



*“There are nomads who remember what it was like before the world was burned to ashes. They speak of the cities sleeping underneath us, and lost technology in the wastes. But no one knows the reason why we were left behind.”--Excerpt from New World History Volume I, The End and the Beginning.*

## Chapter 5

Screeching sirens filled the dark halls of the stable. Cautionary lights swept the stone grey walls and ceilings in a rhythmic rotation. The entire facility was in an uproar after a scientist overheard gunfire near the stable nursery. Just down the hall, desperate breathing and rushed footsteps echoed around the corner. Belle clutched her side with one hand, and held onto the raiders cloak with the other as Link led her down the winding corridors. As they ran, a red trail slipped through her fingers; leading back into the scene of the attack.

A concerned scientist led a team of security into the dimly lit nursery. “Gone”, she gasped between her fingers, staring at the pool of blood in the middle of the small room. A thin trail was leading through the emergency exit of the nursery. Before a search could begin, one of the guards noticed that the pool of blood was growing. Looking up, he noticed red droplets coming from the ceiling. But it was too dark and too high to see what the actual source was until another guard made the same discovery. They both shined lights towards the ceiling to no avail. The network of pipes blocked the view from below, until one of the flashlights caught a reflection from something. “Looks like glass”, another security guard pointed a third light to reveal a horrific sight. The scientist nearly fainted when she saw the red stained lab coat. Another drop fell from the broken pair of glasses sticking out of the mangled lab coat to join the pool below.

Blood rolled into red globs coated in ash near Holder's feet. The smell of singed flesh filled his nostrils. The workers removed the headless body of Holder's previous opponent. Holder plucked a shard of skull from his hair then frantically wiped his face as his next opponent was already being summoned into the arena. By now the crowd was desperate for their usual violent entertainment, so Will decided it was time to put on a show. The pudgy announcer stood on top of his seat to address the crowd, “For the final fight of the evening, and for our friend here, I would like you all to welcome our champion to the pit!”.

A chant slowly grew into a harmonious roar over the death pit below. “One”, the crowd sang on one end of the arena. “Arm”, the other side of the arena finished the chant just so that it could begin again. The crowd's anticipation peaked as the chant was passed across the pit.

Even the slaves serving refreshments to the audience joined in on the excitement. This continued until the a man appeared in a blast of ash in front of Holder. Cheers erupted above. When the smokescreen cleared, Holder could not believe what he saw.

The slave stood in the center of the arena with a confidence that only a champion could have. His body looked as though he had been taken apart and hastily put back together. The criss-cross of scars and sloppy skin grafts created a jigsaw pattern over his visible skin. The scars on his face were the worst. His left eye was fitted with what looked like a fairly new cybernetic implant. However the left arm was completely gone. All that remained was a burnt nub of a shoulder.

Holder could recognize some of the scars his opponent displayed. He shared the marks of failed escapes on his back as well. But the burns and dismemberment were beyond anything he had to endure. Sensing calm, Holder reached out with his mind and tried to communicate with his opponent.

*No response.*

One-Arm had mentally blocked Holder out and was ready to fight to the death. Holder steeled his mind for the upcoming battle as well. It was obvious that one moment of hesitation would be his last against this seasoned warrior. Without warning Holder races around the edge of the arena, running along the walls of the pit until he reaches the left side of One-Arm. Next he springs from the wall and delivers a devastating kick aimed at the neck of his opponent. However the attack lands firmly in the palm of One-Arm, who had tracked the movements of the kick with his cybernetic eye. Unable to break free, Holder is flung across the arena and into the wall. The monstrous grip of the one armed slave had partially crushed Holder's right leg. The fracture would heal, but it would take time. In the meantime mobility was lost and all he could manage was to stand up against the wall. One-Arm raised a hand and stared at Holder. *He's going to use his power.* Holder was starting to sweat. But it wasn't his nerves. The onlookers above had already begun to fan themselves and remove excess clothing. In a flash of light no bigger than the spark of a match, the pit was filled with flames.

Audrey jumped back. She could feel the heat from where she sat high above the fighting below; alone with Will. Her hands were not enough to hide her face of worry for Holder. Will was too busy sweating and screaming like a pig being lead to a roasting pit to notice. Audrey tensed as she glanced around her chair. *Belle should be back by now.* Audrey got up and peeked around the corner of the private room for a sign of her friends return.

Belle inspected her wound as she ran. The bullet went straight through but the bleeding had not yet stopped. She would last long at this rate. Belle cradled a handful of blood in her palm and with a soft whistle carried the liquid down the hall and around the corner. Next she yanked the cloak and pulled Link into a recently abandoned lab just as Maw turned the corner. With every step he announced his presence as he followed the blood trail down the hallway. Belle hid inside the lab until Maw passed by, then she scoured the room in silence for a specific tool. *Found it,* Belle sighed in relief as she pointed the small device at her wound. The

tool was the size of a ballpoint pen except the end was fitted with a small wedge shaped laser. She used it to cauterize her wound. Her cries of pain were muffled with her sound dampening powers. Link cringed as his mother screamed in silent agony. Once done, Belle swallowed a cocktail of pills; praying that at least one was a pain killer. Next she turned to Link and took hold of the cloak. Belle ripped the cloak in half and fashioned sleeves that covered every inch of exposed skin on the little boys' hands. Still crouching, Belle turned her back to Link.

*Piggy-back?* Link crawled onto his mother's back gently, careful not to touch her wound. Belle searched for an exit as a knock came at the door.

Bullets tore through the locked door as glass shattered nearby. Maw came bursting in and continued to fire through the broken window. His aim was true, but Belle was quick. Ammunition ripped through the walls and glass of the window. By now the stable and the rest of the compound was alarmed. Maw stopped shooting abruptly. "The hell?" He examined his weapons for malfunction but was interrupted by a voice in his head.

"I told you no witnesses! What do you think you're doing?", Durwood screamed into the internal communication system.

Maw rolled his eyes as he sighed a response, "I'm *doing* my job. I'll just get rid of any witnesses like that snitch scientist from before."

"You can't just go around killing anyone who sees you. You maniac!" Durwood snapped.

Maw scratched at the skin stretched over his metallic chin. "Why not? I got enough bullets."

"Proceed with stealth! That is an order!" Durwood signed off of the communication system before completely erupting.

"Yessir", Maw chuckled to himself as he watched Belle take refuge inside of the manor. Just as he turned to exit the lab, he was met by security who followed the blood trail, Maw shrugged as he mowed down the stunned workers in a hail of gunfire. He then dropped a grenade in the lab before continuing his hunt. Anyone who had not already evacuated was consumed by the flames that followed the explosion.

Fire encircled the walls of the pit. Any other slave would have instantly joined the ash at the base of the arena, but Holder had broken his own rule to defend himself. The fire had not touched him but the heat was nearly unbearable. *Push*. Holder had to choke the flames at its source before he was cooked alive. One-Arm remained fixed in the center of the pit. Fire swirling around him like a red tornado. But the flow of the flames was starting to ebb. Audrey watched as the small area around Holder began to expand to the edges of the arena. The defensive barrier formed a crescent moon as the fire was pushed back. The flames receded until Holder was able to take equal ground. Holder's half of the pit was gray with charred ash, while One-Arm remained surrounded in a half circle inferno. There was enough force to crush One-Arm in an instant, and enough heat to burn Holder to a crisp. A stalemate was

reached, with each fighter unable to relent. A single lapse in focus would spell immediate death. "Deadlocked". Will spat in girlish glee, as he clapped and jumped back into his chair.

"We'll see who lets up first.", Will refused to blink as he stared down into the pit, but after a full minute had passed he was bored. He searched for Belle once more in order to get drinks, he needed water to offset the dry mouth he was suffering from. The rise in temperature and alcohol he consumed were not a refreshing combination. Audrey had not noticed Will rise from his seat; she was fixated on the fight below. By the time she realized that Will left the room, it was too late. Will noticed that Belle was gone.

"Where'd you run off to slave?" Maw whispered in the sadistic tone he often used when he tortured captured runaways. He scanned the mansion for heat signatures; unable to track her collar's signal with the interference of so many other slave collars nearby. The Windhelm manor was vast and luxurious in comparison to the Durwood manor. Almost everything had a golden trim or a shiny finish. Some of the designs were archaic on purpose, to simulate a different era in time. Durwood Manor wasn't decorated but rather fitted with necessities and technology that made living more efficient. Between the 2, it was like choosing to live in a museum or a factory. In either case Maw was not impressed, to him a manor was just a house with too many rooms, too many stairs and way too much space for anyone to ever use. Normally there would be workers and slaves buzzing around to keep this place in good condition, but the manor was as quiet as a graveyard. If Maw could move his fleshy mask to smile, he would be grinning ear to ear. There was nothing the sadist loved more than torture, but hunting down runaways was a very close second.

"Come out, come out wherever you are..." Maw sang as he began his search. A scan revealed various heat signatures hiding behind almost every closed door in the manor. Any room with less than two bodies could be eliminated; leaving just the rooms upstairs. Next he checked for a collar signal, and could eliminate more than half of the rooms.

Finally, Maw compared heat signatures to ensure that at least one child was inside the rooms. *This wasn't as fun as it used to be, but oh well. Got a job to do.*

With only 2 possible locations left he approached the nearest door and opened it slowly. He heard the voice of a woman shushing a child. Maw ripped the door from the hinges and jumped into the center of the room, weapons ready. But all he found was a worker and young slave asleep inside of a closet. Maw's sensors picked up movement but not a single sound was detected. He scrambled back into the hallway to see the other room door left wide open. It only took a moment to realize that his prey had gotten away.

"Dammit!" Will slammed his fist into the wall just outside the private viewing room. "I really wanted something to drink." Will paused for a moment to rub the sweat from his brow. *Why would she send her slave away like that?* When he realized that they were alone a slimy smirk stretched across Will's face as he approached Audrey from behind. He leaned in close to her ears and stuck out his tongue. Audrey jerked away and slammed her hand into his mouth. Blood and spit streamed down his shirt as Will inspected his injury. "I bit my tongue", more bloody spit rained on the floor. Now he was as red as the stains on his shirt. He grabbed Audrey by the throat and slammed her to the ground. Audrey struggled under all the weight. She was

strong but Will was heavy. He sat on her stomach and held both her wrists down. She tried to shield her face from the disgusting amount of liquid pouring out of her attackers' mouth as he spoke. Audrey nearly gagged as Will smashed his swollen mouth into her lips. She bit down hard. This time even more came gushing out. Will reeled in pain, then made a fist over his head. Audrey was dizzy after his fists had repeatedly pounded her head into the floor. She was losing consciousness. Another hit like that and she wouldn't be able to fight anymore. The next hit came.

Will fell on his side, one limp leg still straddling Audrey. Belle stood with an outstretched hand above Audrey, Link still clinging to her back. Audrey regained her composure and stepped between Belle and Will. The first kick was poorly aimed but still had the desired effect. Will weezed in agony. The next kick landed right where she wanted. Unsatisfied, Audrey kept kicking until something fell out of his pants. It still wasn't what she intended, but she grabbed the car keys before delivering a final kick.

Two balls fell into the pit from above the crowd. Holder recognized this weapon and immediately redirected his barrier. "Grenade!", Someone from the crowd screamed as a fiery explosion pushed Holder and One-Arm to opposite walls of the pit. Chaos and screams spread throughout the arena like smoke and ash.

Gunfire echoed over the screams. Holder struggled to stand and could barely see what sounded like a war going on above him. One-Arm was still conscious, and turned his attention to the crowd above as well. Without a word, the one armed slave jumped up to where Will and Audrey sat. Holder prepared to follow but was halted by a familiar voice. *Time to go!* Belle stood at the fighters entrance inside the arena, Link on her back and Audrey by her side. Holder limped over to join them. As they escaped together, Holder was stopped by another familiar voice. Some one above them was laughing amidst the screaming and gunfire. "Come on!", Audrey rushed to Holder's side and helped him limp out of the arena. The chaos covered their escape as Audrey led them to Will's private vehicle. Link stood up in his seat staring back at the arena. He wanted to make sure that the monster wasn't following them. They moved quickly and didn't slow down until the Windhelm estate had almost disappeared from sight. Audrey continued to drive until the sunlight began to fade.

The sky exchanged its fierce reddish and yellow hue, for a calmer violet and blue. The moonlight reflected on the hood of the car between Audrey and Holder. It was cool without the beating sun, so Audrey moved closer to Holder for warmth. Their hands touch. Holder looks down from the sky to meet Audrey's nervous stare.

Link starts to yawn and stretches over his mother's lap in the backseat of the car. Belle rises up carefully, taking Link by the hand. The two silently slip away to give Audrey and Holder some privacy.

Audrey stared up at the sky. The reflecting light danced in her eyes. Holder stared back for a moment before returning to the view above.

"Are you ok?" Audrey whispered as she turned to share the vision of colors in the sky. Me? Oh my leg? Yeah its healed." Holder felt himself getting nervous.

"Are *you* ok?", he finally asked after a short awkward pause.

Audrey looked puzzled, "Me? I wasn't the one fighting in that godforsaken arena"

“That’s not what Belle told me.” Holder turned to face Audrey with a serious look.

“Will?...He’s always been like that. I remember when I couldn’t fight back, when I was younger. I hated it. I even told my father, but he didn’t care.” Audrey got off the hood of the car and mimicked Master Durwoods mannerisms and voice.

“The Durwood and Windhelm estates have a standing alliance. Therefore, you will not cause any trouble; or do anything to endanger our agreement”. Audrey exhaled deeply to catch her breathe. Holder was still looking serious as Audrey quietly returned to his side.

“I used to think we were so different. But even stuff like that is the same.” Holder stood up this time.

“I was always a runner, even as a kid. Once, I fought off raiders and a worker before getting caught. Instead of being punished, the master of the estate was impressed. He sent me to the stable for a night. They locked me in a room with bunch of females, some were runners, some weren’t. The scientist did tests, then forced us to drink this medicine. I didn’t have a choice. I felt like an animal as they watched.--”. A gentle touch hushed Holders painful memory.

Audrey turned him to face her. They continued to speak without words. The embrace was so close that the light from the moon was trapped between their warm bodies. Audrey held on tight as she rested her head on Holders chest. Holder wrapped his arms around Audrey, but pulled away slightly so that he could see her face. When their lips finally met, pounding hearts began to beat in rhythm. Every shared breath was casting out the evils they had endured in the past. In that moment nothing else mattered. In that moment the painful past was cast away, and an uncertain future was delayed. They held onto each other until a chilling wind reminded them of where they stood.

“We should get some sleep before continuing”, Audrey steals another kiss before going to find Belle and Link. Holder pops into the driver seat and starts the car. At first he thought the car was malfunctioning, the normal roar of the engine starting sounded like high pitched yelling. He listened carefully to the rumbling engine, as if he could interpret the machines language. His quiet focus was interrupted by a blood curdling scream.

The screams of the slave were still audible as Maw held her in the air by her mouth. A quick squeeze and she was silenced. He discarded her body in the pile of other victims. Maw was still inside of the arena picking over the leftovers of his rampage. He stepped over the piled up bodies. If anyone moved, he was sure to help them keep still; permanently. Eventually he reached the private viewing room. Inside was a whimpering man cradling a severely burned arm. Maw stepped into the room and kicked over the man to face him. The horrific sight of the monster up close caused Will to void himself. More blood than urine stained his pants as he shivered under Maw’s intense stare.

“What are you doing Maw?!” Durwood’s voice had become background music to Maw’s murder spree. Even with the weapons deactivated, Maw had enough strength to tear apart anyone he came across.

“You’ve killed countless people!” Durwood was beyond frustrated.

“*No witnesses*, remember?” Maw repeated in a mocking tone.

Durwood responded without a second to waste, hoping to stop anymore senseless killing. “None of those people had anything to do with your orders.”

“Doesn't matter, as long as I get my target, let God sort out the rest” Maw leaned in towards Will.

“Do not! I repeat, do not lay a finger on the Windhelm boy!.” Durwood realized there was no reasoning with the mind of a mad man.

“That's it Maw, you failed this mission”, Durwood stood next to a team of scientist inside his underground lab. The mess from before was cleaned up, but the lingering smell of death still remained in Durwood's mind. Monitors tracking Maw's biometrics and movements were on display.

Durwood turned to the nearest lab coat. “Initiate remote control and return him to base immediately.”

The obedient scientist did as he was told, “Understood sir, this will damage the weapons systems and possibly cause other complications.”

By Now Durwood was exhausted from yelling. “I understand the consequences, just bring him back. We'll start from scratch if we have to.”

“What!? I never--” Maw stiffened in an instant. Will scurried away like a rodent released from a trap. Maw tried to protest but his voice no longer worked. An electrical surge escaped the cybernetic body as he struggled; causing a spark to ignite a nearby spill of alcohol. Maw watched as the growing flames melted the bodies of his victims. Scanners were now offline. His vision got dimmer until he was plunged into the cold darkness he had only felt once before. He thought about the pain he felt in his chest that day before completely slipping away. If he woke up again, he would be sure to get revenge on the slave that killed him.

Holder ran out of the car towards the screaming to find Belle collapsed on the ground. Audrey was consoling Link and pointing at the wound on Belle's side. Holder crouched down to examine the festering scab of flesh. It appeared to be a bullet wound but was somehow infected. Normally a wound like this would heal in a few hours. *Maw*. The realization hit him like grenade to the face. That psychotic laughter from before somehow belonged Maw. Holder figured the sadist used special ammo that was somehow able to negate Belle's natural healing abilities.

“What do we do?”, Audrey broke Holder's silence. He turned to her.

“She won't last more than a few days like this”, Holder spoke in a whisper as if Link could not hear his thoughts. The child silenced his cries as Holder continued.

“The only way to save her is to go underground.” Before Audrey could ask, Holder picked up Belle and walked towards the car. “I can explain on the way!”, He yelled back; motioning for the others to get into the car as quickly as possible. The spinning tires spit ash in their wake, as they sped off to the south. Audrey checked her wrist to confirm their direction, but was stunned by what the GPS revealed. “Holder, if we keep going straight from here, we'll end up--”

“I know”, Holder cut her off with a shaky reply. He pressed down harder on the pedal; kicking up more ash behind them.