



## Introduction

*"Tomorrow, the world will be reduced to ash and the war machines will become the law. Our soldiers shall become saints; And the slaves, our masters." - Unknown, dated sometime before the end of days.*

## Chapter 1

Darkness suffocates the pale moonlight above the sprawling, scorched, desert of ash. A faint red pulsating light can be seen in the distant night like a star on the verge of death. The rhythmic howl of the wind is interrupted by hurried breathing and unstable footsteps in the shifting gray mounds. Two young girls run hand in hand across the monochrome plains, panting as one urges the other to continue sprinting ahead; their feet get heavier and heavier from the accumulation of ash.

"Keep running! You're almost out of range!" The girl running in front yelled back. Her dress flowing below as she drags the other girl along.

"I can't....please...let's just go back." The second girl gasped trailing behind. As she ran gripping a metal collar that hummed with a red blinking light.

Turning around to face her friend, the dress twisted in the wind. "No! You can't give up! Just a little further." She pulled with both hands desperately.

"You keep saying that..." The girl in the collar snarks back in between breaths.

"Please just a little more." The girl in the dress pleads with a dusty but sincere smile.

"I...need to...need to rest..." She pulled the collar hard as if to let in more air to breathe.

"Ok...just for...a minute...I don't think they noticed we were gone yet." The dress settled above

her feet as she slowed in pace.

"Maybe...ugh!" The girl scratches at the collar tightening around her neck and flops to the scorched earth.

"What's wrong!?" Yelled the girl in the dress.

The metallic noose tightened. "Can't....breathe...". She choked out each word while kicking up dust and struggling for air.

"Beauty! Hang on!" She drops to her knees and holds her friend to provide comfort in the confusion; the dress floating as it fell.

But Beauty can only gargle and gasp as she squirms in the ash, desperately gripping her collar.

"Aw....dree..." Beauty spits out, calling out her friend's name.

"There you are miss Durwood! Don't you know it's too late to be taking your pet for a walk?" A slender man spoke coolly as he walked down from a hover vehicle and into the ash.

"Stop this! Now!" Audrey snapped.

"Just because your father's out of town doesn't mean you can misbehave. And look, you got your new dress all filthy!" The slender man replied, resting his hand on the holstered gun at his hip. A metallic band wrapped around his left forearm as he mockingly points at the tattered and dirty dress.

"Stop now! She's dying!" Her voice raised to a screech.

The mocking finger was now stuck firmly in his ear. "Now miss Durwood....". The annoyed tone of voice expressed his lack of patience for defiance of any sort.

"I order you to stop now!" The screech turned to barking as she leaped into an authoritative stance; her finger aimed at the eyes of the man. A stance she had seen her father take only at the peak of his rage.

Words spill out slowly as slender arm is raised to a pointed chin. "(Sigh) CC: Choke--deactivate...Miss please get on so we can return to the compound."

As he spoke, he placed a firm grip onto the defiant girl's wrist. She struggles "No! Leave us alone! Don't touch me!" Next she sinks her teeth firmly into his hand and jerks her neck towards the ground. The man twists whilst lifting Audrey into the air and slamming her back into the ground. Now gripping the blade opposite the hip of his gun, the man reasons while

examining the bite wound on his hand. "Ow! Dammit! You can stay as long as you like. But the property of Master Durwood returns with me."

"No! Leave her alone! Beauty run!" Audrey yells out to Beauty with a face full of dirt. Spewing ash from her mouth as Beauty rises. The collar had loosened and now Beauty had fully caught her breath. She only lie in wait for the right moment to make a move. And now that all the attention was on Audrey. Beauty rose up and broke into a full sprint; kicking up gray clouds with every powerful step.

"Sir! It's escaping!" The driver yelled out from the hover vehicle.

"Stop right there! You know the penalty for escape." The slender man yelled towards Beauty in the ever increasing distance.

Beauty stops cold in her run; panting but not yet out of breath. He begins walking towards her and speaking in that annoyed tone from before. "Good girl. Now turn around and walk towards me."

Beauty turns towards Audrey who still sat amidst the accumulating dust. The two girls lock eyes..."thank you...so much" just then Beauty turns and the dust clouds return in the wake of her speed.

"Hey! I said stop!" The man yelled out.

"No!" Audrey jumped to her feet and grabbed onto the metallic control band..

"Ahhh! Get off of me you stupid brat!" Now fully agitated, Audrey hit the the ground more forcefully this time. "...pick her up" He snarls at the driver. Then leans slowly into her face and whispers insidiously "Now say goodbye to your little pet..."

"Noooooo!" Audrey lies on the ground in pain as she look on at her ill fated friend. "Kill." A sinister smirk grew across his face as he raised his right hand slowly and gently tapped a button on the forearm band.

The dust in the distance transformed from an ashy grey smokescreen to a pink misty cloud. When the dust settled Beauty lie motionless front down. The ash around growing darker and darker from shades of red to black.

"Beauty..." whispers Audrey through partially parted lips.

"Master is gonna be pissed..." the driver interjects.

Climbing back into the hover vehicle, he responded without mercy. "It had to be done. We'll find a replacement in the morning auction. Grab the brat we're leaving."

"And the body?" The driver asks meekly while gathering up the now shocked and limp Audrey.

The man answers sharply "The collar is useless now...leave the body to the wastes."

Audrey stared in awe as her friend was slowly swallowed by the ash in the distance. The vehicle moved swiftly through the desert making her realize how futile her escape attempt really was. In moments they were back at the compound. And now Audrey must prepare for her own punishment.

Audrey knew that upon her father's return there would be consequences to pay. But she couldn't think of that now, the image of her best friend lying lifeless in the wastes stained her memory like the blood splatter on her dress. That tearful smile now ingrained into Audrey's young mind. The thought of losing her best friend had no time to settle in as young miss Durwood was yanked from the seat of the vehicle and hurried to her room by the driver.

Audrey lie in her bed. Face covered in dirt and dress shredded by the desert wind. Quietly she lie there. She couldn't remember closing her eyes, just the sounds of people outside the next morning continuing on with their daily duty. As if nothing had happened. Bursting into her room without warning the slender man grunted two words "get dressed".

Strange Audrey thought. Maw was a sadistic type who usually would be delighted after torturing or killing someone. Normally he would be walking on air and mocking Audrey but instead his foul mood was as obvious as the scar on his face. Pondering this abnormality Audrey got dressed and was escorted to a vehicle, Maw was already sitting inside impatiently tapping the window with his knuckles. The driver pulled off and headed towards town. The answer finally dawns on Audrey in a flash as the auction blocks came into view. She remembered the law of the house: which restricts transactions made under a house name to only be possible when a person of said household is present. In this case Maw could not bid unless a Durwood was present. With everyone out of the car and into their seats Maw could finally replace the goods he had previously destroyed before the master of the house returns.

"What! What is this?"

Maw was furious at the sight before him. Only one was left in the line up. A scrawny young boy, no older than Audrey. The auctioneer replied coolly. "You said save you one...didn't specify which". Maw snatched the man by the shirt and proceeded to curse under his breath as Audrey took notice of the boy. His left arm carried the brands of 8...no 10 previous owners. The auctioneer was getting nervous and snapped "hey you don't have to buy him, I'll put him in his cage and do my business elsewhere". The two men begin to argue, meanwhile Audrey had

approached the boy who stood like a statue chained and muzzled. A cool blue blinking light shine rhythmically on the collar around his neck.

Audrey inched ever closer, the boy stood motionless, staring intently at the shackles on his wrist and ankles. The argument between Maw and the auctioneer could be overheard in the background. "You playing me for a fool? I know a runaway reject when I see one! Who are you trying to screw over!?" Maw could be heard yelling from across the auction blocks. Audrey started whispering to the boy in chains.

"What's your name?..." She asked innocently but got no reply. "Im Audrey Durwood..." she continued.

The boy still refused to look up at her. The argument between the men was heating up. Maw was growing violent and the auctioneer shuddered in fear. "P...put..m m me down!" Maw slammed the man to the ground. All the auctioneer's belongings spilled out from his pockets. As he gathered up his things Maw spits over to the side. In all the excitement Audrey didn't notice the boy sneak a peek over at the auctioneer.

A raspy voice hummed into Audrey's ear. "Holder". Audrey nearly jumped in surprise but calmed herself and began with her questions. "Hello Holder" was the only intelligible thing she said before the onslaught of questions flowed from her like water from a broken sink. After catching her breath, she asked one more question that sparked up the attention of Holder. "Can I help you...?". Holder nodded slowly and pointed at the auctioneer's wrist.

Audrey was startled and began stepping away from Holder. "No...not that...I can't". Holder turned away in disappointment. Audrey stood there a moment before finally walking away. She walked right past Maw and the auctioneer as he slowly rose from the ground. The two nearly collided but Maw knocked the auctioneer back to the ground and away from Audrey before yelling out to the driver. "We're leaving!". Maw snarled and stomped towards the vehicle. The driver calls out for young miss Durwood to return as well. By then Audrey had returned to the shackled boy and was holding his hand. She answered the driver and ran to her seat in the vehicle. The Durwood private vehicle pulled away as the auctioneer dusts himself. After gathering himself up he orders the boy to follow. Without an immediate response he proceeds to activate the collar with an electric shock.

Holder staggers from the shock and walks towards the auctioneer cautiously. Upon arrival the boy begs for a drink of water. The auctioneer grudgingly tosses a ration pack of water and turns his back still furious from losing the previous altercation.

"Pfft. All you do is cost me...I'll never sell a disobedient bastard like you." The auctioneer crosses his arms and marches intently towards the auction blocks.

"Come on!" He yells. But the boy stood motionless.

The auctioneer reached at his wrist for a shock and waits for satisfying signs of pain; but instead the boy sprinted towards him. His arms and legs somehow were freed and allowed him the maneuverability to rush the auctioneer. The boy spit the water on the auctioneer and tackled him while holding on tight. At that moment the auctioneer applies the electricity and shocks himself doing so. Holder, stunned but able to move, grips the collar around his neck and runs down the road. A passerby standing alone in the distance saw the whole act and was yelling at the top of their lungs.

Escape! The would be good citizen given chase but was quickly left behind. The uproar that followed only served to speed the steps of Holder down the road. Unfortunately, word traveled faster than he could and the all too familiar panicked screams caught the attention of the still agitated Maw.

"We got a runner".

He smirked as he jerked the driver's arms and forced a stop. Holder was heading directly towards the city limits. Maw had him in his sights. Maw jammed the choke control on his wrist mounted device to no avail. Then he noticed that the runner was without a collar. "Oh well...." Maw sighed sarcastically. "Guess I gotta put him down". He drew his weapon from the holster on his hip and aimed carefully.

Before Audrey could react Maw pulled the trigger. Holder was shot. The boy dropped to the ground instantly. Maw began to laugh but choked on his own spit as Holder began to rise up slowly.

Maw snarled "Must have just winged it".

As Holder limped towards the city limits Maw lowered his weapon and approached the vehicle.

"Did you clean out the trunk from last night like I told you?"

His gun fixed right at the driver. The driver silently shook his head and Maw opened the trunk. The sadistic man couldn't hide his excitement as he rolled a grenade inside his palm. Audrey went from relief to horror in the blink of an eye. The pin bounced on the ground as he raised a slender arm.

Audrey sprung into action, wrestling Maws arm to prevent him from throwing. "Not this shit again!" Maw was beyond agitated as he grabs Audrey by the throat. Audrey cries out in pain before being tossed to the ground. When she looks up, her blurred vision barely makes out that Maw was also lying on the ground. Above her stood Holder with his hand out to help her up. Maw loses it at the thought of a slave laying hands on him. Then he spots the open trunk of the

vehicle....full of munitions. A croak of a laugh crept from his throat as he uttered a sarcastic "oops" and let the grenade roll from his hand and underneath the car. Maw leapt to his feet and scrambled away for cover. While still on the ground Audrey, spotted the grenade and yells out. But it's too late. The explosion engulfs the car and driver and sends the car rolling towards the two kids seconds before it fully detonates the contents of its trunk. The injured Holder raises his hand towards the sprawling inferno and stands firmly over Audrey. The flames come rushing in and engulfs them in seconds.

She pinned her eyes shut but she could still see the red hue of the approaching blaze. Audrey waited for the burning sensation of death to sweep over her but it never came. Her amber eyes emerged to meet the steely gray stare of Holder. He had somehow kept the explosion at bay; creating a dome of deadly fire around them. The vehicle and its contents had already been incinerated, but the grass within the dome wasn't even singed. Audrey had witnessed the abilities restrained by the collars before during a revolt at her father's compound. Only two escaped the collars but were able to throw a car with their combined power. Of course, Maw quelled the rebellion with his arsenal of weapons and lackeys. But not before half of the the grounds were destroyed. Neither her or the sadist had ever witnessed a feat such as this; much less by an individual.

The flames dissipated to reveal Maw brandishing one of his favorite weapons; fashioned after the relic known as a colt 45. But this gun was able to fire charged projectiles past the defenses of any escapee; collar or not. Audrey rose to catch Holder as he fell in exhaustion. Maw took aim and pulled the trigger.