out the truth.

“I only know your friend Gabriel by name and who he was,” he informed.

“Nobody knew the Vigilante’s name, not even William or Iscar. How do you know such sacred information?” I continued.

“My son told me all I needed to know. He wanted me to look for the Angel of the Night. The Resistencia needs strong fighters to plant the seeds for the World Revolution.”

It stunned me, hearing him say that his family was looking for my whereabouts. I was nothing more than Gabriel’s friend to them.

“Look, we gotta get a move on before the police find us,” I warned.

As soon as I finished my words, an officer shouted, “FREEZE!” behind us, pointing a rifle directly at our heads. “Hands in the air!”

Morgan and I had no option but to raise both our hands in the air. There was no way I could run away with two officers aiming their guns at us. “Against the wall now!” the officers instructed us. We complied. I put the side of my head against the wall with both arms leaning over my head. One of the officers grabbed me from behind, looking for any weapons in my pockets.

“You got any weapons on you?” he asked.

“I got nothing you should be worried about,” I said. “I got nothing but money and food stamps.” The officer took out my money and food stamps from my pockets.

“This guy’s got nothing.” The officer then threw away both items in a dumpster.

“You son of a-” The officer then struck me on the back of my neck with the stock of his rifle. Like a stiff brick connecting the back of my neck, I was dazed, falling to the ground and seeing stars. The impact took my breath away for a moment.

“Hey look at this old man,” I heard the other officer speak. “He looks like Morgan from the wanted poster.” Both officers approached the old man, who was on his two knees.

One of them pulled out a picture from their pocket and compared the photograph side by side with Morgan’s face. “That’s him all right,” said the officer holding the photograph.

“You won’t be getting away this time for defying the Messiah.”

Both officers landed a series of punches and kicks to Morgan. They began mugging him relentlessly. I watched on with a blur in my eyes as I steadily regained my strength and back to my own two feet. I tossed one of the officers from behind and threw him against the same wall they had pushed me against. The other officer grabbed my attention and tried to draw his gun, but I was quick to tackle him to the ground. I yanked his helmet and began throwing fists and kicks of my own, beating him senseless. I was putting myself at risk knowing the officer behind me could swiftly pull out their gun and kill me. I heard a click from the rifle, signifying that he turned off his safety. Morgan jumped into the fray, grabbing the weapon in a sign of desperation. Both the officer and Morgan scuffled to get a hold on the trigger. I wasn’t expecting to see Morgan be strong for his age.

Once I had knocked out the officer in front of me, I turned back to Morgan and the officer struggling to get a hold of the rifle. But before I could get to them, a gunshot echoed through the alley. The officer had overpowered Morgan and fired a bullet through his heart. I was in sudden disbelief, but I had no time to ponder as I pulled the gun away from the officer and pummeled him to the ground. I grabbed his rifle and used the back of the gun, cracking his feeble skull. He was quickly out of it. I couldn’t tell if I killed him, but he was busted open from his forehead. I checked on Morgan, who rested helplessly against the wall.

He was silent. Blood oozed from his chest, nose, and mouth. I couldn't help him. It was too late. I bent my knee, trying my best to comfort him.

"I'm sorry, Morgan. I'm deeply sorry. I was an idiot for not listening to you. Please forgive me." I sniffed my nose, trying to hold my emotions back.

"No need for forgiveness, young man," he said slowly and quietly. "You did the best you could. Leave the city if you must. D-don't waste your life." He gurgled one last pint of the red liquid. It shocked me that he could even somehow talk. "If you meet my family, tell them I love them."

He uttered his last breath. He closed his eyes and passed on. On his left hand, he had the earpiece he showed me earlier. The officers had broken it, meaning I could not communicate with whoever he had contact outside the city. I looked at my hands stained with his blood. My eyes grew watery. I couldn't help myself anymore, let alone other people. I couldn't return him the favor for sharing his water bottle with me. Anywhere I went, I lost something or someone. Was this going to be how I lived the rest of my life? I lost my family, my friend Gabriel, and now Morgan. I was alone again.

"Over there!" I heard a voice emerge from the streets. The police must have heard the gunshot. I had to leave my emotions behind, or else I would be next. I scrambled to my feet, exiting the alleyway, navigating from street to street. I was surely the most world's most wanted criminal after what I had done to the

two police officers.

## The Stranger

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I was only a few meager blocks away from home. A van rolled in the streets with a loudspeaker attached to its roof. A police officer warned citizens about curfew. This was typically done to quench riots from catching fire.

“Curfew is now in effect,” declared a woman’s voice. “All citizens caught outside of their homes for the next 24 hours will be arrested. Any individual harboring wanted criminals will be prosecuted and is punishable by death.”

My watch read *1:06 PM*. The curfew would last until after lunch rations tomorrow. I must return to my apartment, pack my valuables, and leave somewhere safe. I regretted not killing the two officers so they wouldn’t recognize my appearance. The possibility that at least one survived struck fear into my existence. My name had been registered in the criminal database since last year. The city government kept everything in file, from my name to a photograph of me. I would become the hunted.

I peeked at the end of another alleyway, surveying for any patrols. The coast was clear. I sprinted across the street and between two buildings. I was inching closer to my destination.

“He went in there,” said a voice far behind me, followed by the menacing sounds of horse hooves. I knew I couldn’t get across without being seen. I ran through the alley, hoping to lose

track of the patrols. I was less than two blocks away from safety. This specific alley seemed quite lengthy. I have never traversed through this location in all my years living in this city.

I made a sudden turn to the right, hoping not to get caught in the line of sight. I neared the exit, but before I could go past the next street, I halted to look on both sides for any more patrols. My breaths came in panicked pants. I sprung from the alley once the road was clear. All of a sudden, I crashed into a young woman who came from my right flank.

My first instinct was to apologize, but the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I was certain that I was about to die by her hand. I feared for my life. However, this was no ordinary young woman, let alone a police officer. She had pitch-black hair and was wearing a long, ragged dress, a desperate attempt to fit in and to appear frail, but one look in this woman's crisp, hazel eyes and I knew she was a stone-cold killer, the scar just above her left eye sending a chill down my spine. It was the thing one would only get from hand to hand combat, jagged and dragging up toward her scalp. Her nostrils flared briefly as our eyes met. The recognition I saw in her gaze was a mix of respect and disdain. She was also a thin woman, yet in great physical shape.

"You okay?" I asked the young woman as I got up, extending my hand down to her. She swatted it aside, glaring at me and getting up without my assistance.

"Luke Edwards?" she said, not bothering to look at me, brushing the dust and dirt from her dress quickly, her eyes



flicking about suspiciously as she did so.

“Yes,” I responded a little confused as to how she could know my full name. She bore no resemblance that my memory could make a connection to. There was no doubt in my mind that I’d never met her before. Not even once.

“Follow me,” she said with all the confidence in the world that I would obey her command, as she turned and started down the alley. She was right about that, although I didn’t follow her because she said it. I followed her because I wanted to know how the hell she knew my name.

“Who are you?” I demanded to know, speaking in a firm tone. One that I hoped matched hers.

“Shh,” she hushed as she pelted herself against the alley wall, tucking herself down behind a small dumpster, dragging me in behind her. She turned her gaze toward me again, giving me that sense that she’d just as soon kill me as talk to me. As if that might be the simplest way to deal with whatever equation I represented. I saw a question in her eyes. One, I didn’t quite understand, and for one, I wasn’t sure if I wanted the answer to. Why was I still following her? Perhaps, the moment she got me alone, she’d slit my throat or stab me in the back.

The patrol officers and their horses passed by us, unaware of our presence. As soon as they were out of our line of sight, we moved away from the dumpster. I looked back at her, wondering what her purpose was. She knew me, but she seemed to be an outsider.

“Can you tell me what your name is and who exactly you

are?” my tone grew more serious.

“I will answer the questions you seek once we find a place where we can talk without any interruptions,” she scoffingly replied.

“That’s if we’re not shot first,” I grumbled. “We’re standing here like dummies in a shooting gallery.”

“Keep your goddamn voice down,” she said in a menacing whisper. “You don’t want answers? I’ll just walk away and leave you lying in the ditch.”

“All right, all right,” I tried to reason with her. “So much for lady-like manners.”

“Halt!” one of the two officers on horseback yelled from several feet behind me.

“Let’s get the heck out of here,” the woman said immediately, grabbing my hand and dragging me by force. Following her became my only choice. Do or die, but I hated myself for doing it, and I wasn’t convinced my fate would be any different with her than it would be with the officers pursuing us.

We ended up at a rundown apartment, entering it quietly as if we didn’t belong there even though it was where she had brought me to.

“Care to tell me who you are?” I demanded as she led me into the dirty kitchen. I grew impatient with her silence. The small complex smelled of rotting onions, and it didn’t look like it had been cleaned in months. A rat stared at us from the counter as it munched on leftovers from the plate left unclean next to the

sink that probably didn't function properly.

"Just help me lift the door." She gripped at a handle, kicking aside the rug. Then, she bent, slipping her fingers unto a crack on the floor, and I followed suit. Together, we hoisted the barely visible hatch door. It was the nicest feature within the domicile. A way to escape the mess.

The basement was well lit, and the cement walls were at least free from the greasier walls of the structure above us, but I couldn't help but wonder where the electricity was coming from. The light bulbs were working perfectly compared to my apartment. The woman led me down a narrow passage, taking me to a large room with a conference table that seated at least twenty. The chairs weren't much, but they were padded, suggesting that whatever group met in this tucked-away location might have sat for long periods.

"Care to tell me who you are, or is that some highly regarded secret," I asked without making eye contact.

"Take a seat," she commanded, ignoring my question once again.

"Answer my damn question already!" I yelled to her louder than before.

"I said, take a seat," she repeated herself calmly. The stranger placed a dagger on the table. I turned, slowly lifting my hands.

"Sit," she insisted.

I sat down calmly, making no sudden movements. I had the

slightest clue what would happen next. “I have one question to ask you. Have you served with The Children of Iscar before?” she questioned my past.

“Yes. I served with them for three months to make a living for my family. I quit after I realized the monstrosity that I had gotten myself into. Did you bring me here to kill me or what?” I asked, trying to make sense of her odd behavior. She nodded in disagreement. She stared at the dagger and pointed at it.

“Pick it up,” she demanded.

“What?” I was in complete disbelief.

“I said, pick it up,” she repeated more sternly.

“For what reason?” I continued to refuse her orders.

“If I can trust you, you can trust me,” she explained. I hesitated to grab the dagger. I tried to keep a keen eye on her, hoping it wasn’t a trick. “I won’t tell you my name unless you comply.”

If it meant getting her to talk more, then so be it. I slowly reached for the dagger, all while keeping a sharp eye on her. As I almost reached the dagger with my fingertips, the woman grabbed my right arm and planted my face first against the table. I had zero time to react to her swiftness.

“Argh!” I groaned in pain from the impact. It was like getting hit in the face with a speeding soccer ball. She held my face against the table with her arm and placed her sharp knee on the back of my head. The young woman had such strength to her. I tried to shove her off, but I was physically exhausted.

“You told me to trust you.” I writhed in excruciating pain.

“I did,” she hissed. “Now tell me where Gabriel Ellis is?”

“I haven’t seen him in over a year. What’s he to you?” I tried to resist her strength. She then used her other hand and proceeded to bend and twist my fingers. I screamed in unimaginable pain. “I swear to you I’m speaking to you the truth. Tell me what it is you need,” I begged her to stop.

“Very well, then. Was your friend a part of The Children of Iscar?”

“Yes, he was there for about six months,” I replied to her demands. “He then quit and resorted to saving the lives of others in Donquest while hunting down ruthless police officers and politicians.”

She bent and twisted my fingers even more than before. The agony was unbearable. “What do you want from me!?” my voice cracked. My eyes were watery. A woman not much older than was doing this to me with ease. I felt humiliated on the inside. She didn’t seem that much older to me, yet she pinned me on the table with ease, pleading for her to stop. To my relief, she suddenly backed off. I crumbled to the ground in extraordinary pain. Small drips of blood spilled from my nose after the stiff impact on the table.

“My name is Judith,” she finally told her name while I embarrassingly bite my finger to ease the torture.

I washed my face, wiping the blood from my nose with a wet towel. I was fortunate that I didn’t break my nose when Judith slammed me face-first on the table. I had slightly turned my head

to my right and fell flat on my left cheek. Without a doubt, I felt the brunt of the slam. I stared at the perfectly framed rectangular mirror and noticed that I had a black eye on my left eye. Judith had nailed me. I was unsure if I could forgive that woman for what she did to me without good reason. There was no bathtub or shower in the bathroom. I sure could use a nice warm bath right now.

I left the small bathroom and see the conference table in front of me and to my right, Judith sitting on the sofa watching television. She promised to tell me everything if I obeyed her. After what she did to me, I had no choice but to follow her lead. I sat down next to her on the sofa. This sofa was far more comfortable than the one at my apartment. I could sleep like a sturdy old rock here.

Judith was watching a reality TV show called *Keeping Up with the Kowalskis*. The show followed the life of a family known as the Kowalskis, who do dumb things like going to baseball games and be a nuisance to others, mowing their lawn, singing awful songs, getting tans, going grocery shopping, and getting divorces. *Yikes*. This didn't interest me one bit.

“Why are you watching this stuff?” I stared at Judith.

“I don't know. I haven't watched TV in some time,” she said, staring at the screen. “This is getting ridiculous, don't you think?”

“Yeah. I mean, they make themselves look dumb every time their show is on the air. Anyway, do you mind talking more about yourself like who you are, where you come from, what is

this hideout, and how do you know me?" I demanded more answers.

"Very well," she turned to me. "My full name is Judith Powell, and I came from a family of lawyers. I lost them when I was very young when they showed their true colors and supported the downfall of Iscar. An aunt from my mom's side took care of me until I turned eighteen. I lost her too when she died of disease. For many years, I grew strong because of how strict my parents were. I escaped my home after surviving for a couple more years. Food became more and more scarce. I decided my best option of survival was to escape and live in the wilderness for several months. Then, I met Maxwell, the Overseer of The Resistencia, and brought me in his ranks. He trained me to be even stronger. This place where we are at was once a hideout built by members of The Resistencia who we lost contact with months ago. Our goal was to spark an uprising from inside the city. Those plans were eventually foiled."

"You joined The Resistencia?" I asked her to my surprise. "I heard that name earlier today from a man named Morgan."

"Morgan as in Morgan Greene?" she asked to her surprise. "Where does he live? I must know immediately."

"I don't know if it's the same Morgan you're looking for. He didn't tell me his last name," I continued. "He had some earpiece that allowed him to communicate with someone from The Resistencia. He talked about his son leading them. Who is he to you?"

"He is Maxwell's father. Where is he at this very moment?"

she desperately asked. I stopped moving my pie hole for a second. Knowing Morgan's fate, I was unsure how Judith would react. I'm not sure if she even knew who exactly Morgan was besides being Maxwell's father.

"He died bravely today. He saved my life twice," I mumbled quietly. "I'm sorry. Where you tasked to meet him?"

She sighed, but she seemed to be indifferent. "I was to rescue Morgan and return him to our Headquarters. I don't know how to break the news with sir Maxwell when I return."

"Why were they living separately? Why wouldn't Morgan live in a much better place than this god awful city?" I asked, confused.

"Morgan and Maxwell had a falling out. Morgan accused Maxwell of being self-centered and lying about his true goals," she explained thoroughly. "Morgan admired The Resistencia and their purpose, but he felt Maxwell wasn't showing his true intentions. Regardless of their differences, they both kept in touch. Maxwell warned his father that rations would be a thing of the past. Maxwell sent here me on his behalf to bring Morgan back where he belongs."

"So they have family issues?"

"That is all I know at the moment. Nothing more, nothing less. I appreciate you not stabbing me with that dagger just a while ago."

"What exactly are you talking about? I never intended to kill you?" I berated her. "You attacked me first for no good reason, threw my head against the table, almost broke my nose, gave me



a black eye, and twisted my fingers! Explain yourself!”

She rolled her eyes carelessly. “Fine. First, I owe you an apology for doing what I did to you. I did it was because you told me you served with The Children of Iscar. I don’t care how long or short someone has served with those savages. I don’t trust anyone who is serving or who has served with them. When you didn’t kill me with that dagger, and after you were so hesitant, I knew you aren’t cold-hearted like one of them. Still, I couldn’t take a risk, and I attacked you for safe measure.”

“You could have permanently injured me!” my tone grew more threatening.

“Yeah, I know,” she replied quietly. “I don’t regret it one bit because I was taking a gamble with a stranger. I was fed a lot of information about your friend Gabriel or Wolf as we call him.”

“Oh great, he’s got a fancy nickname to him because of what he did,” I joked. “What’s he to you, anyway? Is The Resistencia looking for him too?”

“You are correct. We are looking for his whereabouts. We have been looking for him to bolster our forces. We need someone who can create a spark in our Revolution.”

“And how exactly do I fit into all of this?”

“You were his friend, and you might know of his last location,” she stated.

“He’s gone.” I softened my voice to a whisper. “Ever since they took him to a labor camp, I haven’t heard from him since. He was probably executed or something. We were both arrested

for stealing rations at the plaza when we were starving for food. End of story.”

Judith sat ever so silently, saying no more. We both sat undisturbed for several minutes, absorbing what we had talked about. She only cared about me because I was a friend of Gabriel. That’s it. I coincidentally happened to be the friend of the guy who became a sensation for saving the lives of others and hunting officers who murdered innocent civilians. He was the Vigilante of the Night as some called him. The Resistencia called him Wolf. They didn’t need me. Hell, they sure didn’t care who I was besides being his friend.

“You came all this way for nothing then?” I interrupt our silence.

“I don’t know,” she murmured under her breath.

“How did you find me anyway, and how did you sneak inside the city?” I continued to question. “It was certainly no coincidence we bumped into each other.”

“Last night, I hitched a ride on top of a ration truck that was headed to the city. I couldn’t find your location or Morgan’s under the poorly lit streets. I slept under a bridge during the night and made my way to the plaza where almost everyone would go to pick up their rations. I saw you and Morgan run away from the plaza when the riots broke out. I initially lost track of you when the riots got out of hand, and the police started flooding the streets. I looked in circles, hoping you were somewhere near the vicinity. Suddenly, you came running out from an alleyway, and that’s that.”

There was another long pause before I said my part. “It must have been a long 24 hours looking for us. Could I borrow the remote? I need to look for something.”

Judith disrespectfully tossed the remote to me without saying a word. She didn’t seem to care very much about me. The mission must have been a total waste of time for her. I feared she would attack me again in a fit of rage. I flipped through various channels looking for the local news station. I had to find out if I had a warrant on my head. I stopped at one of the news channels explaining the aftermath of the riots at the plaza.

In the major news headline, at the bottom of the screen, it reads, *30 Killed, Over 100 Wounded, Thousands Arrested*. The riot was finally under control. I changed the channel and stopped flicking the remote until a report on a wanted criminal flashed on the screen. The news anchors spoke about a young man who attacked two armed police officers. They believe that their assailant was in his early to mid-twenties. The news station panned to both officers who survived the scene in a hospital bed and spoke on how their lives flashed before them. Shortly after, they showed a picture of Morgan. Then, a wanted sketch that resembled me was shown.

“The suspect in question is believed to be Luke Edwards, who was sentenced to hard labor last year for stealing rations. He’s believed to be armed and dangerous. He is about 5’9, crewcut black hair, brown eyes, sideburns. He was last seen wearing brown trousers and a white shirt. If you know any details about this criminal who murdered the elderly man and

attacked two officers, please call the number on your screen. Police are offering a month's worth of free rations if your call leads to his arrest."

"That sketch looks a lot like you." Judith glared back at me with menacing cold eyes. "I didn't know I was harboring the criminal who murdered Morgan. What kind of person are you lying to me!?"

"No, you got it all wrong," I tried to explain. "One of the officers killed Morgan, not me. Morgan sacrificed himself to save me. Please, I wasn't lying to you, I swear it. Don't believe anything the media tells you!" I stood up, trying to do my best to convince her otherwise.

Judith stood up as well. We locked eyes filled with anger and hatred. She had a blank look on her face. I couldn't read her body language very well, not knowing what to expect from her, but I was ready for her this time if she had any more tricks up her sleeve.

"I learned not to trust them since I was young. I believe your words. There's no need to worry," she calmly accepted my story.

"Look, I've had a rough day," I continued. "I don't know what I would be doing out there except having thousands of officers on my tail."

My stomach unexpectedly growled. I had forgotten about my hunger during our lengthy talk. "Oops haha," I laughed. "I guess I have had nothing to chow on today."

Judith turned around and picked up something from the small table next to her. It was a glass bowl with a handful of

cookies. “Here. I owe you something for what I did to you earlier,” she said, handing me the bowl.

“Oh my god. Thank you so much!” I thanked her for the food. I wasted no time devouring a handful of cookies in minutes. I had survived most of today on an empty stomach. I had never felt this satisfied at the end of a day in a very long time. I had finally slept with a full stomach.

## The Escape

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During the night, Judith allowed me to sleep on the comfy couch while she slept on the hard floor. I woke up still aching from my wounds Judith had inflicted on me. My left eye was sore, and I could hardly feel my fingers. It was difficult for me not to move and simultaneously feel any pain. I moved off the couch to see Judith peacefully sitting and eating the cookies from the bowl.

“Morning,” I said, rubbing my eyes and adjusting to the light. Judith didn’t say “morning” in return. I couldn’t say I was surprised. I sat down at the conference table, eating the last few cookies remaining. We both sat without saying a single word for several minutes. It was an awkward moment, only hearing the sounds of her chewing the crumbs in her mouth. She had a blank look on her face. I could only guess she was thinking about her next move after coming to Donquest empty-handed.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked. She gave a slight nod while staring at an empty wall without making no eye contact. “I haven’t asked you yet, but how old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” she whispered. Something wasn’t right with her demeanor. She perhaps regretted going overboard yesterday, and now she was as lighthearted as the soul of an innocent child.

“I’m twenty-one,” I stated. “I’d figured we could get out of this wretched city. I could use your help to escape Donquest

without much trouble. Authorities want me for what I did yesterday. Plus, rations will stop coming in. The worst death possible is starvation. I'm not long for this city."

"Help you? After the hell I put you through yesterday, you are trusting me willingly?" her voice crescendoing.

"I'd figure our best chances of survival are if we stick together," I implied. "The Resistencia could use more people in their ranks too. A Revolutionary movement like theirs would need every man, woman, and child to achieve its goal. Am I right?"

"I was waiting when you would ask me to join The Resistencia," she said with a vacant callousness. "The Resistencia is full of tough Rebels the likes you haven't seen. You aren't worthy enough to join us yet. After what I did to you yesterday, you are not strong against what The Children of Iscar will throw at you."

"And what about those two police officers I took out on my own, huh!" Her doubtfulness greatly irritated me

"If it weren't for Morgan, you wouldn't be here, and you surely wouldn't survive on your own out there for long," she insisted.

"You gotta be kidding me," I said in disbelief. "What am I supposed to do in this slump of a city. Get captured and put in chains, die in the streets, or die of starvation. I have been living on my own for an entire year. What is wrong with you? You must drive everyone you meet insane. You're lucky I have an ounce of patience with you and your nonsense."

“And what will you do for us?” she wondered.

“I-I don’t know. I just need a place to hide in the meantime.” I fumbled with my words. “I-I have nowhere else to run or hide in this city. I can’t live like this for the rest of my life. I got no one to talk to, no one to look forward to seeing, no one to trust.”

“All right. You can come with me back to our base, but only for a few days,” she declared, grasping my full attention. “You can join us or go on your own. I have to give everyone, including you, the benefit of the doubt. We leave tonight at dusk. Be warned that the journey ahead is not for the faint of heart. We will have to travel to the vast rainforest. I don’t know what to expect, even when there may be Fanatics roaming the wild. The Resistencia has its underground Headquarters approximately 60 miles south of Donquest. It will take us about two days to reach our destination.”

“Thank you.” It delighted me to hear her come to terms. I didn’t know how long I could stay with The Resistencia, but I surely would not endanger myself by aligning with them. I had a better chance of survival out in the open than joining The Resistencia. Iscar has squandered hundreds and hundreds of uprisings. No one stood a chance against him.

Judith said no more for the rest of the afternoon as we devoured the rest of the cookies in peace. I watched TV for a while longer but quickly grew bored. I didn’t have a good night’s sleep for several days until last night. I wouldn’t have such a luxury outside Donquest. I turned off the TV from pure boredom and rested on the sofa to take a nap for the next couple of hours.



“Wake up. It’s time,” Judith tugged my shoulder. I rubbed my eyes before sitting up. I was feeling a lot of pain vibrating in my right shoulder. I feared that there was more than meets the eye with my arm. Something wasn’t right. I must have ruptured a bone or something.

“Are you okay?” Judith looked at me, concerningly. She had changed into a fresh pair of clothes. A black jacket and black sweatpants. “Is your arm still hurting from yesterday?”

“It seems that way, but my right arm hurts up to my shoulder. You don’t have to apologize to me anymore,” I answered while attempting to be forgiving. “You got me good, and there’s no way we can change that anymore. What’s done is done.”

Judith handed me a pair of neatly folded black clothes. Black sweatpants and a black sweater with a hoodie. “Here. Wear this. It will keep you hidden under the night.”

“Where did you get them from?” I asked her.

“They were stored in a drawer under here. I looked around for anything we could use while you were asleep. The Resistencia uses dark clothing in cities to navigate the night and avoid being caught.”

“Okay, sounds fair. Just give me a second to change.”

“Don’t take too long,” she said.

I stared into the clear mirror to see my black eye still lingering. I examined my right shoulder, desperately looking for any other bruises I may have missed. I found nothing resembling an injury or a fractured bone. The reasons for my lingering

shoulder and arm pain were still a mystery.

I reflected on the mere moments away from risking my life for the sake of finding peace. I have been only outside of the city a few times during my service with The Children of Iscar. I served with them to help make a living with my family, who struggled to make any money. I was about to venture into uncharted territory. The rainforest. What was it like? What about The Resistencia? What were they like? I had more questions than answers, but this was a risk I had to venture.

I removed my trousers and put on my sweatpants Judith gave me. I was pleasantly surprised they fit just perfectly on me. I slowly put on the sweater to avoid furthering damaging my right arm. The sweater was tight on me. If it got the job done, it didn't matter to me. I exited the bathroom, seeing Judith waiting for me near the basement exit.

“All set?” she asked.

“All set,” I repeated after her. “Do you think we can pay a visit to my apartment? I gotta grab a few things before we think of escaping this city.”

“Fine,” sighed Judith. “Let's not take too long. Just follow my lead, and everything will go as planned. And please don't do anything stupid.”

“You're the boss, ma'am,” I abided by her rules. Judith switched the lights off, and we made our way up to the creaky old house and exited into the shadowy streets.

I studied my apartment from a safe distance. The lights were turned on. The police had already arrived, searching for my

whereabouts.

“There it is,” I pointed at my apartment. Judith and I looked carefully from the rooftop of the apartment across the street from where I lived. We both were lying low on the roof, keeping a low profile. She was trying to survey the perimeter for any patrols in the street.

“Your place is swarming with cops. How do you expect to get inside and get what you need? What exactly do you want to take from your house?” asked Judith.

“It’s a picture of my family,” I whispered.

“Your family might be important to you, but I don’t think it will be worth the trouble. We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s get going,” she insisted.

I hear the engines of a van roll up in front of my apartment. I continued watching the scene unfold. Soldiers from The Children of Iscar stepped out from the van. Their familiar black and red armor with the Iscar insignia suddenly brought back terrible memories. It was clear they wanted me dead. Not alive. Dead.

“Have any of you figured out where this Luke guy is at?” a familiar yet menacing voice asked. A man stepped out of the van. William. Bald, tattooed face, burly build, short scruffy beard. The Warlord of Donquest. Iscar’s right hand. I knew him too well.

“No sir,” said a soldier. “He’s not at his residence at the moment.”

“Continue to search for him in every corner of this stinking

city. Bring him to me alive if possible. Kill anyone on sight who is aiding him in any way possible.”

“Yes sir,” obeyed the same soldier.

“Hey, we gotta go now,” Judith patted me on the back of my injured shoulder, which caused me to flinch for a second. I had my eyes locked at William. He represented the worst humanity could offer. Words couldn’t sufficiently describe what he was capable of.

“It’s him,” I whispered.

“You mean the tall bald guy?” she asked. “Who is he?”

“William. Warlord of Donquest. Iscar’s lackey. Murdered my family in front of my very eyes.” I regrettably said. I couldn’t bear talking about him. I felt a dark cloud shroud my mind every time I heard his name or saw him in person. He is the one responsible for the suffering I’ve had to endure.

“I don’t want to get sappy about it, but I am truly sorry about that. On a more serious note, we need to get a move on.” She sounded indifferent about me, only caring about herself and what she was tasked to accomplish, like a fixated machine programmed to take orders from her creator.

“Okay,” I muttered under my breath as I followed Judith’s lead. She was right. It wasn’t worth the risk for two simple photo frames that meant a lot to me.

The police were in full force tonight, all while we were avoiding patrol after patrol. We hid in between alleys, behind dumpsters, inside abandoned buildings, and under bridges. The

streets were most definitely quieter without civilians roaming. Only the muffled sounds of horse hooves, vehicle engines, and patrols talking among each other could be heard under the full moon.

“Exactly where are we going?” I asked Judith. We were hiding under a bridge located several blocks from where I lived as we inched closer to the city walls.

“There is a city gate at the end of this road,” she said. “That will be our only way out.”

“Couldn’t we just sneak up on top of a truck as one leaves the city?” I reminded her how she had snuck into the city.

“The way you’re holding your arm gives me no confidence that you could climb a truck in less than a few seconds.”

I clenched my right arm with my left hand. It was still in as much pain as when we left the safe house. She was right about why we couldn’t take the easier escape. We had to do this the hard way.

“How are we supposed to get past their gates? This is suicide if you ask me,” I said.

Judith pulled out something from her belt. It was a strange small spherical device that I had never seen before. “With this.” She handed me the device. It felt weightless as I held it directly in front of me. I could probably throw it at from at least two city blocks, even with one bad arm.

“Care to explain what this thing is?” I asked her, awed by the tiny device which was no bigger than a baseball.

“It is an electromagnetic pulse sphere,” she explained. “When used properly, it will malfunction any nearby electronic device within its radius.”

“So you’re saying this little thing will shut down their security system, correct?” I curiously asked.

“Yes. It will also shut down any cameras or lights that could expose our identity.”

“You surely came here prepared. Fine, let’s do this,” I confidently said. She nodded while also looking uninterested. *She never smiled, did she?*

We neared the massive walls of Donquest. Spotlights frequently searched for anyone who dared to leave the city. The city gate was only about a city block away guarded with hefty security patrolling it 24 hours a day. A pair of guards surveyed up top from separate guard towers. There were even more guards lined up directly in front of the city walls, which were much taller than most of the city’s buildings. It would be impossible for someone in my condition to make an excruciating climb over the titanic walls made of bulky concrete and steel.

“Okay, so how do we run past them without getting shot?” I questioned Judith’s strategy.

“Let me think,” she replied, urging me to leave her alone for a moment. I placed my focus, reflecting on my last night in the city I was born. One benefit of living in a city like Donquest was the lack of light pollution. The night sky was filled with stars of distinct colors such as turquoise blue, scarlet red, or pure white that blinked across the galaxy. I loved my conversations with my

dad and learning about every different constellation in the night sky. So many stars. So many worlds waiting to be explored.

*As much as I would love to travel the stars, I don't think it will happen in our lifetime.* It bummed me when he said that. Growing up made me realize that this is likely to remain true for the rest of my life.

“Okay, I have an idea now,” blurted Judith, interrupting my thoughts. I paid close attention to what she had planned. “I could use that large dumpster over there and cause an accident when a supply truck drives up to the gate. The guards on top of their posts will stay no matter what. My EMP sphere should diminish their visibility once I shut down their electronics. Once that is done, we jump over the gate swiftly.”

“I got no other choice, but I like where this is going,” I said, agreeing with the plan. The dumpster she referred to is heavy enough to stop a car in its tracks. We removed the trash from the dumpster to lighten the load, making it easier to push. It reeked of a horrible stench of unimaginable proportions. I coughed out the putrid smell from my mouth and nose.

We worked together, turning the dumpster from its position. All we had to do is wait for a supply truck to drive into our trap. I stand ready behind the tail end of the object, waiting for the right opportunity. Judith waited patiently at the end of the corner, waiting to signal me.

“I see lights,” I heard her say. “Get ready.” I was more than ready. I carefully listened to the purring of the truck engine rumbling nearer and nearer to our position.

“Now!” she yelled as quietly as possible. I mustered my raw strength, pushing the dumpster with my left shoulder. The dumpster budged ever so barely. I was struggling to push an empty dumpster, of all things.

Without saying a word, Judith came to my aid, helping me push the heavy dumpster. The object gained momentum, sliding across the street. The lights of the truck reflected from the dumpster, followed by the screeching sound of the breaks filling the empty night. The truck driver smashed through the dumpster and lost control, crashing to its left side through an abandoned building. The clangorous impact permeated a cacophony of a thud on a rather quiet night.

“Let’s get going,” Judith ordered. We sprinted around and to our left until we reached the last street. On our left were the bright city gates. The guards who we had seen patrolling moments ago at the gate were no longer there. They were attending the driver of the truck that had just crashed.

We jogged our way closer to the gates. Judith pulled out the EMP sphere from her belt and threw it right in front of the city gates. I could hardly hear the tiny explosion erupting from the small ball as the lights and other electronics blacked out.

“The lights! Get them back in working order!” yelled one of the tower guards. The wired gate was about twice my height. I climbed as fast as I could, primarily using my left hand to pull myself up. Judith made it to the other side of the gate before I could even blink. Some guards who were rescuing the truck driver shouted words that were meant to stop us.



“I think I see someone trying to get over the gates!” yelled a guard who wasn’t sure if he had seen us. I jumped down from the top of the gate and safely touched the other side unharmed. I was at long last outside the city walls. I made a run for it, following directly behind Judith. The guards at the tower posts seemed to be scrambling in confusion. They were arguing with each other for no good reason.

“Hey! I see two people running down there!” one of them barked. “They don’t look like one of ours either. Open fire!”

Bullets whizzed beneath our feet, missing their mark. Their aim was terrible, but it was to be expected in such poor visibility. We sprinted for our lives and further distanced ourselves from the city. The guards continued to unload their magazines, but the further we distanced ourselves, the harder it was for them to hit their intended target. I followed Judith for as long as I could until she stopped to catch her breath.

“I think we lost them for now,” she heaved. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me,” I was wheezing too loudly.

“Tired already? I thought you were in the military?” she asked.

“Been a while. Not in tip-top shape.”

I surveyed the area in front of us. An empty land with trees looming on the horizon. It was numbingly quiet beyond the city walls. There is a strange eeriness to it. I wasn’t exactly sure how to describe it. Luckily, I didn’t have to worry about running for

my life at the moment.

“Over here,” said Judith, who was several yards ahead of me. Everywhere we went, she was one step ahead of me. It was getting on my nerves. “You best keep up unless you want to find your way to The Resistencia on your own.” I slowly walked towards her without saying a single word. She moved closer and closer to the treeline. I wondered if this was the rainforest she had talked about. I have never been in such an environment. I have been in the desert before, but a rainforest? I didn’t know what to expect as we wandered into the unknown.

My dad once told me this continent used to be called South America, or at least what was left of it in the decades before when Iscar conquered the world under his decree. I couldn’t see the time on my watch, but it was surely past midnight. Today was a long day. My legs slowed with every passing second. I desperately needed to rest.

“Hey, hold up will you?” I pleaded for Judith to slow down. I fell on both my knees. I was heaving louder and louder from pure fatigue. “It’s been a long day. I could use some rest.”

Judith looked back and said, “We have to keep moving. I wouldn’t put it out of the question that they might be following us at this very moment.”

“You expect them to find us in the middle of this forest?”

“They aren’t going to sleep well tonight knowing they let two people escape the city. Come on. Get on your feet,” she demanded.

“No, please, don’t leave me behind,” I begged for her to stay.

She scurried away, disappearing behind a black wall of the night. I crawled towards a small boulder in the middle of the rainforest. I had no bed, no pillow, no blankets to sleep with. My stamina was running on fumes. I was on my last hinges. I couldn't keep myself awake that I laid my head against the boulder resting against it. Silence shrouded my ears. This was the most pleasant feeling ever.

## Into The Unknown

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My eyes opened to what appeared to be a gorgeous morning sky and the merry sounds of birds singing. The forest beamed with sunlight. I wasn't sure how long I slept for, but I was enjoying the tranquil state I was indulging in. I immediately noticed that my right hand was no longer in any pain. The forest was as green as grass, the plants brightly nourished, trees towering several feet high protecting me from the rays of the sun. It was a majestic sight to behold. This place was something out of a mural. I was awestruck by its beauty and liveliness.

"You're awake. Feel rested now?" asked Judith's voice. She stood to my right, standing up in an imposing demeanor.

"Yeah. I'm feeling much better. Please don't tell me you were awake all night?"

She nodded. "Someone needs to be on watch, or else someone might sneak behind us."

"I guess this is where I say my thanks to you," I replied with a weak smile.

"Don't sweat it. You couldn't carry my bags if I asked you," she taunted me. I stood up and made a stand for myself. I wouldn't allow her to slide this time.

"Very clever, aren't you?" I said straight to her face, eye to eye, person to person. "I might mean nothing to you, but if The

Resistencia is full of hot-headed people like you, then you can kiss whatever you have worked so hard for goodbye.”

She had no decipherable emotion on her face. My words would not break her stoic attitude.

“I could break you like a twig. You know that oh so well, don’t you?” she threatened me with a clear, menacing look. Her voice changed tone in just one emphatic sentence. She believed every word she was saying. “Now get a move on before we stay here too long, or do I have to hold your hand before I leave you alone and start crying?”

I stood silently without a reply in mind. I moved right behind her lead without looking back. I was probably dead weight to her. If we both died, it would be because of me. My pessimistic thoughts clouded my mind. I was just some person to her.

We traveled for several more miles, not speaking a single word to each other since that morning. The weather here was much cooler than inside the muggy city. A chilling breeze brushed the trees, and the plants danced to the refreshing wind. It was an oddly relaxing walk. Despite the perfect conditions, something didn’t seem right. Something was missing from the picture. Ah yes, the animals. Was this all my imagination? No other animals were present in the forest except the background noises of birds chirping.

A loud crack and boom erupted from the dark sky above us. A lightning storm was fast approaching. The clouds hovering over the melancholy sky were no ordinary white clouds. They were pitch gray and dark. Mother Nature was ready to unleash its

fury.

At the end of another tree line, I see a clear view of the shadowy clouds. An instantaneous flash of light blanketed the sky. Seconds later, another jarring boom followed. Judith continued to wander into the vast open field in between the rainforest. I continued to move behind her at a sluggish pace, almost as if she wanted to combat the storm. I quickened my speed, hoping not to be down poured by the oncoming rainfall. I raced ahead of Judith, looking around to find anything to hide under from the brewing storm.

Judith had something else in mind shifting towards a different direction. She turned left, completely ignoring me and without warning. She leaped down a small cliff and disappeared under the same cliff as if she had dropped under a ditch. I sprinted to the last place I saw her. As I reached the bottom of the small cliff, an opening underneath was present. I had no clue where this leads to, but if Judith is in there, then there should be no harm.

I gingerly dropped towards the small ditch, touching the soft ground with the soles of my shoes. I turned around to see a small cave staring right in front of me. Judith was sitting down quietly, staring at the rocky ground. The only light that illuminated the underground was the reflection of the sunlight from the entrance. The cave could only fit about five people at most, but tall enough for someone my size without having to kneel. It was utterly lifeless with colorless bare rocks and walls. I only hoped this kept us dry from the torrential rain.

I sat near Judith, but not too close. We hadn't spoken a word for several hours. *5 PM*. I could finally listen to the drops of rain pouring from the ominous clouds. I have never heard a rainstorm like this before. The violent thunder rumbled across the sky, shaking the ground momentarily. The wind howled with such raw intensity. This storm showed a force, unlike any other. Mother Nature was not happy today.

“Look, what happened this morning, you were right. It's my fault,” I said, finally interrupting our long, awkward silence. I had to get something off my chest. “I am useless. I have been for a long time because I grew lonely. I hated being alone. It was miserable living in the slums. Poverty is a plague, and food is scarce. Some days, I go to sleep without dinner. I am a shell of my former self, and I damn well know it. I'm sorry for dragging you down.”

Judith gazed at the ground, showing no overt expression on her face. I couldn't tell if she was paying attention to what I had said.

“My friend Gabriel and I made a promise to each other when we were kids,” I explained my past. “That promise was that when we grew older, we would fight to protect people from The Children of Iscar. After I lost my parents, I lived in Gabriel's house with his family. He quit The Children of Iscar after they killed my family, exactly three months after I quit. We both bowed revenge against The Children of Iscar and Iscar himself to avenge my family. We resorted to vigilantism and saving people who were mistreated by the law. People framed for crimes they

didn't commit. People struggled to put food on the table. People with little to no money to pay for rations. We sought to help others, but Gabriel and I had different opinions on how to come about it. He murdered those who punished the innocent. As much as I appreciated his willingness to fight back, I realized his actions didn't make us any better than the enemy."

"Do you not believe in murder as an option for justice?" Judith finally spoke a word. She had paid attention to what I said. I was pleasantly surprised yet grateful.

"I don't know," I answered unconvincingly. "I should have killed the two officers for what they did to Morgan back in Donquest. But I thought about it for a moment and questioned if that is who I would become. My biggest fear is if I killed someone, I would lose my sanity. Even if the person in question is at the root of evil, would you not try to reason with them first?"

"I wouldn't be sure if I could do that even during the direst of situations," Judith explained. "It depends on what kind of human being stands in front of me. If Iscar stood in front of me, I wouldn't hesitate for a second to kill him. If it was a person willing to listen to what I have to say, then I show mercy."

"Well, my friend took it a step further and killed or tortured dozens of officers, some who did nothing more than punish civilians. Gabriel was losing his damn mind. I had never seen such sadistic behavior from him. How did this make us any better than The Children of Iscar? This wasn't proving a damn thing."



“And how did you want that to come about? How would you Punish the Unjust?” she asked the same question Gabriel asked me before.

I took a deep breath and said, “I would help people without trying to kill those who punish them. I question their motives and purpose. If it comes down to it, then I would have no choice but to put them out of their misery. Some Fanatics had no choice like me but to join them, to survive and endure.”

“Things don’t seem as easy as they used to be when you were just kids, weren’t they?” She explained, bringing up a good point. This was something I learned to be truer as I grew older.

“Not at all,” I replied. “We did the best we could with what we had. Gabriel transformed into a worldwide sensation throughout the news and media, captivating audiences. No one knew his true identity. He was the most wanted person in the world until we were both caught and arrested for stealing rations at the plaza. I haven’t seen him since then.”

Judith randomly stood to her feet, crawling towards the exit of the cave. “Where are you going?” I asked her.

“To get some wood for a fire that we can use to keep ourselves warm.”

“With how the weather is outside? Are you serious?” I worryingly asked.

“Remember our talk earlier today? I can fend for myself against whatever the circumstances await me,” she reminded me as she exited the cave.

I patiently waited for Judith to return. My clock read a minute past 6 PM. She had been out for quite some time. The rain was still pouring, although the thunderstorm seemed to have passed. My right arm was feeling significantly better than before. Whatever was causing the insufferable pain seemed to have simply vanished into thin air. Things were going too well for me at the moment. I was still hoping that no one had followed our tracks from Donquest.

A pile of wood dropped from the cave entrance. Judith jumped down and back inside the cave and gathered the wood, tossing it in the center of the cave. She used two rocks, grinding them against each another to ignite a spark over the pile of wood. The slightly dimmed fire grew steadily. Judith sat in the same spot and watched as the fire ignited the frail wood. She seemed to be in a better mood than before, but knowing her, I couldn't say I was one-hundred percent sure.

Hours passed as the rain continued to cascade from the sky. Only the rattling sounds of the storm and fire were audible to my ears. For a moment, the world around me became non-existent. It was as if the harsh realities became mute. I wiped every foul deed in the past from my memory. I had nothing to worry about in the present.

“Are we going to continue our walk during the night?” I quietly asked Judith.

“No. This is perfectly fine.” She sounded as weary as I thought she would be. This aura of peacefulness was a rarity these days. It was beyond satisfying.

“How did you discover this cave?” The question was in my mind since entering here.

“I found this place while on my way to Donquest,” she explained. “I rested here the day before I arrived. This is my favorite place outside of The Resistencia Headquarters by far.”

“It most definitely seems that way. How far are we from the Headquarters?”

“Not far. We should be there before tomorrow evening.”

“Do you mind telling me how you survived for so long?” I was visibly curious about her past. “How did you find The Resistencia during that time? You don’t have to tell me if it makes you feel uncomfortable talking about your past.”

Judith sat silently. She was thinking about what to say exactly. Did I blow her off again? That would be the last thing I needed to happen tonight.

“Maxwell found me alone, sleeping in the middle of the forest. He offered me if I was interested in joining a Revolution that would retake the world by storm. At first, I was skeptical and outright refused to join his movement. Then, he brought up how The Resistencia was no ordinary Revolutionary faction. They were here to give back what humans deserved: dignity, liberty, and freedom. A future for everyone. A say in our daily lives. No more oppression, no more chaos. The mistakes of our ancestors that lead us to this imperfect world were because we allowed elitists to take control of our lives. We had failed to Punish the Unjust. That was the difference between The Resistencia and every other Revolutionary group that has existed

before them. Everyone else only fought for themselves.”

“This Maxwell guy sounds compelling,” I commented. “He seems to be the ideal leader of a Revolutionary group. Even so, it’s an uphill battle from here on out to overthrow Iscar and his Fanatics. I wish you and your group the best of luck.”

“We have faith in Maxwell. Our numbers have flourished over the past few months. We have yet to liberate any village, town, or city, but we intend to accomplish this soon enough.”

I had a smile on my face, knowing that people hadn’t given up on an uprising against Iscar. I was still concerned about how this would come about. Their most vital task was not only to liberate towns or cities, but to get millions and millions to join their cause. Only then will The Resistencia stand a chance against Iscar and his military prowess. As of now, it is foolheartedly to fight back. My watch struck at exactly *10 PM* as my eyes flickered from the long walk today. I desperately needed a rest.

“Well. Goodnight Judith. Try to get the rest you need. You haven’t slept one bit since yesterday,” I said.

“You’re right. I need some rest.” She yawned. “Goodnight.”

## The Executioner

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“Are we there yet?” I wearily asked Judith the next morning. My legs, feet, toes, arms, shoulders, hands, neck, head, and back were aching. My spine grew restless, my mouth was disgustingly dry, and my throat was equally numb. My energy dissipated for every second I moved.

“Less than a quarter of a mile to be exact,” she responded. Judith didn’t look or sound tired. She was happily walking without dragging her feet or taking any rests. The time read *5:30 PM*. We had moved for miles with little to no breaks in between. The Resistencia Headquarters were somewhere just ahead, past this rainforest. The day was cloudy, but no signs of rain or thunderstorms. In front of us, a cliff towered more than twice my height. I hoped I didn’t have to scale such an obstacle with a bad arm. Things weren’t exactly easy out here for me, but this was perhaps our only way to our eventual destination.

“The coast should be just past this cliff,” Judith informed me of the craggy cliff just up ahead.

“I’m not sure if I can climb it,” I replied.

“Well, you can endure the injury and get to safety sooner, or you can hike the long way around without having to do any climbing, which will take you more than an hour to go around at your slow pace.”

She was right. I plodded on my feet ever since we escaped the city. It would take an eternity to take the long, but less painful way. It was pointless to take the long road. I would risk further injuring myself by not doing so, but I had nothing to lose at this point.

“Okay,” I sighed. “I’ll try to climb the cliff.”

Judith crawled her way up to the cliff, scaling it in mere seconds. She had such quickness and mobility to her, making it look way too easy. Before I knew it, she had reached the top without a struggle.

“I must say that was very impressive,” I said.

“Your turn. I’ll grab you when you’re close,” she said.

It was my turn. I grabbed an uneven rock along the rugged walls of the cliff, pulling my weight against gravity. I steadily placed my feet together on a much stiffer rock. There was little room for error. I struggled to get a grip on another gap to lift myself higher. I moved higher and higher. When my confidence reached its pinnacle, my right foot slipped from the crevice I had stepped on. I fell back to the earth, flat on my back, and unmoving. A gush of wind was knocked out from my lungs. I panicked as I couldn’t breathe properly.

“Help,” my voice wheezed. I feared an unexpected death at that moment. I could feel the brunt of the impact on my back shoulders. The back of my sweater was cluttered with dirt and moss.

“Are you okay?” exclaimed Judith.

“Can’t breathe...” The lack of oxygen muffled my shaky voice.

“You just had the wind knocked out of you. Don’t be a wimp. You’ll be fine,” she explained unwittingly.

I focused on controlling my breathing patterns, exhaling, and inhaling at a reasonable pace. Oxygen began circulating back into my brain. I regained my normal breathing patterns. I realized my fall wasn’t as bad as I initially thought. My back ached, but at least I didn’t fall on my head. I was fortunate to have a safe landing. I resumed scaling the cliff once again.

I had more confidence the second time around. I tightly grabbed a rock with my good arm and pushed myself while locking my feet together. I exerted more effort this time by pulling my entire body upwards after each successful climb. I was still too afraid of falling again that it clouded my thought process the higher I climbed. I was never the best at heights, especially from very tall buildings.

Judith stretched out her arm to me. I grabbed her fingertips, pulling my left arm and dragging me up to the edge of the cliff. She could pull my entire weight easier than I could on my own. I was beyond relieved to have made it past a simple cliff. Sweat rivered from my forehead. I was breathing uncontrollably, but I was still alive. That’s all that mattered.

Minutes later, we reached the edge of the rainforest and into the open. In front of my very eyes, an infinite ocean, and a thin coastline materialized below us. The gentle ocean waves crashed along the shore. White seagulls flapped their wings, flying

around the coast. They too were astonished by the fantastic view. The breeze gracefully swayed my dirty hair. I wished I could gaze at the ocean on top of this cliff until the end of time.

“So, where exactly is the Headquarter?” I asked. I couldn’t observe anything that indicated a building or structure of sorts.

“It is not easily visible from here,” explained Judith. “The Resistencia chose the perfect place to hide from The Children of Iscar. To this day, they don’t know of our location.”

“Don’t tell me it's underwater,” I joked.

“No. Headquarters is somewhere on a small island across the ocean. It is naked to the human eye from here, but it is barely visible from here with a pair of binoculars.”

“Are you going to signal them, or what’s the deal here?” I asked.

“Give me a moment while I dig something up. You can head down there on your own and wait for a boat to pick us up.”

Judith began digging something under a specific tree with her bare hands. Whatever it was, I hope it got the job done. I made my way down the cliff, cautious of not plummeting to my doom. It was much easier to climb down than to climb up a cliff. I strolled over the sand wearing all black clothes. I gazed into the distance, but I still could not see the island from here. Just how far was this place? This had better been worth the trouble.

Judith fired into the sky, a flare of sorts. I stared up to the sparkling glimmer as it peaked high into the air. A small crackling sound exploded from the flare as it bursts into a small



flash. I waited for a few minutes at the coastline while Judith watched from the cliff. It would take some time before something would arrive.

Something was amiss as I heard the roaring of an engine rumble in the distance. It wasn't coming from the ocean. It was emanating from the rainforest. I knew I had to get back to Judith to avoid being caught out in the open.

"Get out of there!" her voice trembled in panic. This was the first time I heard cries of desperation in her tone, one that I would not have imagined. My heart pounded faster and faster as I hastily returned to the cliff. I was much quicker than before as I scaled the rocky cliffs. I caught up to Judith, who was waiting for me.

"Let's get as far away as possible!" she urged as we ran our way away from the engines and to a different part of the forest from where we came. As Judith reached the safety of the trees, my right arm inexplicably lost sensation. A sudden burst of burning engulfed my right arm. It was almost as if my arm was cut off clean. My fingers felt a jolt rupture up to my shoulders, similar to an electrical shock. I was in a world of hurt.

"Oh god no!" I screamed as I fell to my knees. I couldn't move my arm. Not even the strongest person in the world could tolerate this. I fell to the ground, succumbing to the torture of a thousand needles puncturing my arm like a pincushion. Judith immediately turned around and appeared to come to my rescue.

"Luke, what's happening?" she demanded to know.

"I-I don't know. My right arm. I don't know what's going on

with my right arm. Help me, please!” My cries for help bounced from the ground. Judith tried to carry me on her back shoulders. Just as she tried pulling me up, I heard the screeching sound of car wheels coming to a halt. Car doors were slammed shut, and gun safeties clicked to firing mode.

“Freeze criminals!” barked an unfriendly voice. Judith stopped for a moment as I hung from her shoulders. “Get on the ground now!” Judith dropped me on the ground as carefully as she could. I gazed into her eyes and saw a young woman who was not ready to give up. “Drop any weapons you have!”

A set of angry footsteps dragged across the dirt. I couldn’t see their faces, but this seemed to be The Children of Iscar. The Fanatics coerced Judith to lay flat on the ground, face down. They tied both of her arms behind her back and had left me alone for some odd reason. They were soldiers wearing red and black, symbolizing the prestigious armor of The Children of Iscar. On their body armor was the dreaded Iscar insignia, which is a cursive capital *I* milked in crimson red and gold. About more than a dozen looked on as a tall humanoid figure approached me.

“Well, well. We meet again,” said a deep voice that I was too familiar with. William had come back to finish the job. His sadistic grin on his ugly, tattooed face angered me. He had followed us from Donquest. He would allow no one to leave the city unscathed and would hunt down any straggler to the ends of the earth.

“I see you have a new friend here. Interesting that both of you were heading in this direction. Care to tell me why?” he

demanded. If either myself or Judith told William about The Resistencia, The Children of Iscar would easily dismantle their existence.

“Let me guess. Both of you are looking for The Resistencia,” he continued to blabber. “Those Rebels are as miserable as everyone else. Do they think they can overthrow the Messiah? Useless and weak-minded. Now tell me where they are, or we can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“We won’t tell you a goddamn thing,” Judith cursed. “If you want to destroy The Resistencia, then you will have to go through me first.”

William turned his attention to Judith. Knowing his true capabilities, I wouldn’t allow him and do what pleased him. “You got a big mouth, madame. Quite young too. You sound like one of their pawns. Oh, I almost forgot to thank you for signaling us with the flare,” he laughed.

“We made a promise to kill each and every one of you until there is nothing left to kill!” she said with such ferocity in her voice.

William got on one knee and viciously slapped Judith across the face. I had seen enough. I wasted no time jumping William from behind. I tackled him to the ground, trying my best to strangle him with one good arm. He trivially knocked me back with his pure brute strength. I almost had no chance of overpowering him. I fell directly on my right arm, which got the worst of it. To my surprise, his men didn’t shoot me during our brief scuffle.

“Nice hit kid. You are bold, trying to save your pathetic friend. Lucky for you, I ordered my men not to kill you so we could have a little chat. It appears you want more from me. I will have to teach a lesson to your friend here the same way I taught you and your pathetic friend Gabriel,” he smirked at his own words. I knew exactly what he meant by those words. My time was running short. At least I had the chance to make it out of the city and experience the beauty of the outside world. I had lost everyone I cared for. I would join them soon. For some reason, that thought didn’t bother me very much.

“Take off your clothes,” he demanded.

*What?* I whispered in my mind.

William walked back to Judith and pulled a small handgun over the side of her head. “Do I have to repeat myself or what?” he barked orders as he threatened to shoot Judith. “If you won’t listen, then I’ll take her instead.” He clicked his safety off. She had more to lose than I did. I would not allow someone to die because of my errors.

I obeyed William without saying a word back. I was hiding the intolerable pain for as long as I could. I removed my clothing until I was half-naked, only wearing my underwear. The servant of the antichrist slowly sauntered towards me.

“Get on the ground,” he ordered me. I quickly laid flat on the ground. My body felt chills crawling all over my skin. The wind was much colder than I had anticipated. A sudden hush surrounded me. *Everything would be okay.*

“Tie his hands!” William barked more orders to his men.

One of them approached me and grabbed both of my arms and tied them against my back.

“I’m going to enjoy cutting you like a scalded dog,” he spat like a possessed demon. William pulled out a sharp knife. My heart pounded faster, boiling my blood. I had to face the repercussions of escaping Donquest.

“What are you going to do? Let him go! Please don’t hurt him, please!” begged a desperate Judith. She sounded concerned for my well-being. The only way this wouldn’t come to be is if either Judith or I told William about the Resistencia’s location. I had to take it to keep her alive for the sake of The Resistencia. She had to understand this.

William ignored Judith’s desires. He crouched to my left and wrapped his right arm on my throat. In his left hand, he wielded his knife. The blade inched closer to my forehead. It struck the side of my scalp. His knife slowly cut across my forehead. I was screaming on the inside, but I had no energy to replicate the suffering on the outside. I was worn out. I closed my eyes, feeling warm blood drip from my forehead as William was slowly slicing me open.

“Stop it, dammit!” I could hear Judith screaming for help. I wouldn’t survive William’s grotesque method of torture, but if it meant that Judith and the Resistencia lives, then I would take it.

My head began to feel as if it was on fire. My mind was growing fuzzy. *It was okay to die. We are all going to die someday. Today is going to be my unlucky day.*

Suddenly, a bullet whizzed, followed by grating gunfire.

William instantly stopped slicing my forehead open. The coward ran for his life and back to his vehicle. I heard inaudible shouting from The Children of Iscar as some dropped dead from the gunfire.

“Retreat!” I heard William giving out orders. My head laid on the ground. I opened my eyes ever so slightly, seeing a pool of my blood taint the ground. I could taste the distasteful liquid in my mouth. I heard Judith’s voice attend me. She had been set free from whoever saved us.

“Get a boat quick and help me take him to the island before he loses too much blood!” she yelled to our saviors. “You’re going to be okay. We’ll get you some help,” she whispered into my left ear. “I’m sorry this happened to you.”

Her voice choked up, showing signs of empathy. I couldn't speak, unable to tell if this was real or just some sort of dream. I closed my eyes again, losing all forms of consciousness.