



“I may be a slave to this collar, but you are a slave to your debts; and your master, a slave to his wealth.”--Final words of an unknown slave

Chapter 3

Audrey Durwood watched from her window as her father’s operation moved like clockwork outside. Shipments and construction were *always* on time at the Durwood estate, making them very predictable. Stowing away on a shipment to a nearby settlement then finding passage to the northern settlements was her fool proof plan. Just as long as she could convince Belle to accompany her. If not, she would be tracked down before the shipment reached its destination. Audrey dreamed of life in the northern settlements, often referred to as the ‘super settlements’ by outsiders. Northerners lived directly on the ruins of the massive citadels of days past. Audrey would become a Scav, living independently by collecting and selling relics from ruins. Slave labor still existed in the north, but Audrey always believed that it was not as bad there as it was here. And anything was better than living under the Durwood roof. There were also rumors of an anti-slavery group seeking to return the enslaved back to their nomadic lifestyles. It wasn't perfect, but Audrey knew she could make a life in the north, she just had to get there.

The daydream was interrupted when Belle awoke. She gave her usual greeting then waited to follow Audrey. The two had built a rhythm over the passing week. Even Audrey’s attempts to evade Belle were part of the daily routine. Right after breakfast, Audrey took off full sprint to the garage behind the factory. Belle followed as she always did. She stood with Audrey inside the empty garage, the fresh scent of the trucks still in the air.

“Hey Belle, I have a favor to ask of you.” Audrey said as she caught her breath.

Belle responded with a quick nod, waiting for the request.

“Well, really it's a trade” Audrey leaned in closely as she continued. “My freedom...for your freedom.”

The whisper echoed inside of Belle’s head as she processed the stunning offer.

“I can deactivate your collar with my fathers’ spare control band, then we can both escape on a shipment truck.”

Belle had sobered by end of the offer. She could only half consider what Audrey was saying. Finally she responded, “Is that what you told Beauty?”

Audrey had no reply other than the truth. And she was still unable to admit her guilt in the death of her friend. They had no plan. They had no time.

“No.” was all Audrey could manage as she turned to leave the garage.

Just outside two workers were having a hurried conversation. Audrey took to her habit of eavesdropping as she shushed Belle.

“Got one loose in Harristown, they said”

“A runner?”

“Yea, no collar either. Just tearing the town apart.”

“Did they put it down yet?”

“Not yet, Mad is sending over a few armed hands to protect the grid.”

Mad was a nickname for Master A. Durwood of the Durwood Estate, that both slaves and workers used. The conversation faded as the two men continued their work elsewhere. *Could it be him?* Audrey slid past the cracked doors of the garage and Belle followed without a word. They returned to the Durwood estate where the master was living up to his nickname.

A bee hive of workers, slaves, and hired guns fly around the compound under the strict order of Master Durwood, who stood in the middle of the frenzy. Trucks were loaded and sent away one after another. Audrey stood a safe distance away, cursing her luck. She should have known that her father would mobilize quickly to protect his precious grid. Now was the time to sneak aboard a truck unnoticed but Belle would surely stop her. *No, it's now or never.* Audrey cut her reasoning with the hard truth. She entered the frenzy ahead with Belle hot on her heels. Audrey used the chaos to weave in and out of the line of workers and slaves loading the trucks. Belle followed as best as she could, never giving more than a shadow’s length of distance. They dodged shipments of weapons, supplies and repair parts as they raced around the loading zones.

A distracted worker drops their load and breaks the flow of traffic. Audrey rushed into the crowd building up behind the clumsy worker. Belle was close behind. Durwood noticed the stoppage and was stomping over to re-establish order. With one hand, the master lifted the worker back to his feet.

“Do you know how much this cargo is worth?”

The question could barely escape Durward's clenched teeth. The worker was dumbfounded with fear. He looked around the crowd for help and saw a slave standing amongst the workers.

“You idiot!” The worker pointed desperately at the slave, who stood as unaware as everyone else who had gathered. Durwood glared at the slave, then back at the worker.

“I asked *you* a question. Then you insult my intelligence.”

The worker stared back at Durwood, holding back tears as he trembled.

“Blaming a slave won't get you out of this. Do you think I can't see everything that goes on in my compound?”

The worker hit the ground and was pummeled by the most expensive pair of boots he had ever seen. The master stormed away, “Your debt has increased, contract extended and shift changed to 12 hours.” Durwood stopped to inspect his boots.

“One more infraction and payment of your debt is expected immediately. Inability to pay means that your life is forfeit to me. So by all means, go ahead and break something else. I can always use another slave.”

The master scanned the crowd until he was satisfied that everyone was terrified. “Now, get back to work”. Belle was left standing alone when the crowd dispersed and work continued. She watched as the beaten worker collected the broken cargo. No matter how many times she was bought and sold, every compound was the same. The only difference was that the next master was always crueler than the last. Workers who become slaves never last more than a week of physical labor. Slavery was a death sentence.

But the risk of slavery was accepted by anyone who was indebted to a master of a compound. Most workers were farmers, traders or scavengers that couldn't make it on their own. In order to survive they enter into a contract with a compound owner for land and supplies. In exchange they work in any capacity the master dictates per the agreement. Sometimes even raiders enter into contracts as hired guns or overseers at a compound. The hierarchy is simple to figure out but in terms of value an unskilled worker was lower than a slave. And were often treated as such. Belle had witnessed slaves and workers alike killed for the smallest of mistakes. So she was surprised to see that Durwood let the worker survive. But before she could consider mercy as the reason, she remembered how calculating and cruel Durwood was. He was probably avoiding any decrease in productivity and would kill the worker at a later time.

It took a moment to realize that Audrey was gone. Belle darted from one truck to another until she noticed the hem of a dress trapped under a closed truck door. Belle could hardly react

as the truck already pulled away. She had to stop it or Audrey would escape. She ran as hard as she could. The truck could be stopped before it reached a main road. Belle cut across the loading zones and raced right past Durwood.

Master Durwood watched as Belle, who should be with Audrey, ran full speed towards the main road; beyond the range of his control band.

He lifted his arm, "CC: Commands Display". The screen on his wrist unfolded with three options. In yellow, choke. In blue, shock. And in red, kill.

Belle was able to get ahead of the truck and blocked its path. The driver screeched to a stop and got out of the vehicle enraged and confused. Durwood was already in a car and expecting a good explanation from Belle. Without a word she pointed to the hem of Audrey's dress. The driver lifted the door to release a torn piece of cloth to the wind.

"Where is Audrey?" Durwood stared impatiently at Belle.

Belle couldn't respond.

"Find her or our little deal is over." Durwood took a deep breath as he returned to his vehicle.

The driver continued down the road and Belle stood motionless, lost in thought. Suddenly she ran back to the compound and inside of the manor. She remembered that Audrey was planning on stealing a control band before escaping and headed straight to Durwood's office. Too late, the safe was already open and the spare control band was gone. But the thief left the window open. Belle ran to the window and saw Audrey climbing into the back of a truck. Belle leaped in after the escapee.

"Lets go", she ordered with arms crossed.

Audrey was foiled and immediately began pleading. "Please Belle, just come with me. I can deactivate your collar now. And I know someone who can take the collar completely off once we reach Harristown."

Belle refused to listen and took hold of Audrey by the hand. As she turned to leave, Audrey ripped away from the hold and held up her arm to her chin. Belle's reflexes were faster as she took a hold of Audrey once more, this time the other hand and pulled her off the truck. Audrey broke free again.

"Stop! If you don't want to be free then fine. But you can't keep me here!"

The commotion was sure to draw attention. Just what Belle wanted. Witnesses would help her remove the defiant child without risking her deal with Durwood. Audrey could hear people coming with more cargo to load. She turned and jumped back into the truck but Belle

grabbed her leg. While stumbling; Audrey tried to resist, but had no hope of matching Belle's strength. The defiant child threw a tantrum as the grip remained unchanged. The workers were close. Audrey reached for her control band.

"Get off". She made eye contact as she raised her arm to her chin. "CC:...".

Belle loosened her grip. Audrey got back into the truck with a feeling of shame and guilt for having to resort to such measures.

"Freedom by any means." Audrey whispered to herself mimicking her mothers' comforting voice.

Before she could turn back to apologize, Belle had already boarded the truck.

"Sorry."

Belle beat her to the apology as she lifted Audrey into the air. This time Audrey became more desperate as the workers neared.

"Shock". Audrey whispered the command into her wrist.

Belle stiffened as dull buzzing emitted from the collar. Her body dropped onto the cargo boxes. Audrey tried to shove her out of the truck but it was too late. She hid from the workers as they sealed the door and locked the latch from the outside.

"Looks like you're coming with me after all." Audrey smiled with a bittersweet grin. She knew Belle would be upset when she awoke, but Audrey promised that she would protect her no matter what. The truck started for the main road to Harristown.

The population of Harristown had doubled in one day. Under any other circumstance, the trading post settlement would be bustling with commerce. But on this day, the tiny town had made its final transaction. The lives of many for the life of one; and Holder would broker this trade.

With the scar on his neck revealed, most of the townsfolk had already retreated to their homes for safety. Their fear saved them from the initial attack that flattened the surrounding crowd. Holder thrashed about like a wild animal. He knew that losing control would completely drain him but he didn't care. People and vehicles alike were pushed, smashed and thrown into the ash. The surrounding area was upheaved, leaving only the old slave and himself untouched. Holder could not face her. The voice still echoed in his mind. *Zion*.

Holder rolled her gently into a hole deep enough for a grave. Ash rained from above the hole like sand escaping a fist until it was filled. The collar served as her gravestone. In the

moment of silence, Holder felt a shape forming in his mind. Something similar happened when he fought the raiders in the desert. It was like his own hands were protecting him. But they were massive, big enough for him to hold two trucks. Holder looked back at the vehicles marked Durwood Estate, floating in the air behind him. The doors on the truck to the left burst open to release 6 mercenaries. When their boots hit the ground, they broke into pairs and took cover behind buildings and vehicle debris. The mercenaries opened fire on Holder.

Bullets ripped past Holders' defenses. *Just like that psycho with the grenade.* Special bullets like these could not be blocked with his power alone but there was always another way. Holder knew that catching each bullet was impossible. He moved the left truck between himself and the gun fire. The mercenaries were already on the move. Holder spotted 2 of them on top of a roof. The truck crashed into the roof and inside the building. But the remaining 4 had surrounded Holder. Before they could shoot, Holder moved the truck on the right into defensive position.

Wait!

A cry for help jumped into his mind. The voice was not familiar, but he could tell it was coming from inside the truck. Holder dropped the truck and reached for the raiders motorbike. Bullets tore into the bike as Holder desperately held on. His power was almost completely exhausted. He noticed his pack lying on the ground and flung it at the mercenaries. The fuel cells were hit. An electromagnetic wave of force knocked Holder flat on the ground. The mercenaries were pushed back several feet and knocked unconscious. Holder got up to finish off the hired guns but was too drained. Holder ended the last 4 with his bare hands. The driver watched from the other truck lying on its side. The passenger of the truck began scrambling to exit. Holder ran towards the truck before the men could finish crawling out. He leapt into the air landing on the door, crushing one man with the door and the other with the weight of the vehicle. The back door of the truck flew open. Before anymore attackers could emerge, Holder jumped over to the back of the truck. Inside was boxes of electronic equipment; various wires and parts had spilled into a pile and buried two young girls underneath. One girl was moving and dug her way out of the pile to meet Holder's eyes.

Audrey reached out for Holder. He lifted her from the back of the truck. They held the embrace a few moments after her feet reached the ground. The second girl surfaced.

Thanks.

Holder recognized her as the voice from earlier and began to question what circumstances led her and Audrey to Harristown. Audrey watched as Holder and Belle conversed in private without a sound. She knew that they were talking with their minds. Beauty called it the '*Connection*' and explained that everyone could use it. The only problem was that the slavers couldn't hear it. Feeling left out, she began to explain her daring escape to Holder. Belle finished her side of the story and waited patiently for Audrey to run out of breath. The

thrilling escape was concluded with, "So can you remove her collar just like you did yours?" Audrey waited eagerly for a response.

Before Holder could speak, Belle answered for him. "No. You can't remove it until..."

"Your father is keeping her child hostage." Holder interjected.

Audrey wasn't surprised, but the truth still shook her. Belle went on to explain and apologize to Audrey. Master Durwood had selected her as a replacement for Beauty and also purchased her child. Belle was taken to Durwood estate and the child was shipped to Windhelm estate.

"Windhelm", Audrey spat out the name in disgust.

Belle continued, "He promised that if I could stop you from leaving he would bring my child to me."

Audrey sunk low into herself. Holder placed a hand onto her shoulder. She was lost in regret until she realized a simple solution. "We just have to get your kid ourselves". Belle looked on in disbelief.

"If Holder helps, I'm sure we can " Audrey searched for Holders; eyes. He did not falter, but turned away as he spoke.

"I have to keep going south." Holder faced the direction of the metal mountains.

Audrey stepped around to block his view. "Please, the Windhelm estate is just southeast from here; we can save the child then you can head south and I'll head north."

Holder agreed in silence. Belle thanked him from the bottom of her heart. Before Audrey could lead the way to Windhelm estate, more Durwood trucks had arrived. It was the same as before. 2 trucks, one with supplies and the other with 6 hired guns. Holder crushed the van full of mercenaries like a tin can before boots could even touch the ground. Audrey shuts her eyes and ears to block out the screams. Holder drops to one knee in exhaustion. Belle notices the driver and passenger of the other truck trying to escape and decides to use her own powers. With the collar deactivated, she is able to sing a siren's song that leaves her target sleeping in the ash. The slave, the runner and the heiress to an estate board the vehicle and head towards Windhelm estate.

Back at the Durwood Estate, the master of the grounds was calculating the financial loss he had incurred so far. Durwood was a genius at predictive mathematics and had even determined the net gain from stopping the Harristown runner. He factored in ever possible figure, from gas in the trucks to the number of mercenaries killed in action. He even factored in

Audrey's escape. The agreement with the Windhelm plantation was based solely on the marriage of the heirs of the respective estates. Without that, the contract is null. A timid little man in a lab coat emerges into the Durwood office, "Master Durwood...I have the updates for you".

Master Durwood stared out the window with his back to the scientist, "Go on".

The timid man stumbled over his report. "Brain activity has been confirmed...but there is a problem."

"Yes?" Durwood was growing more agitated by the second.

Sensing the frustration, the little man spat out the rest of his message. "Due to the micro EMP, his body is in a complete vegetative state."

The man sunk into his lab coat expecting an explosive reaction, but Durwood only responded with a calm sighing question. "Have you restored the relics I recently purchased during my business trip?"

Stunned by the composure, The timid man answered after a brief moment of hesitation. "Yessir".

"Then it sounds to me like that won't be a problem." Calm was replaced with condescending as Durwood spoke.

While timid, the mad was still a brilliant scientist and was able to connect the dots quickly. "I understand sir."

However Durwood was growing tiresome of the conversation. "Good, how long?"

The man shoved his hands into the lab coat as he calculated..."At least 4 days sir, maybe more..."

Durwood finally turned to face the man. "You have 1 day."

The scientist shuddered as he turned to leave the office. Durwood watched as the man squirmed out of the door, then returned to his view outside the window. He lifted his arm and activated the screen on his control band. A GPS revealed a single red dot heading southeast of Harristown. The master smirked, "Good work Belle".