



*“ We are the chosen, tasked with leading this world back to the former glory of our forefathers. We shall rise out of the ashes. We shall lead the people. We shall tame the wastes. We shall be glorious!”--Excerpt from the Book of Windhelm, William Windhelm II.*

## Chapter 4

The elevator ride to the underground lab was silent except for the rhythmic humming of the descent. The air felt cooler underground. The elevator travelled at least 3 stories down. Durwood was always uneasy when at the mercy of a machine. He couldn't help but think that the elevator could drop him and the two other scientists to their deaths at any moment. The ride stopped with an abrupt grinding clank.

“This way.”

Her lab coat flowed past the partially open doors and into a dark room with 2 metal chairs and a large window. Durwood followed but the other scientist remained. The chairs were hard and cold. Durwood began to fidget in his seat until the woman in the lab coat motioned to look out of the window.

“This is a one way viewing screen. Please watch below as we begin the test.”

“Of course.” Durwood grumbled in discomfort.

The other scientist had emerged from the elevator just one floor down. The white lab coat picked up air as the timid little man walked quickly to a console. A slight buzz signaled the motion of a thick metal slab. A man was strapped to the other side. The buzzing continued until the scientist was face to face with his subject.

“Maw,” Durwood whispered as if his voice could escape the room. The timid scientist was slightly less meek when standing before someone who was unable to move. The scientist took a deep breath and deepened his shaky voice as he spoke. “Awaken”.

The dead man took his first breath in days. Maw shot open his eyes and thrashed against the metal slab. After a brief struggle he glanced around the room and rested his gaze on a timid little man standing in front of him.

“Welcome back Mr. Maw. Can you tell me the last thing you remember?”, the scientist spoke in a scripted tone.

“What? Last...an explosion...” Maw didn't recognize his own voice at first.

“Anything after that?”, the scripted questions continued.

“No...” Maw was becoming less confused, and more annoyed.

The scientist decided to redirect his questions. “How about before, what's the first thing you remember?”

Maw resisted the urge to speak, but failed, “My....my mother”.

A smirk grew on the timid man's face, “Good. Tell me about her”.

“She was... She was a slave.” Maw never talked about his mother but he felt compelled to answer.

“I see.”, the timid man nodded.

“Not like that! She was just a worker who couldn't pay her debts.” The restraints grew tighter.

“Understood Mr. Maw. We are aware of your background. This is a simple memory test.” The scientist did not falter in his scripted tone.

“Stupid whore. Ended up having me and sending me off to the wastes alone. Got picked up by raiders. Must have thought I was a runner. But one of them could tell I wasn't. They took me in. Been doing jobs ever since. We done here?” Maw was growing impatient.

The script continued. “What do you know of your father?”.

Maw sighed deeply, “Nothin'. Most likely a worker or something. Could've been the master for all I know.”

“Birth records indicate that you were born after your mother became a slave.” The scientist shuffled in his lab coat.

“So?”, the restraints were even tighter now.

The timid man cleared his throat. “So in actuality, it is far more likely that your father was also a slave.”

Maw didn't even feel the resistance of the strap as he wrapped his cold fingers around the scientists' neck. The remaining straps broke just as easily as Maw stepped off of the metal slab. The scientist fell with a lifeless thud. His neck was rung like a wet rag. Maw stepped over the corpse and approached a mirror across the room. It took just a few steps to realize that his reflection wasn't moving. Maw stared at the slender framed man with a scorched hole in his chest. He began to recall the events after the explosion. The Durwood girl and a slave. That slave who tried to run but...*No*. The truth pierced his chest like the bullet from his own gun. “Look at you”, he placed a hand over his wound and stared into his own dead eyes.

“Dead by the hands of damn slave”, Maw leaned in close and kissed his forehead before tearing into his old flesh. The body looked as though it was chewed and spit out by a voracious animal. The sterile room was painted a dark red, and decorated with severed limbs and chunks of flesh. Only the head and the stump of a neck remained on the table.

“Weak!” Maw spat in disgust. He scanned the room until he found a mirror. After wiping away the blood he could see himself again. Maw stood frozen, staring at the face that wasn't his face. Durwood had been watching the whole time, joined by the unwilling scientist who had sealed her eyes shut well before the true sadistic display was unveiled. Durwood witnessed what could only be described as a waking nightmare. Long sections of skin flapped on the ground by Maw's feet. The synthetic skin was painless to remove and wasn't as messy as the real thing. A state of the art cybernetic body was revealed. A sleek black musculoskeletal frame with steel plating over the joints, hands, feet and any weak point on the human body. Maw was careful to remove every last piece of skin before returning to the head. His hands moved with surgical precision as he ripped off his own face and discarded the rest. Carefully, he placed his fleshy mask over his metallic skull; careful to use the available tools to attach the skin correctly. Maw returned to the mirror to marvel at his transformation. His face was still twisted into an expression of pleasure and pain befitting his twisted soul.

Durwood turned away from the horrific scene below to discover the scientist attempting to activate a nearby control band hanging on the wall. A firm strike pushed her to the ground. Durwood stood over her with an outstretched hand. The scientist put the control band over Durwood's bare wrist and dare not move again. Durwood raised his new control band to his chin.

“Maw”, the master spoke in a cool but authoritative tone.

“Durwood?”, Maw scanned the room but failed in locating the source of the voice. Sensors in his new body indicated that Durwood was communicating directly into his brain.

“Now that you're done...adjusting to your new body, I have work you”, the master walked past the sobbing scientist and entered the elevator. When the doors opened he was met by Maw.

Maw had intended on saying and *doing*, a few things to Durwood when he saw him, but for some reason he was compelled to listen as the pompous man spoke. As instructed he entered the elevator and listened in silence. Durwood was straight to the point as he raised one wrist to reveal a collar beacon heading southeast. “ Go get my property”.

The beacon blinked red as it moved; growing brighter until Belle tugged at the collar on her neck. The runaways had travelled far and now the Windhelm estate was in view. Holder awoke when Belle stopped the truck. Audrey turned to face Holder, waiting until he finished yawning. “While you were asleep, me and Belle decided that it was best if you didn't come.”

Before Holder could respond, Belle had begun replaying the conversation that he missed during his nap. Holder listened to them both, but crossed his arms in disagreement. “So you want me to hide out here just in case your little plan goes bad?”

Audrey and Belle nodded in unison. Holder jumped out of the truck in a huff. He watched as they continued towards the estate, driving down the monochrome plains. The wind swept away the tire tracks just as fast as they were made. Holder dug out a foxhole in a single scoop and rested inside the shade. The sun was hot and he was still tired. *Just tell me when.*

Belle found comfort in knowing that Holder was on standby. Audrey fixed herself inside the passenger side mirror as the Windhelm estate gates came into view. Belle followed Audrey in silence as a guard scanned the control band and collar. “Confirmed. This slave is registered to you miss, Audrey Durwood.” Audrey cringed. The guard paused on the last name, then turned to his associate. The other guard began frantically searching an arrival schedule. Audrey cleared her throat and raised her head high as she spoke.

“Tell William I am here for a visit; he did say that I was welcome back anytime.”

The guard snatched the key from Belle as the gates opened. “I'll bring the truck around for you miss Durwood”. As the truck pulled off a smaller black car arrived to transport the ladies into the compound. Belle stared at Audrey in silence. She had never heard Audrey speak in such a manner. It was like she took on an accent; similar to her father's' way of speaking. Audrey stared out the window of the car, sitting with dignified posture.

It was hot and the shade from the foxhole wasn't helping. The heat kept him awake, and his mind couldn't help but worry about Audrey. He starts to think about the conversation Belle showed him. Holder becomes more and more upset as he replays the conversation in his mind. *Impatient. Impulsive.* He ran through the insults. But most importantly they said he was incapable of stealth. He's a runaway. Stealth is his lifestyle. Holder hushed his thoughts as a whisper crept into his mind.

*Help*

A caravan in the distance; 2 trucks and a larger truck with 9 wheels on each side in between. The cargo was children. *Its far. But they're just kids.* Holder sighed deeply as he reasoned a justification for his next impulsive action. *Audrey will be fine.* In a cloud of ash he erupted from the foxhole and sped towards the caravan. He aimed for the first trucks' drivers side but veered off course at the last second. The smokescreen of ash caused the driver to stop. *Stealth.* Holder whispered to himself as he snuck into the back of the largest truck. Once inside, the caravan continued its journey through the wastes. Inside the truck was dark and quiet. Holder poked holes into the canopy above to shed some light. There were 4 kids; each older than the last with the youngest locked inside a cage. The 5 or 6 year old child was doubly bound to prevent contact with the other children. The oldest spoke, "Yessir?"

Holder scoffed, "Not sir; Holder. And we're leaving". Holder pulled down his cloak to reveal his runner's scar. The middle children hopped in joy as the oldest gasped at the shocking statement. She was young, but wasn't much younger than Audrey, possibly 18. They all looked related, except for the youngest. As Holder approached, the other 3 children gathered behind him. "No mister", the second oldest child warned.

Holder stopped. The child explained his warning carefully, "If you touch him you'll die".

Holder scoffed once more; "who told you that?". The child pointed towards the cab of the truck.

Holder kneeled to meet the child's eyes, " 'Don't you know? Never trust one of *them.* " Holder opened the cage and released the excessive shackles off the youngest child. As soon as the child was free, he showed gratitude with an endearing hug. Holder stiffened at the display of affection, but not in disgust. He felt strange. His brain felt like it was boiling. The pressure kept building. Everything went black.

The black car stopped in front of the Windhelm manor and the driver hopped out of the vehicle to let out Miss Durwood. "Welcome, welcome." William Windhelm the IV rushed outside to greet her. Belle bowed and ducked behind Audrey. Audrey stiffened her arm to prevent Will from making a full embrace. Will ignored the resistance and forced a hug before welcoming his guest into his manor. Audrey cut the tour short by requesting a view of the stables. William reasoned, that the stables are off limits until a shipment arrives from Stillwater. Audrey didn't know the name but it seemed familiar to Belle. She shuddered while standing behind Audrey.

"But, if you want to see some of our slaves then follow me!" William took Audrey by the hand and rushed out the backdoor of the manor. They arrive at a short building with only a stairwell inside. Belle followed along quietly as they enter the depths of the Windhelm arena. Audrey heard of the savagery conducted here, but dare not witness it herself. Will finally let go when they arrived inside his private viewing area. Audrey sat down, and snapped her head towards Belle. "Sit outside unless I need you for something." Belle obeyed and left the room, returning the wink Audrey gave her. Audrey grimaced as the fight below was nearing an end. A worker entered the ring to check the status of the fighter who lost.

"He's alive!"

“Be quiet they could hear us!”

“Sorry...”

“*Hush*”

Holder slowly awoke to the sounds of voices and sobbing. The youngest child was crying inside of the cage while the other 3 crowding overhead.

“We thought you were dead”, the oldest helped Holder to stand.

“Not yet”, Holder got to his feet and pulled off his cloak. He approached the youngest child slowly and draped the cloak carefully as to not make skin contact. He then turned to the others in a stern face, “let’s go”.

The driver of the truck slammed on the breaks after three loud bangs went off in the cargo bed. The caravan halted to inspect the back of the largest truck. 2 men entered and were sent flying through the canopy in seconds. Just then the three children ran towards the truck leading the caravan. They piled in and the oldest pulled around to pick up Holder. The runaway was about to finish another one of the slavers before he heard an all too familiar beeping sound. The youngest child started to shake. A slaver activated the collar, with a finger hovering over the kill switch command. Holder raised his arms in surrender and glared at the the oldest of the children.

*Go to the south, find the mountains of metal.*

The oldest obeyed and drove off as Holder was collared and beaten by the remaining slavers.

The caravan was reduced to a single truck as the slavers huddled around Holder under the torn canopy. The driver sped off after the last worker boarded. The last man inside shouted to the driver, “Secure back here. Get us over to Windhelm”.

As soon as Belle was out of sight, she headed straight to the stables. Her destination was clear across the compound, but Belle was confident that her powers would help her save her baby. Belle’s ability allowed her to manipulate sound and aerial vibration. She silenced her footsteps as she raced through the shadows along the compound. If a stray worker spotted her; she would vibrate their eardrum to induce sleep. When she finally reached the stable doors, she removed the lock by vibrating the mechanisms within. Belle snuck inside and glared as a Stillwater truck arrived. The driver got out and was met by a scientist. Belle got close enough to listen to their conversation.

The truck driver stared at his own feet while he spoke, “Got hit on the way over”.

“And the cargo?”, The scientist adjusted his glasses.

“Gone. Except for one.”, the driver was becoming nervous.

The glasses nearly fell off of his face as his voice snapped, “Tell me which one!”

The scientist sighed in relief as the guard read off a collar registration number. “ Good, that is our most valuable subject”.

“Got this one too” a guard pointed inside the canopy but Belle couldn't see from her angle..

“Oh, just toss that one in the arena. I have what I need.” Belle watched as the scientists walked away. Workers boarded the truck in pairs and carried out an unconscious slave and a cage. *The cage* . There was no mistaking it, Belle had found her son. She followed the worker carefully until they put the child into the stable nursery with the rest of the children. She watched patiently as the scientist conducted a series of tests on the children. There were too many people around to make a move, so she waited for her opportunity. Belle was so focused that she didn't realize that Holder was the other person taken out the of the truck.

The workers dragged the body into the arena and dropped him into the blood soaked ash. Audrey couldn't help herself when she realized who the next fighter was. “Holder!”. She scrambled to cover her mouth. Audrey glanced over at William; but he was still cheering from the last gruesome fight. William turned before she could avert her eyes. “Hey, where's your slave? Tell her to bring us some drinks”.

Audrey knew that Belle could not have returned so quickly; so she distracted Will with idle chatter. “Ooooh what's happening next?”, Audrey feigned excitement while pointing down into the arena. William cleared his throat as he explained every nuance of arena fighting. Audrey hid her worry for Holder as she watched the fight; but was sure to interject every so often with a “oh ok” or “really?” everytime Will paused to take a breath.

Holder got up and dusted the ash off of his clothes. He stared up the crowd of onlookers jeering in the stands. It didn't take long for him to realize what was going on. He had fought in places like this before, albeit much smaller. But he was sure that the goal was the same. Survive. Holder prepared for the worst until he noticed Audrey in the stands. Audrey remembered that even though she could not hear Holder's thoughts, he should be able to hear hers. She covered her mouth and thought as hard as she could. *Holder are you ok? What the heck happened? Nevermind I can't hear you. Just listen. Can you hear me?*

Holder was staring back at Audrey to confirm he heard her thoughts. Audrey took a mental breathe before continuing. *Belle isn't back yet, so you have to play along until we can escape together.* Holder nodded. Just then, a slave joined Holder on the arena floor; and without warning started to attack. Holder went on the defensive and dodged the wild swings. He

was able to skillfully evade or block each attack, but when the opportunity to counterattack was presented Holder would create distance by leaping back across the arena. The crowd above was growing restless. They wanted blood and called Holder a coward for not fighting back. Holder got frustrated from the jeering and lost his footing. The slave landed a clean hit on Holders jaw. Holder feigned an injury and refused to stand back up. By then the crowd was throwing things into the arena. Will was getting embarrassed and decided to take control. "What do you say folks? Do we spice things up by turning off the collars?"

The unanimous cheers for death swept throughout the stands. After deactivating the power damping fields Will returned to his seat and continued his one sided dialogue with Audrey.

Holder got back to his feet but was knocked down yet again by an unseen force. An enormous amount of pressure was crushing him from above every time the slave stomped his feet. Holder quickly put up a barrier with his power. In all of his previous fights he had never used his abilities against his fellow man. Holder still refused to attack and remained on the defensive while the slave continued his barrage. Before long, Holder was pinned down, feet sunken into the ash. Just as the slave reared back to deliver a finishing blow, Holder rushed his legs. They scramble and kick up ash. When the dust settles, Holder has a firm headlock around his opponent. The crowd was now completely enraged. Some of the onlookers turned their rage towards Will. Feeling even more embarrassed; Will stood up with an outstretched fist. He then pointed his thumb horizontally. A death chant began to grow in the stands. The thumb tilted until it was pointing down. With a flick of his wrist, Will had activated both collars for detonation. Will began to sing, "eeny, meeny, miney, moe...". In a flash, Holder was covered in his opponents' blood. Audrey was just as stunned as Holder as the fight was concluded. Will returned to his seat triumphantly and continued the conversation where he left off. His voice had faded into the background while Audrey examined Holder for damage until he said something to catch Audrey's attention. "When it comes to breeding, sometimes you can get promising results from cross-breeding".

"Cross-breeding?", Audrey turned her full attention to Will.

Will smiled, "You know, when you mix a slave with a worker slave".

"Oh...", Audrey was unaware of what went on inside of stables. The realization caught her off guard. Will kept on explaining as Audrey began to lose interest and turn back to the arena.

"Its 50/50 really, Sometimes they get nothing at all, not even the physical strength. Hell, without the collar you couldn't even tell they were a slave! He laughed hardily.

" But on the other end, you could get one with unheard of power. I've even seen one keep fighting with half a brain left!"

The worker in the arena signaled that another fight was starting. But Holder refused to leave the arena. The worker quickly threatened to kill Holder for his disobedience but Will interjected. "If he wants to fight then let him fight. But remember, I'm not saving you like I did last

time boy". Holder stood his ground as the next challenger was being announced. Audrey had seen more than enough, but had to endure the facade so that Belle could find her child.

*Now.* Belle made her move just as the scientist left the room. She rushed in without a sound and took hold of her child. They embraced, careful not to touch skin directly. "Link", Belle sobbed as she squeezed harder and harder. Link endured the hug, he was just as excited to be reunited. Afterwards, Belle recognized the cloak that Link was wearing. Before she could ask her son how he came across a raiders cloak, the bright lights inside the stable flickered then went off. Belle stood up just as the lights partially returned. The stable had darkened, but areas of importance were still illuminated with dim light. She stared down at Link who was stricken with terror. The caring mother assumed that her child was frightened by the brief moment of darkness.

"Its ok now, I'm here to save you". But her comforting words fell on ears deafened by fear. Link stared up at his mother trembling and unable to speak. All the child could do was point at the hideous figure standing behind his mother. Belle was now confused, she would have sensed if the scientists or anyone else was coming back into the pen. She turned and was met by a tall black slender frame. On top of the skeletal machine was the face of a man. The face appeared to be a distorted mask, but Belle could tell that it was once skin by the slight smell of rotting flesh. A voice crept out from the unmoving lips, "You aint saving nobody slave". The loud bang of a gun drowned out the screams that filled the nursery.