



“I swear, no matter how long I live it's always the same thing with these people. The world is ending and they still find reasons to kill each other...” - Unknown, dated right before the end of days.

Chapter 2

Red dots were gathering on young Audrey's dress. It took a moment for her to realize the drops of blood were falling from above her. A red ring was forming around Holder's neck as Audrey cradled his arm over her shoulders. Stopping an explosion at point blank range had proved to be exhausting, yet still he persevered. Holder held up one hand as he rose from his knees. Audrey remained seated; staring in awe as the bullet was stopped midway between Maw and his target. Holder held an imaginary gun as the bullet turned until it was facing Maw. The bullet's new target raised his arms into the air as his fancy revolver bounced in the dirt. Audrey placed a gentle touch onto Holder's outstretched arm; then pulled her body from the ground until they met eyes. *He knew what she wanted. Mercy. Those people never showed Mercy. But Audrey helped him escape. He owed her. No. That debt was repaid when he saved her from the grenade.*

Holder lowered his weapon; leaving the bullet suspended harmlessly in the air. Maw reached for his control band. Audrey pulled away as her face was painted red. Stunned, Holder was still on his feet. It was not uncommon for a slave to still be standing or even walk after their collar was detonated. The snap explosion removed their heads so quickly that the rest of the body had to catch up. In some compounds, a game called 'Pop-corn' was played by workers with control band access. Slaves were put to death at random just for entertainment, but this type of treatment is banned in most settlements; due to the mess created and the added expense of losing a collar before it expired.

The remnants of the collar had fallen to the dirt, leaving behind a wound. But Holder's head was still attached, thanks to Maw. While the intent was to kill the rebelling slave, Maw had revealed the path of liberty instead. The grenade taught Holder that even explosions could be contained. This rebel had seen countless die from these collars to know that the detonators were not that different. Since the discovery of these damning machines, his people had known suffering. The collars were unearthed nearly 300 years ago, by a woman whose name was lost to history. Some say that the original purpose of the collars was for healing, linked to the ruins of

the medical facility where they were found. No matter the original intent, scholars agree that the collars ushered in a new age of advancement. The once feared and secluded people of the wastes were then hunted down and enslaved. People of the wastes only traveled in units of 6 or 9. Composed of 3 couples, sometimes accompanied by 3 children. Numbers, weapons and the recovered technology allowed for the enslavement of these powerful people. The collar became the symbol and tool of their bestial existence. The device created a dampening field for telepathy and other mental abilities. For added measure, the detonator was included into the design. Even with all their powers blocked, the nomads were still gifted physically. It was their ability to work and survive that rebuilt society as we know it. While the slavers deny any resemblance, the people of the wastes were just as human as their oppressors. And it was human instinct to want freedom, even if it had to be fought for.

The bullet was still floating, facing the merciless man who pulled the trigger. Holder returned the favor. Maw looked down as a crimson stain spread over his chest. The bullet had performed just as designed; to penetrate then detonate an emp that would trigger the collar from within. Without a collar, the emp spread throughout his body. The sadistic man dropped to his knees with a grin. The surge of electricity froze his face into a twisted mask of pain and pleasure. Maw dropped dead in the dirt next to his gun.

Audrey stared at the body. She knew he deserved it. She thought of Beauty to justify what she felt in her heart. Beauty was not named for her face; a slave was named for their purpose and duty. It was decided at birth that she would live the life of her mother. She was the last of 28 children born before her mother died. Audrey was just a few years older than Beauty, but she was well aware what fate had in store. On the night that Beauty was able to be used, they ran before anyone else found out. They ran until it was the next night and didn't stop; until Maw showed up. The twisted expression was fixated on Holder's back as he escaped into the ash. Audrey sat and waited until aid arrived. Unfortunately, they brought someone who could only do more harm than good.

A well groomed, and nobly dressed gentleman emerged from the first of four vehicles. As he strolled towards Audrey, the contents of the other cars spilled into the dirt road.

"Get up girl, you are a Durwood, and will always appear dignified in public". Master Durwood barked in his usual tone as he surveyed the scene. "A driver, one vehicle... Oh and this." He mumbled loudly, already calculating the costs, only to stare down at Maw's body. A worker was on standby near the corpse. Master Durwood snapped his fingers and turned as Maw was loaded into the truck's freezer. "Our contract has not yet expired, keep him on ice until I find a use for him." His head whipped back towards his daughter. "You cost me more than you're worth." Pausing to inspect her damaged clothes. "Get in the car." Audrey dare not look up at his face as the command took the tone of a threat. She gazed out the window in the direction where Holder ran off.

The wind covered Holder's tracks as he ran. Time was running out. No one could survive in the wastes alone, not even his nomadic ancestors. He was lost with no supplies but he still remained calm. He was now free and his mind unbound. Anything was possible. He reached out with his mind to find others like himself. At first, only the weak signals from those still enslaved responded. He drowned in their cries for help, and screams of pain. But the coolness of night

brought hope. *Go to the mountains of metal in the south.* He repeated the message but the sender could no longer be heard. Facing south, two large peaks sit on the horizon. Holder pressed the scar around his throat before taking his first steps toward freedom.

Audrey had finally arrived back at the 'Durwood Estate'. A fancy name for a place of misery and injustice. Like most compounds, the Durwood Estate produced a resource on demand. Food, energy and water were the most sought after and Master Durwood monopolized energy in the northwest while self sustaining his food and water supplies. Master Durwood customized his facilities to maximize profits, while still including the essential components of a basic compound. The plantation fields where food was produced was integrated into the water purification system. Water purification mills also generated energy to sustain the energy converter located in the main factory. The main factory was powered by the windmills, and created the materials needed for energy grid expansion. And he currently powered 8 of the 12 surrounding settlements. The mastermind had a simple motto for his contract employees to remember, "Energy is power. Power is control".

While the car was pulling up slowly past the gates to the manor, Audrey lept from her seat and ran upstairs. She sat in her room and awaited her punishment. The air in the entire compound was thick with fear. When Maw was on a rampage, only the slaves had to worry. But when Master Durwood was upset; everyone suffered. Starting with his disobedient daughter. He burst into her room still dressed in his full noble attire.

"At first I was going to confine you to this section of the manor for a very, very long time". Durwood cleared his throat. "But factoring in the costs that you are no doubt the cause of, today has changed my decision."

Audrey knew that whatever the punishment he chose, it was nothing compared to the life of the people he enslaved. Master Durwood began to smirk as he summoned forth a girl, slightly older than Audrey, dressed in fine clothes and fitted with a collar.

Durwood grinned, "Meet Belle, your new personal slave."

Audrey cut his words with her scream, "No!"

The master let out a furious roar, drowning out the screams of his defiant daughter. Belle shuddered as the spit from his words wet her back. "Now see here!" The room was still with fear as Durwood prepared a verbal onslaught.

"These are my slaves! My property! My money! My rules! And this slave will report everything that you do from this day forward to *Me.*" The yelling continued until he was out of breathe.

Durwood then took a moment to compose himself. His face was sweaty as he leaned in for confirmation, "Do you understand?"

The tone of the conversation lowered as Audrey retreated. As the master continued to speak, attendants began rearranging her room. Moments later, Audrey heard her door slam close and the squeak of Belle sitting on the other bed. Audrey turned to lay down. She was too upset to talk; but managed a "Goodnight" before falling to sleep. Belle said nothing and did the same.

When the girls awoke the next day they shared a brief moment of peace before remembering the promises of last night. It was made thoroughly clear that Audrey would be sent away if she cost her father one more penny. And Belle would return to the stable if she did not make her daily report. Audrey rose out of bed to properly greet her roommate. Belle sat motionless, eyes bulging from uncertainty.

"Audrey." She extended her hand.

"Good Morning mistress Durwood." Belle bowed in respect.

"No, no, call me Audrey. Just Audrey from now on."

Her warm smile gave Belle a sense of safety. Everyone at the compound heard about Audrey Durwood. She was sweet, and always giving, and never treated anyone bad. Not even a slave. But there were also stories that warned against being her friend. Master Durwood was sure to mention the reason for buying a replacement stable slave during the ride to the compound. He also made sure to read Maw's report very loudly while indicating Audrey as the mastermind behind the failed escape. Belle remained cautious, but returned the smile.

"G-Good Morning, Miss Audrey" Belle stammered as Audrey reached for her hand.

"Good enough for now." Audrey firmly shook hands with her.

Belle did just as she was told. And for a week she followed and reported on Audrey Durwood's every move. While reciting her mental notes to the master, she forgot her place and smiled as she retold a joke taught to her by Audrey. Her face throbbed where the master struck.

"What's so funny? Do you think this is a game? Lucky I won't scar you, you'd lose too much value."

Master Durwood shifted in his chair as Belle continued her report. "There was talk about escape."

Master Durwood sprang from his seat, "Oh?"

Belle grew silent as his breath warmed her face. He took a sweet tone as he stroked her back. "Remember the promise I made, if you did a good job for me?"

“Yes Master”, Belle stammered as her face turned away from the insidious grin. A gentle touch returned her eyes to meet his.

“Look”.

The cunning businessman made good on his promise as he showed his slave a video image from his control band. Belle began to sob as the image faded to the home comand screen.

“You can be together again, but first you know what you have to do.”

Durwood returned to his chair, resting his feet on his desk. Belle raised her head to complete the report. Just outside the sealed doors of the Durwood private study sat a disobedient girl.

When Audrey was unable to make out the conversation, she returned to her bed; just as she did every night for the last week. She sat in bed staring at the moon shining over the ash desert in the distance.

The moonlight was dim near the well lit compound but grew in strength the deeper you ventured into the wastes. The gray plains shined like smooth slopes of silver, touched only by the wind. Further still, a storm was stirring to the south.

Holder stood within the eye of the storm. He was barely free for a week, but was already being threatened with re-capture. Raiders on motorbikes prowled the areas between settlements and compounds to catch runaways. Now Holder was being circled by 3 raiders equipped to catch slaves. The slave catchers yelled to each other over the dust and wind that was picking up.

“He aint got no collar!”, one raider was frantically pressing his control band to no avail.

“Damn! Got us a class A runner here”, the leader of the group responded to his subordinate.

“Worth a lot dead or alive!” the leader motioned to the others. “Ready the net *and* your weapons.”

The third raider was silent as he aimed the net launcher at Holder. The wind became more violent as he looked through the sights. The raider motioned to his leader that visibility was too poor.

“This storm ain't natural!”

“It must be doing this!”

“I can’t see--”

Holder wasn't sure who said what exactly; but they were right. Creating the storm was just a test to his ability. He attained a new level of precision and control during his escape; but the outer limits of his power was still unknown. Holder thought back to the day where he last used his full power. It was also the same day he earned his name and duty as a slave.

Children born of slaves could not be fitted for a collar until the age three to avoid the risk of paralysis or death from the dampening field. Luckily for the owners, a slaves' power didn't manifest until around the ages of four or five. That was also the age they started working. However, in the case of one child, his power manifested at birth. Of course the cautious parents kept this secret. Slaves were not allowed to have secrets; slaves were not allowed to have *anything*. When the master discovered the child, he sentenced the entire family to death. The slaves tried to resist; even managing to lift a car and throw it while still collared. The fight raged until they were cornered in the factory. As a last ditch effort, the slaves brought the building in on itself. There were no survivors, save one child. After 2 days had passed, another owner came to acquire the land. He found a baby sleeping in the rubble. The child was untouched underneath the suspended debris floating above. Holding the fallen ceiling overhead, he earned his name and a collar from his new master. Years of torturous labor followed until the day he met Audrey.

Now Holder was summoning the strength once restrained by the collar. No more holding back. The storm erupted and lifted the three raiders into the sky. Their bodies collided until a mangled heap remained. Below, the wind had driven two of the motorbikes together. A small spark totaled the vehicles. The ball of raider flesh plopped into the ash a few feet away from Holder as the storm settled. He quickly looted everything of value and loaded his pack into the passenger car of the motorbike.. The ride was uncomfortable but the distance travelled was worth it. Holder was no expert but after a few falls he managed to figure out the machine. Steering was another issue to handle. Fortunately there was nothing to crash into.

Damn raiders. Holder had barely traveled for a day and the fuel was almost gone. He needed a fuel cell to continue his journey for freedom. A nearby settlement would have the supply and he picked up plenty to trade from his attackers. He reached out with his mind again. This time inviting the cries of the still enslaved. Their voices washed over him just as forcefully as before but he did not resist. Finding the settlement was easy, but now he had to barter without revealing his identity as a runaway. His scar was a dead giveaway but the raiders carried hooded cloaks and gear that hid their faces.

Harristown was the name of the tiny settlement. With a total population of less than 50, it was more of a trade post than a town. Perfect for a stranger to pass through. So, no one questioned when a lone raider rode in on his motorbike with a pack full for trade. The townsfolk rushed the disguised runaway with bargains and deals for a variety of goods upon arrival.

“Fuel Cell.” Holder mumbled in his gruff raider voice.

A merchant offered 8 primed cells and promised at least 4 days travel. Holder tossed him salvaged tech from the wastes. The other stalls begged for trade; offering food, water and other supplies. With his plan working so well, Holder was confident that a little shopping couldn't hurt. After a few hours, the contents of the pack were exchanged and Holder was returning to his motorbike. He walked quickly until a voice crept into his mind.

Please take us with you.

Holder looked back at the oldest slave he had ever seen. The old woman was over two hundred years old; well beyond the expiration date of a collar. Her collar was most likely deactivated after 99 years had passed and she was allowed to live without the dampening field hindering her mind. However her feeble body could not carry her to freedom. So there she sat, never resisting, letting the years go by. She rose from her seat and took hold of the mysterious raider.

I was waiting for you.

Holder dare not speak, aloud or with his mind. But still the old woman was sure. A smile began to grow on her wrinkled face. Before Holder could pull away; the townsfolk already surrounded him again. They had never seen the old slave act like this before. The gathering crowd started to whisper. Holder could sense the fear. The owner of the slave arrived and threatened to activate the collar. At this point the only function left was the killswitch. The old woman whispered into Holders mind.

Please...Take us to Zion.

Her last words. And only Holder was able to hear the confusing message. The old slaves' body slumped without a head. The owner kicked at the corpse until her grip loosened from the raiders cloak. The dead hand pulled down the hood to reveal a scar on the raiders neck. Holder removed his mask to reveal a rage like he had never felt before.