

Ian

Not Much Further Now

I've dragged the kid halfway through the slums of the Outer Centric by the time the sun sets behind the Wall. I can only tell he's still alive because of the shallow wisps of breath that crystallize in the chilly evening air.

Out of the sun's light, the shivering begins uncontrollably. I wrapped the kid in my coat, not that it does much good either way. The thing's full of more holes than a bombed-out shack.

I found a piece of sheet metal back at the quarry, which I pull the kid on. The metal scrapes against the cobblestone, leaving a black streak across miles of deserted road.

We approach a sharp turn in the road. I corner it, but can't handle the turn fully in time. Stopping, I push the other way. I try twisting the metal, but it won't budge. So I gradually tug and shove the metal sheet back and forth, back and forth until we've made the turn. I dig my heels in deep, one foot against an uneven stone, the other shoveling into the mud. I yank the metal with all my might and manage a foot. Then another, and another, until I've picked up enough momentum to carry on.

The boy, no older than ten, whimpers, but his voice carries little weight in the silence.

"Come on, kid," I say with nothing but a raspy whisper. "Stay alive, just stay alive. It's not much further now."

My fingers are numb, wrapped around the icy metal scrap. They've cramped up and I don't think I could let go of my grip if I wanted to. I imagine all ten frozen solid to the metal. We'd have to pry them off with a knife.

There's a hill ahead. A small one, but at this point, it might as well be scaling the Wall. Glass from a shattered window cracks underfoot, and makes a grating, slashing sound against the underside of the metal. The kid stirs again. He turns over, nearly falling off the sheet. Panicking, I drop the sheet, fingers protesting, and rush over, gently setting him back on. I take his hand and place it back against the bullet wound on his chest.

"Please." Panting, I manage only a few words. "Keep your hand there."

The kid continues staring at the overcast sky.

"Rain," his voice catches against his throat. He starts a fit of coughing, spraying my face with flecks of blood. I feel it freeze to my face.

"Yeah, looks that way," I reply, slowly, deliberately, having to force out every word. "If we don't get you home, we might get stuck in the rain."

"What's home?" he asks, eyelids drooping.

"I'm getting you to the orphanage. My home. You'll be safe there. Miss Lydia will fix you up."

I get up, my knees screaming, and go back to the front, grasping the tattered metal with bloodied fingers.

"Miss Lydia...seems nice..." I hear him mumble.

"She is," I tell him as I pull the metal with all my might, beginning the slow climb up the hill. "She'll love you...and you'll get to meet Spike and Riley," I can barely speak as I work my way one aching step at a time, but I must keep the kid awake. "There's lots of kids your age. You can be a kid again, no need to fight to survive anymore...And you'll get to meet Eden."

"Eden."

"That's right...Eden...she's the best of all. With her, there's no need to worry...With her, you'll realize you don't need to kill to survive."

"Survive."

"Yeah, kid. We're gonna survive. We're gonna make it. It's just up this hill and a little further."

My breathing is labored, and my cold breath stings across my cheeks. In the dying evening light, ravaged concrete buildings become monsters and the huts and shacks which crisscross through their alleys and hide in their nooks become their underlings. At night, the street gangs come out to play. We're just outside Blood Brotherhood territory. If they find us, we're dead. But there are worse ways to be found than dead.

I grit my teeth, muscles tearing. I concentrate on each step.

The Wall bears down on us with a watchful eye, seeing our struggle and offering no help. Heck, it might as well be laughing at us. Cresting the hill, the typical sounds of the slum invade. The crackling of grease fires echoing in oil drums, the murmur of people afraid to show their face, the dirty hum of military trucks and the heavy boots of wandering Dawn soldiers. Somewhere in the distance, the Songbird wails across the Red Wasteland.

The kid mutters something and I hurriedly shush him. The tricky part is going to be getting past all these soldiers without them knowing. The shrieking of cold metal against stone doesn't help to hide us. So I pull us over to the exposed spots, where stone and concrete have cracked away, dirt and mud spilling out.

This new way masks the sound, but makes the pulling all the harder. I lean my body, practically parallel to the ground, in an effort to dislodge the sheet from the mud. With a loud sucking noise it comes loose and we continue on, down one street, through an alley, making a

desperate effort to avoid any passerby. In the dim light of a few flickering street lamps, clouded over with dirt and smoke, I notice the kid is bleeding worse than before. It trickles down the ridges in the metal, pouring on the ground in a long trail.

"Are you still with me? Please, still be with me."

He makes no sound, but I can still see thin clouds of air bubbling out between his teeth. Blood runs in rivulets down the side of his mouth.

"We're almost there," I tell him, but I think it's meant more for myself. "I can see it."

In the distance, the rough metal fence peaks out from the next street corner. Something like hope lights across my face. I forgot what that felt like.

And as quickly as it comes, that hope is snuffed out. Replaced by a deep well of fear as a Dawn soldier rounds the corner, his gun bouncing rhythmically against his chest.

I freeze, hoping in the dim light he won't see us. A flickering fire glances off the side of my face, intermittently lighting me up. For a moment, I think he'll move on.

But he doesn't. He catches sight of my face, and walks toward us. Slow, lazily. His finger traces the trigger. He stops a few feet away, bearing down on me like a giant.

"What are you doing out so late, boy?" he asks, adding emphatic distaste to the final word. "Get lost in the dark?"

"N-no, sir," I reply, hating how shaky my voice sounds. "My home is right up ahead."

He looks behind me, to the kid lying on the makeshift sled.

"Looks like your friend isn't doing too well."

"He's my brother," I lie, trying to play into any morsel of sympathy he may have. "I'm trying to get him home so we can help him."

The soldier takes a moment, then shoves me aside and bends over the kid.

"Maybe let me take a look. See if I can do anything about it."

I can't argue or speak against him. And I hate that with everything inside me.

The Dawn soldier nudges at the kid with the barrel of his gun, like he's poking a dead rat with a stick. The kid still has his hand pressed against the wound, but the Dawn notices and moves his hand aside.

"Oh, what do we have here?"

The soldier grows gravely silent, his mouth a thin line. He pokes at the wound with his gun. The kid writhes in pain, his breath catching against his ragged throat before he can scream. So it comes out as a feeble squeak.

The Dawn stands up, hovering over the kid.

"It's a bullet wound."

"Y-yes, sir. There was a street gang and—"

"You know the law. Only soldiers have guns. That means this Circ could have only been shot by another soldier."

"No, that's not—"

"By Lord Kyrie's decree, I must finish what the other soldier could not."

He flicks off the safety on his gun.

I cry out.

The soldier points the gun at the kid and fires a bullet through his forehead.

I drop down in the echoing emptiness, grabbing the kid and pulling him close, too exhausted to weep, feeling only the cold tendrils of failure and ravaged hope.

Without an expression, the soldier flips his safety back on and marches away without a word, his gun bouncing against his chest like it did before.

It was in this disgust and hatred for anything resembling the privileged, idyllic life the Dawn must have, that my own thoughts of self-preservation broke down. I shouted at the Wall, screaming to its heights clawing at the heavens, wishing for something, anything different than this. On the other side of that Wall, people live in comfort and security, without soldiers kicking in doors, where survival is a guarantee, not a fight.

The sky is dark and the Songbird of the Red Wasteland no longer hums. The kid's blood dries to my hands, cakes into my shirt, soaks through to the skin. If the Dawn find him here, they'll throw him with the corpse weed and call it charity. And the grass that grows from his body will feed the cycle. This kid deserves more. We all do, frankly. Our lives may amount to little more than a few bites taken in the shade and a couple footprints in the dirt, but at least we deserve to be treated as human in death. He was only trying to survive in this harsh world. It may be arrogance on my part, but I should take the kid away from all this. Find a resting place away from the cycle of hate.

So I lift him in my arms, leaving behind the sled, and carry him one step at a time out of the concrete and dust, toward the field of tall grass, and the Edge beyond. My arms ache, and every few minutes, I have to readjust my grasp as his limp body slips between my arms.

The lights of the city slums fade, and I have nothing to guide me, except the years of memories and words of warning.

Don't play near the Edge. You may fall to your death.

Don't play in the field of tall grass. The corpse weeds will trip you and cut you up.

Words of warning that always fell on deaf ears. We played in the grass as children, when the grass was up to our shoulders. And the whipping of weeds against our face was its own kind of freedom.

So I follow my own childhood footsteps, leaving a trail of the kid's blood, hearing its pitter-patter splash against the concrete and cobblestone.

The Dawn soldier went in the opposite direction, toward the Wall. Part of me wishes I could place the kid inside a bombed-out building and chase after that soldier. He's long gone, I know, but maybe the desire for vengeance is the best I can do. I can't tear down the Wall. I probably can't kill a single man. Not with these shaky, frail hands, strengthened from labor, but weak from hunger. So at least I can entertain the writhing, seething anger for justice inside me. That's something, right?

And after I have taken this kid away from this place, I'll find that soldier. It may take time, but I won't stop until I do. Until I put my own short knife, now clattering in my pocket, between his ribs. Or die trying.

The latter is more likely, but at least it beats dying of starvation or having some Dawn shoot me in the head because I stepped out of line.

My legs are numb, and the rest of my body aches for rest. Years of exhaustion rolling into this singular drive toward a distant point I don't even know if I'll reach. Not with the kid. I may collapse in the street now and hope I wake to continue toward the Red Wasteland. But it's not much further now.

A moon illuminates my path like a guiding light. *There's always a moon in the sky*, I think to myself, bracing against a twisted iron fence. Something's always watching from above. The giants who stand atop the Wall are just the ones we concern ourselves with the most. A Court of

Watchers. Flies on the Wall to keep tabs on us. To keep us in line. To keep us confined in our Outer Centric.

The buildings part into an expanse of overgrown grass, strangled by gnarled weeds which pulsate in the night wind like throbbing veins. The grass reaches above my knees, and I have to wade through to make it anywhere. Another couple hundred steps and it drops off the Edge. A deep chasm for the Forsaken, and a barrier between us and the freedom of the Red Wasteland. The whistle of wind is an indication the Songbird sleeps. In and out, whispering over my hair back and forth.

I stand there by the Edge, catching my breath. This is it. The furthest I can go. The affordance of freedom granted us by Lord Kyrie. I place the kid's body a step from the fall.

"Well, kid," I whisper, kneeling beside him. "This is the end of the road. As far as we go. I'm sorry I can't take you away from Tenprus. If I could fly you across the red sands, I would. Somewhere peaceful." I look over the Edge. It goes down a long way, so far down the mud huts are smaller than my pinky nail. And the lake looks like a small spill. Life down there must be miserable, the poor Forsaken cast from society. But, then again, it's a land without Dawn and, while sunlight may reach in only a few hours a day, they must have something like peace or freedom. Something, anything, to keep them going in a land of refuse and mud. Otherwise, why go on?

"I wish I could give you a better burial, but at least your death won't serve the Dawn. At least you can be free of this place."

Placing my hands against his body, I tilt my head and hesitate shortly. But I finally make up my mind and push his body over the Edge. I shut my eyes, but can't help but imagine his

body tumbling through the air, into the mist and darkness, eventually splashing into the lake and disappearing into its depths.

I fall back into the grass, letting the weeds overtake me as I stare at the night sky, and the green clouds which blot out the stars. So I look out across the sands as my breath comes out as a thick cloud.

They say there's nothing but the Songbird out there. That the Songbird eats those who manage to make it across the chasm of the Edge, and those who escape her die out among the sand and solitude. But it's got to be a lie, right? There has to be more than Tenprus, more than the Wall, more than death. Somewhere across the red sands, I have to believe someone is living a better life. Somewhere—

Fast approaching, beams of light paint the grass. Someone's coming my way with flashlights. I stay motionless. Three figures hurry past. They're not soldiers. In fact, they're dressed the same as me, in tattered, stained clothes several sizes outgrown. It's hard to make out in the thin light cast by their flashlights, but I make out a few details. The first one is tall, and walks with confidence. The second is a girl who looks to be in her late teens, around the same age as me. She has what's probably a bow slung across her back, and the arrows make light clattering noises as she walks. And the third is a short, round guy, dragging what seems to be an unpleasantly long sword through the grass.

Curiosity or the need for a distraction draws me, and I follow at a distance, making sure to tread lightly, hoping they won't turn around and shine their light on me by accident.

The tall one speaks in a low voice, the wind carrying his voice to me, which I strain to catch. "Only about another half mile now. We'll start seeing patrols soon. We'll need to adapt as

it goes, but Syra, keep your eye on the searchlights. Kill whichever one's light looks like it might cross our path."

"I thought we were doing a full sweep. You told me we were gonna wipe 'em all," the girl replies.

"Tonight's not for revenge, Syra. At least not here."

"When the Wall goes boom, you'll get some good revenge there, don't you think?"

The Wall? What are these people doing? They can't be crazy enough to think they can so much as put a scratch on that steel surface with some bomb.

"I'll wear the uniform and drive, like we discussed," the tall one says.

"Unless the rooster's uniform fits me better, huh, Alan?" the round one chuckles.

"I'm the only one who knows how to drive," the tall man says without a hint of humor. "If I get killed, Syra, you take over. You know how to drive conceptually." After a minute of silence, he goes on. "Keep your breath light, and watch your footfalls."

The girl speaks, "Do you think the loud idiot who's been following us can follow that advice?"

I freeze.

"What do you mean?" one of them asks. I'm already on my back foot.

"Don't worry, I got this one," she says, unslinging the bow, nocking an arrow, and aiming it right at me. The flashlights catch me a moment later. I panic.

"Wait! Wait! Please, don't shoot. I'm on your side."

I throw my arms up, palms bared, realizing a moment too late they're still covered in dried blood.

"Why are you following us? Are you a spy? How long have you been tracking us?" the short one hits me with a volley of questions. "We're exposed, call off the mission."

"Calm down," the tall one chides. "Good catch, Syra. I didn't hear him."

"Really? Sounded like he was stomping with steel boots for all the sound he was making."

"Please, let me explain," I rasp.

"No need, I think I've figured it out," the girl says, lowering her bow a little. "I didn't hear your footsteps until about a quarter mile back. And if I can hear you in grass, I would have heard you on the concrete if you'd been following since the slums. No one knows we're out here apart from us three, so either you're no spy or one of us three is a rat. But I highly doubt that."

There's stunned silence all around before the girl named Syra speaks again. "So either you live out in the tall grass for whatever reason, or you wandered out here at night to dispose of a dead body. Hence all the blood. I hope it was a rooster you killed."

I shake my head.

"Then what the heck are you doing out here?"

I swallow hard, trying to put it into words without sounding like a fool. "I didn't kill a rooster, but a rooster killed my friend. I was burying his body. I couldn't even protect one kid, much less kill a soldier."

I drop my head. Then there's a hand on my shoulder, so I look up into Syra's face. At this distance, I can make out her face. She smiles at me. A heartbroken half smile.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Ian. I'm Ian."

"Not that it matters because I'll probably be dead in an hour, but I'm Syra."

She's about my height, with short hair that doesn't go past her ears.

"It's nice to meet you, Ian, but it's about time you left. We've got a suicide mission to get to—"

"Not to mention we'll miss the truck if we wait around any longer," the short, round one interrupts.

"Right, so best of luck, Ian." And she turns. The short one eyes me like he wants to run me through with his rusty sword. Then they walk away.

"Wait!" I call out into the darkness. "I can help! Let me help you."

"No," the tall one, Alan, says back with finality.

"But, I...it's all I...I have to do something of meaning."

"You seem nice, Ian," Syra says. "But Alan is right. You're not prepared for this. You'll get us found out. I'm sorry. I am. But go home, and live your life. And if you want to make a change, make your own modest rebellion and stick it to the roosters. But only when you're prepared."

I open my mouth, but the words choke at the back of my throat. *They're right. I can't do anything.* Then the three of them are gone, nothing remaining but swirls of settling mist.

Back home. Back home there's Eden, there's Spike and Riley, Miss Lydia, and everyone else. People who care about me. It's a home. Something so few have in the Outer Centric, a land deficient in so many things, but perhaps lacking love and the capacity to care above all else.

And yet, standing in knee-high grass under the glare of a moon's eye, I feel nothing but desolation. The kid died because I couldn't act. These three outcast rebels might die, and I don't feel I'm deserving of any home if I'll let that happen without at least trying.

I'm weak and pathetic. A nineteen-year-old orphan who survives on a few pieces of bread after a long day hitting rocks or harvesting corpse weed. A short knife I barely know how to use, and hands still red with the blood of a kid who put his faith in me to save him.

I'm no good for anything, and I'll probably end up hopeless and dead before I have a chance to do better. So I make up my mind. I carry my shoes to conceal my steps and pull out my knife, dull with rust, and follow after the others.

The bridge spans the length of the Edge, from the Outer Centric to the Red Wasteland. The faint trickle of sand can be heard spilling off the Edge on the other side, down to the Forsaken. The bridge is the only way out of Tenprus, and heavily guarded. It's a crime punishable by death to escape, and so intensely enforced, it's almost as if Lord Kyrie is hiding something out there beyond the sand dunes. It's not to protect us from the Songbird, that's for sure.

I keep my distance, trying to get a grasp of the compound. There's a large building a ways off. Probably where the Dawn soldiers sleep. Two guard towers three-stories high straddle the bridge. The bridge itself is blocked off by a heavy-looking iron gate. Several trucks are scattered in the grass around the compound. I count eight soldiers out in the grass and along the road. One soldier on either guard tower sweeps the searchlights. Sandbags stacked in neat rows fan out down a road leading from the bridge into the slums, off toward the Wall. Down the road from the bridge, a checkpoint stands solitary with a small guardhouse. I position myself near the guardhouse, with a good escape route behind me. It's only a minute's run before I'd hit some buildings, where I could hide.

As I'm watching, the three rebels appear up out of the grass, keeping close to the deepest shadows. I see Syra take aim at a soldier wandering over near a truck. With a faint twang, she

looses the arrow through the soldier's neck. He drops immediately. The short one heads toward the nearest guard tower and climbs it. Over the next minute, I watch as Alan strips the man of his uniform jacket and puts it on himself. He pulls it tight, but it looks like it's just a bit too small for him.

The searchlight sweeps toward them and Syra and Alan quickly hide under the truck.

Meanwhile, the short guy climbs the last flight and takes his sword to the soldier, killing him without a sound. He moves the searchlight like nothing's happened, making sure to illuminate the remaining soldiers to declare their location.

The three of them seem to really have this whole thing figured out. Maybe there is nothing I can do.

Just then, the iron gate opens, yawning deep into the night. After an anxious minute, I hear the metallic clang of the gate fully open. The rumble of three trucks shakes pebbles around me. The three trucks drive slowly, cracking the stone and concrete beneath their tread.

It's a shock, really. I had no idea the Dawn were doing things out in the Red Wasteland. I think I would have heard by now if trucks coming and going was a regular occurrence.

The three trucks come to a stop when the first reaches the checkpoint. I see Alan and Syra hesitating, as if they don't know which truck to choose. However they found out about tonight, they probably thought there would be only one truck. They make up their mind and head for the third truck in the back. I sneak closer to the guardhouse, where a soldier has stepped out to talk to the driver of the first truck.

"You're back sooner than we expected," the soldier says. "And with three truckloads, no less."

It's a bit muffled, but I make out the reply from the driver. "We found something out there we weren't expecting. We need to get it into the Wall for testing as soon as possible."

"We'll need to do a scan for radiation. Which truck has the explosive?"

"That's fine. The explosive is in the second truck. It's highly reactive and volatile, so be careful near it. Also," he pauses, and the Dawn soldier takes a step closer. "We found something out there. Special cargo in the third vehicle. Your boys, don't let them touch it, don't let them near it. We can't have them opening the cargo hold. Orders from Lieutenant General Nero himself."

The soldier walks over to a device on the wall. "Bring in every available unit on the field. Meet at the checkpoint and I'll distribute scanners." Then he steps over to the driver. "I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle so we can search it. And I need to see those documents from Lieutenant General Nero, please."

He steps out of the truck as I back away, sliding further into the tall grass. It seems like whatever the rebels are looking for is in the second truck, but they went to the third truck. I wonder if they'll realize their mistake, or if they'll drive off with the wrong truck.

Several soldiers, hands on their gun, pool in toward the trucks. I drop where I am, hoping they'll move past without seeing me. I wait as they walk by within steps of me, my heartbeat pounding through my chest. The soldiers move past without spotting me. I breathe in and steady myself, waiting for my hands to stop shaking. I notice for the first time the faint pattern of raindrops bouncing off blades of grass, trickling down my fingers. Any moment, the rain may begin pouring. Finally, I pull myself into a crouch and sneak toward the last truck, feeling out the ground ahead of me with my hands so I don't step on something that'll make a sound. My bare feet bleed from the corpse weed I've been stepping on.

When I make it there, Syra is dragging the body of the driver into the grass. I move closer to her, hoping I can catch her while her hands are full so she doesn't kill me in surprise.

"Don't panic," I whisper at her. "It's Ian."

She does panic, dropping the body and pulling out a knife as she lunges at me. Her eyes widen as she recognizes me, turning the knife so she doesn't stab me in the neck.

"What are you doing here?" she seethes. "I told you to get lost."

"Look, there's no time. The soldiers are on their way over here. But I heard them talking with the driver. The bomb or whatever you're looking for is in the second truck."

She backs off, eyeing me hard, before turning around and bounding toward the back of the truck. I go with her.

"Alan," she calls into the back of the truck. "That guy from earlier says the bomb is in the second truck."

Alan shows his face out of the darkness of the truck's cargo hold, clicking his flashlight off. "There's something back here," he says. "It's big. I think it's the bomb."

"No, that's not what the soldier said," I argue. He glares at me like he wants to kill me.

The soldiers' voices reach us only seconds before they do.

"They're not checking the back of this truck," I frantically tell him. Alan makes up his mind almost instantly.

"Get in the back," he tells the two of us. "We'll have to take our chances with this one."

He pulls me up and over into the truck's cargo hold as Syra hops in beside me. Alan gets out and closes the doors on us and bolts it shut. We're in total darkness until Syra turns on her flashlight, illuminating the cramped space around us.

We hear Alan's footsteps as he makes his way around the truck toward the driver's seat, wearing a Dawn uniform.

"Good evening," his voice comes through muffled into the cold metal interior. "Looks like the rain's going to start coming down hard any minute. I hope you were told by your superiors not to open the back of the truck?"

"We're just scanning for radiation." A soldier's voice.

"Go right ahead. Let me know when I can get back behind the wheel."

"This won't take more than a few minutes."

I use the few minutes of silence, while soldiers' boots stomp around the truck, to take a look at my surroundings. Not that anything else in here could distract me from the hulking black sphere placed carefully in the center of the interior, suspended on rubber wires that keep it from rattling around. It takes up the width and height of the truck, measuring taller than me, and wider than my wingspan.

Syra looks just as shocked as me.

"Is this the bomb?" I whisper to her.

"If it is," she whispers back, her voice so quiet I can barely hear her. Her eyes are wide in awe. "If this *is* the bomb, then it's a whole heck of a lot bigger than we thought. This thing looks like it'd blow up not just the Wall, but the whole Outer Centric along with it!"

I step up to it, feeling its oppressive weight like a dangerous aura. There's a sparse control panel and a display showing a green pulse. Waves bounce across the screen in a sleepy rhythm, making a light beeping noise every time. The sphere hums with life. A key hangs from a chain, which looks like it can be inserted into a keyhole. Maybe to arm the thing.

"But it couldn't, r-right? Nothing is that powerful." I pause. "What are you planning on doing with it anyway?"

"We're following the transport into the Wall," she says, not taking her eyes off the sphere. "Once inside, we'll detonate. Hopefully toppling the whole thing and sparking a full-on uprising."

The truck begins moving. I reach out to steady myself, but nearly fall. Syra catches me, holding me steady. She looks at me, and I frown at her.

"So when you said this was a suicide mission—"

"—I meant it." There's another pause as we stop. The truck in the lead must be through the checkpoint, so now it's the second truck's turn.

"So when you told me not to come..."

"Yeah," she mumbles.

My frown deepens. "Well, nothing I can do about it now. I'm with you until the end, I suppose."

A change crosses over her face. Something like fear. In that moment, she looks exactly like the children at the orphanage, helpless and unable to do anything about the circumstance they're in. I suppose I look the same way.

She grabs my hand then and I feel it shaking. She swallows hard and tells me, "The Dawn killed my family less than a month ago. I've made up my mind to get revenge, no matter the cost. If...If we do this, we're furthering the cause. Our sacrifice will inspire the people to stand up to the Dawn and take hold of their freedom beyond the Wall." I can tell she's trying to convince herself of the words she's saying. "It won't be for nothing, will it?"

I put my other hand over hers. Two people trying to hold back the fear. I remember the kid who died not more than an hour or two ago. How I dragged him to safety, and how it was all taken from him for nothing. "I don't know," I tell her honestly. "But, hey, what about that other guy? The one with the sword. If he makes it over here in time, he could let us out."

She shakes her head. "That's not the plan. And even if he did, someone would have to stay here to arm the bomb and blow it up."

I open my mouth to speak, but the words dry on my tongue. Finally, as the truck lurches forward again, I say it. "I'll stay. You go."

Her hand grips mine tighter and her eyes shine with tears. Rain taps against the roof in a heavy beat. "No," she says. "This is my revenge."

"Maybe revenge isn't worth death," I tell her, lying to myself. "Live on. Find Miss Lydia's orphanage. She'll take you in. She'll care for you like she's cared for me all these years. You'll have to help provide, but you'll find a home there."

She looks like she's about to speak, to call me out on my hypocrisy. After all, aren't I doing all of this out of some misplaced justice against those who wronged me? But she doesn't have time to speak before the truck stops and voices outside yell into the night.

"Documents, please. Let's move this along. I don't like standing here in the rain."

"Of course," Alan calls back from the driver's seat. I can hear the hesitation in his voice. "Just give me a second to find them."

We hear the rustling of papers and compartments opening and shutting.

"Soldier, we're gonna need to see those papers."

"Give me a moment. I seem to have misplaced them." Alan's voice is frantic.

"You are told to keep them on your person at all times, soldier. I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle."

There's an image of Syra dragging the driver into the grass. Of course she wouldn't have thought to check his clothes for papers.

"Well," I whisper. "We might *both* get killed before we get to do anything."

"One more moment, please," Alan's voice.

The Dawn soldier must have a gun pointed at Alan now, because he yells, "Get out now or I will have no choice but to shoot. We can—"

There's a gargled shout and the rough sound of a body splashing against the ground.

"About time you showed up!" Alan sounds relieved. The short guy with the sword must have killed the soldier.

The short guy speaks, "All hell's gonna break loose in a second. Be ready to gun it to the Wall. Here, take his gun."

"Hurry and open the back," Alan says. "That kid from earlier showed up. We need to let him out."

"Alright." His steps echo as he moves toward the back of the truck. "Then I'm out. Look, Alan. I wish you all the luck in the world. We all know you're gonna need—"

A gunshot rings through the air and the man's head slams against the truck, making a hollow, reverberating thud. Syra jumps to the ground and I follow. The sound of the short man's body bouncing against the ground is the last we hear of him through the truck wall.

Alan yells out as the sound of bullets cascades around us, shattering through glass and deflecting off metal. I scream as several bullets tear into the interior and bounce around,

sending sparks raining down on the two of us. Alan hits the gas, and we shoot forward, tearing through the checkpoint as gunshots and shouting ring out.

We bound down the road toward the Wall, pitching back and forth as Alan swerves us through buildings. The rev of engines follows close behind, bringing with them a constant hail of gunfire. Syra and I roll around, slamming against the walls. I clutch at my head, the rest of my body bruising against the force. Every few seconds, a bullet rips through the back of the truck and ricochets around, and we pray it won't hit us. Or worse, set off the sphere. The giant sphere itself sways around dangerously, vibrating and pulling against the rubber restraints. It looks like it'll snap any second and the thing will roll over us.

We must still be a ways off from the Wall, but we're getting close. I drag myself to my feet, hoping a bullet won't hit me. The floor quakes beneath me, trying to make me collapse. I grab onto a rubber rope and yank myself over to the control panel. I need to figure out how to work this so I can blow it up in time. We won't have time to stop and figure it out. Alan will probably barrel us straight into the Wall's vertical surface, hoping the bomb will be armed in time.

The truck lunges around, and I swing on the ropes to stay standing. I grab the key and insert it. When I turn it, I have no idea if that'll blow it up then and there. Instead, the screen lights up:

PRESS ENTER TO OPEN.

Open? I search around for an Enter button.

The side of the truck collides against a building and Syra and I crash into each other, falling into a heap and pounding against the doors of the truck.

"Hold on back there!" Alan shouts at us. "We're gonna make some wild turns. I'll let you know when it's time to arm the bomb. Be ready! Not much further now!"

I clamber to my feet, the whole world conspiring to throw me back down again. One step, then another, toward the sphere. Alan makes a sharp turn and I ram my shoulder against the wall. Before we've completed the turn, there's another volley of gunfire and a sudden painful shout from Alan.

The truck abruptly shifts course, careening around and around until the truck smashes headlong through a building. We impact something hard and the truck stops. Syra and I fly forward. I slam my head against the sphere and drop to the ground.

I come to in the darkness, hearing Syra stir beside me.

"My head," she groans. "Ian, are you alright?"

I mumble something as I try to grasp what happened. Through everything, at least the truck managed to stay upright. Somewhere in all the twisting and turning, the flashlight got smashed, so the only light comes from the monitor still reading: PRESS ENTER TO OPEN.

A moment later, a few traces of light spill in rays through the bullet holes in the truck. There's a chorus of shouting. As my head slowly clears, I make out what they're saying.

"Repeat, I'm going to need all available units to converge on my location. We have no idea what they've got hiding in the back." And then a shout, which echoes around whatever building we've crashed inside of. "Come out with your hands up, Circ scum!"

Alan mutters something from the front seat, and I hear the sound of him cocking a gun. Then we hear as he opens the door and stumbles out. There's a splash of blood. He was probably hit during the chase, and that's why we crashed.

There's a single shot from Alan and a crowd of soldiers shout together before firing all at once. Alan's body collides against the side of the truck as he's lit up with gunfire. He doesn't shout or make any noise at all.

"Hold your fire!" someone shouts.

Alan's body drops and Syra screams. I put my hands over her mouth, so nothing comes out apart from a heartbroken squeak. She searches around for her bow as the sound of boots on a concrete floor surround the truck. Syra finds it and clambers to her feet.

"Get down!" I whisper. But she stands by the doors, waiting for them to open. I hear the sound of a drawstring being pulled taut. As soon as they open the doors, she'll loose the arrow. A kill for a kill.

"You're wrong, Ian," she says, her voice broken with contempt and anger. "Revenge is worth death."

"Fire!" the voice outside shouts and suddenly the interior is lit up with dozens upon dozens of bullets, tracing hissing, crisscrossing lines across the middle of the truck. They strobe, sending sparks and shrieks as they find their way to Syra. They rip her apart, smacking against every part of her body with a sickening crunch. I cry out as the hellfire draws to a close, poking enough holes into the truck, beams of light—like the ones that stream through the clouds after a rainy day—shower Syra's body as she gradually collapses to the floor.

I catch her before she does, and cradle her in my arms. She's already gone. Her eyes shine with terror and hatred. And those lifeless eyes stare at me, asking me why I wasn't able to save her also. Within one night, I held the body of two people I could have saved. If only I had the power. If only I could do something.

Maybe there is something I can do. It may be revenge or it may be a final shout of defiance, but I put Syra's body down and step over to the sphere. There's a crowd of soldiers out there like ravening wolves. If it's all I can do, then I'll blow them sky high along with me. It's the most I can do.

"Check the body. Make sure he's dead. Then scan the truck. Make sure there's no traps or anyone else still alive in there."

The sphere is unhurt, the bullets not leaving even a scratch on its surface. I look to the control panel and find the button labeled Enter. I steel myself and breathe in deeply. Then, I press it.

I wince, expecting to be vaporized, but it doesn't happen. Instead, there's a hiss and a crack, and the sphere opens wide, like hideous black jaws. And inside...

I gasp and stumble back.

Inside, a girl, no older than nine or ten, hovers impossibly, suspended in space. She's curled into a tight ball, like a butterfly in a cocoon. In her arms, she holds what looks like a mask close against her chest.

She breathes, and the whole space pulsates with life.

I take a hesitant step closer. The girl is like no one I've ever seen. Her skin is so crystal white, it shines in the light. It looks like a single touch would shatter her. Her hair is the red of flaming embers dancing in a fire pit, floating above her as if in water.

She opens her eyes, filled with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. Her eyelids flutter and droop, and it seems she's trying to stay conscious. Her eyes meet mine, two red gemstones without irises. And yet, I know she's looking at me.

She reaches out a long arm and sets it against my cheek. There's nothing I can say or do except stand there.

"Alright, men." Voices outside. "Open the vehicle. Check what's inside. Make sure the cargo is still intact."

The girl looks out past the interior of the truck, toward the soldiers, or perhaps past them to something far unseen. She looks back at me, taking the mask in her hands.

Holding the mask out to me, she says in a lilting, melodic voice, "Please, save me."

I take the mask. As soon as my hands glide across its surface, something stirs inside me. A feeling. Some kind of an understanding. Like it's whispering out to me, and it lets me know what I need to do.

I place the mask across my face. It's a perfect fit.

I step to the door and wait as they unlatch it. Artificial light cascades in waves all around me, reflecting off the mask. And the mask it seems, although perhaps only in my imagination, gives off its own light. Like a shining beacon.

"Step out of the vehicle!" someone shouts. I comply.

All around me, soldiers wait with bated breath, shifting nervously, every gun trained directly on me. I glance around me, unhurried. There's over a dozen Dawn soldiers, but I know the number doesn't matter.

I look for the soldier whose gun bounced against his chest, but don't find him. No matter. I'll find him later. And when I do, there is nothing he will be able to do.

Since when were you the one in control? The thought pounds against my head, and I laugh. It's something above a chuckle, but it scares a few of the soldiers.

"Remove the mask!" one of them says.

Today, I think. I'm the one in control.

"If you don't comply, we will shoot! Obey and you will be given a fair trial."

Obey? I've spent my whole life obeying you fools, being tossed around by your whims, surviving off your crumbs, under your boot.

"Ready your weapons, men!"

Something takes hold of me. I'm drawn to the action as if there never was anything else I could have done. I raise my arm, pointing my bloody palm at the soldiers.

"Aim!"

Then I command them, "Die."

Silence falls upon the room as the soldier's voice goes cold. A moment later, the silence snaps and every soldier stands at attention, the heels of their boots clicking together. Their backs rigid and their eyes are blank as they take their gun and turn it on themselves.

And all at once, they pull the trigger.

Eden

Orphans of Calamity

“Eden, I had a bad dream.”

I open my eyes, and smile sleepily at Landon standing by my bedside. He balances on one foot, then the other, his bare feet cold on the wood. He clutches at the fringes of his shirt. His one good eye flashes with tears.

I sit up in bed, the springs aching beneath my body. Moonlight spills into the room from behind a tattered curtain and a draft of cold air washes by me. I shiver. Still, there’s the soft pitter-patter of raindrops across the tin roof, like finger-taps on a piano. Gently, I hold the sleeping body of Evelyn nestled warm against me and move her a few inches, then I follow, being careful not to push us both off the edge of the small bed.

I put a hand on the empty space I’ve created.

“Do you want to sleep here tonight. There’s nothing scary here.”

He nods, his face scrunched up to hold back tears. He hops into the bed and pulls the blanket up to his mouth.

“Would you like to talk about it?” I ask him.

He shakes his head vigorously.

“Sometimes,” I say. “Talking about it helps. But if you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

I make a show of laying back down and pretend to go right to sleep.

“Wait, wait!” his small hands grab my shoulder and rock it. “I’ll tell, I’ll tell.”

So I prop myself up as he snuggles his body closer, and listen.

"It was you and Ian. You and Ian ran away and you climbed the whole Wall, all the way to the top. You escaped and got to the other side, but then I couldn't see you and that was scary. Because you left us. A-And then the soldiers came back and they took Miss Lydia away too. And Spike and Riley ran after them to get Miss Lydia back, but then they didn't come back. And then it was just me and everyone else and then I turned around and then it was just me. I was alone in the whole house and I didn't know what to do."

He goes silent and I watch him, a frown on my face.

"Do you think we'll leave you, Landon?" I ask him.

"No," he whimpers, burying his head in my arms. "But what if they take you away. Or what if you can escape, but we can't? Then what? If you could go behind the Wall without us, would you?"

"No," I say without hesitation. "I'm not going anywhere."

Just then, there's the reverberating shock of a crash in the distance. I shoot up in bed, and so do many of the other children scattered around the room. There's the crackle of a fire, followed by shouting. Angry boots rush about somewhere outside. Both Evelyn and Landon cling to me, and I wrap my arms around them to keep them safe, holding my breath and praying the soldiers don't come inside.

"What's happening, Eden?" Evelyn asks.

"I don't know."

We wait there for a small eternity, no one moving. Children hold each other in their beds and a few more run over and hop into mine. The thin mattress sinks into the feeble frame, groaning with the added weight. Everyone is scared. Not only at the not knowing, but the fear that the soldiers will come inside. It could happen.

There's suddenly the sharp sounds of gunfire echoing through the rain, and the children cry. I look over at the cot in the far corner, where Riley sleeps soundly, her snores as oblivious as always. She somehow manages to sleep through another cluster of gunshots a minute later.

Another heavy minute passes, the rain bouncing loudly against the roof like a drumroll reaching a crescendo. Guns go off all at once, one loud sound, echoing through the window, and then there's silence. True silence. No boots are heard, no shouting, no more gunfire. I wait for the children to settle down, as hesitant minutes tick by, before quietly stepping out of the room. I tiptoe down the hall and open the door to the boys' room. Spike is nowhere to be seen, which is pretty typical. But neither is Ian. Ian said he'd be home late, but late has passed and he's not here.

I wonder briefly what trouble he's gotten himself into this time, but my annoyance abates to a dull throb of worry. *Please be safe.*

Getting a disquieting feeling, I check to make sure the children in the room are okay, then walk back to the girls' room. Most of the children are back in bed. This is fairly regular, as horrible as it is to say. Guns in the night and angry shouting, praying they don't break through the gate.

But that's life.

"If you get scared," I tell the children still up. "You can wake Riley. She'll keep you safe."

Riley will be upset, but she can get over herself.

"Where are you going?" Landon asks, his voice full of worry.

"Nowhere special," I lie. "I'll be back real quick."

I close the door and walk down the stairs toward the front door. I cross the living room, furnished with a stained carpet and a couple rat-bitten couches with stuffing spilling out. The

dying embers in the fireplace give off the faintest heat. I work my way through the darkness, feeling my way along familiar walls, cold to the touch, but warm with its security. These walls have kept me safe almost my entire life. They've saved so many orphans lost in the night.

Miss Lydia appears from her room, carrying a candle giving off a warm glow.

"Don't try to stop me from going out there," I tell her. "You heard the gunshots. Someone may need our help."

Miss Lydia takes an unhurried step toward me. "I wasn't going to. I simply wanted to tell you to be safe," she responds, placing something in my hand. A knife. A small one, but I still recoil.

"You know I wouldn't—"

"I know. But keep it with you. Even if it's only to set me at ease." She smiles, dissipating her deep wrinkles with its sincerity. "Be safe."

I nod and give her a hug before I go, grabbing the gate key and slipping the knife into my shoe as I step through the door. The rain pelts me, matting my long hair, making it heavy. My hair slaps the back of my neck as I walk, sending shivers down my spine. Water pours into every rip and hole in my shoes, squelching with every step I take down the cobblestone path toward the gate. Rives of mud and slush cut roaring waves through dying grass. I step over one such rainwater river, grabbing hold of the gate on the other side.

I turn the key and carefully look both ways before stepping out into the street. Apart from the rain, there's little sound apart from the sizzling of a fire close by. I follow it, rounding the corner to find what looks like a Dawn military truck buried in a building. The front of the truck barely sticks out. The whole building looks like it may go at any second. A small grease fire

smothers in the downpour. I take tentative steps forward, making sure there's no one around who could ambush me.

I go up to a window, avoiding the truck, and try to peer inside. There's not much I can see because of rubble blocking the way. What I do manage to see is a couple bodies of Dawn soldiers, with pools of blood around their heads.

I turn away, feeling sick. *What happened here?*

Unexpectedly, there's the sound of a child coughing. From the other side of the building. I run around, concern written in bold across my face. I slosh through puddles, my feet sinking into mud until I make it into an alleyway separated from the collapsing building. Buried in the shadows, a coat wrapped around her body, a young girl rests against the brick, her head lolling as if she's trying to keep awake. Bare shoulders peek out above the coat, pale and shivering in the freezing air. Her legs are pulled in close, her feet stark. Her ankles are cut, blood running into the ground and washing away with the water.

I'm stunned, but act all the same. I kneel down beside her, worried to even touch her. She looks like she may shatter at the lightest touch. Finally, I put my hands against her shoulders, rubbing them to wake her up and maybe warm her however slightly. Her eyes jump open and I gasp. Shining red eyes pierce through me, and I almost stumble back. She's, impossibly, not human. Or like no person I've ever seen.

I recover my composure and smile warmly at her. "Are you alright? Can you stand? I'm going to take you somewhere warm and dry."

The girl, no older than most of the children in the orphanage, reaches a hand out and puts it against my cheek. My face fills with warmth, as if she's somehow shifting her body heat into mine. And yet her breath is ice clouds and her shoulders tremble with each gust of wind. I take

her hand in mine, and ask again, hoping she understands, “We need to get you inside. Can you stand?”

Carefully, she speaks, her words parting through the rain like music. “You’re the second person I’ve met today. His eyes were like yours, very surprised, but also gold.”

“Gold?” I shake my head, clearing it. “I’m going to carry you inside. Alright?”

She nods. I wrap her up tight in the coat and lift her to my chest, as if I was holding a baby. Her body is light and paper thin, as if a strong wind would carry her away into the night.

I take deliberate, quick steps to get back to the orphanage, checking every corner and the far distance vigilantly for anyone coming our way. The road feels long and full of evil eyes watching from the shadows, but we do make it back, and I padlock the gate tightly behind me, rushing inside and placing the girl by the fire. I throw some wood in the fireplace and do everything to get it warming.

Next, I take off her coat, soaking wet. Underneath, she’s entirely unclothed and so pale, it’s as if she’s never seen the sunlight. Her deep breathing reveals ribs jutting out, her skin gaunt against it. She must be starving. I run and grab a towel, drying her off and wrapping her in it.

Miss Lydia finally wanders in, assessing the situation instantly and acting fast. She hurries into the kitchen and grabs medicine, a loaf of bread, and a stick of chocolate we’ve been hoarding for weeks. She hands the girl, now barely conscious, a glass of water with the medicine.

Miss Lydia speaks softly, but fervently, “Take this. It should keep the chills down. Eat as much as you want. I’m heating some soup, which should warm you right up.”

The girl takes the water and downs it all at once, then she grabs the bread greedily and tears at it, putting more in her mouth before she can swallow. She coughs and Miss Lydia takes

over, holding the girl in a sitting position while she eats. I go into the kitchen and bring out the soup when it's hot enough. Miss Lydia takes it and begins ladling the thin broth into the girl's mouth. Gradually, the girl's eyes shine brightly, and the white of the eye replaced the red around the edges, making her look much more human. But the irises are still an unnatural red.

"Go, bring her a change of clothes," Miss Lydia orders me. "And hang up Ian's coat, as well."

Ian's coat?

I grab the tattered material and hold it up to the light. Now that I've gotten a good look at it, I can't deny it. I'd know his coat anywhere. So, then, how did this girl get Ian's coat? Was he somehow involved in the crashed truck and the dead soldiers?

Suddenly, the loud boom of a tank cannon thunders through the night, silencing all else as a shockwave rattles the bones of the house. I look at the girl, who wears an expression of understanding—a knowing, anxious look—and it chills me to my core. I scramble to get the girl a change of clothes, feeling something uneasy welling up deep in my stomach. I place the clothes near the fire, so they'll be warm when the girl puts them on. Then I walk back to the door and step back out into the night. There's the faintest glimmer of morning lining the highest heights of the Wall.

Miss Lydia knows what to do. This is where she thrives, saving the lost children who make their way to the only warm light in the Outer Centric. She saved me in a similar way, nearly sixteen years ago, when I was barely old enough to walk. And yet, against a world conspiring against children like us, I found her. Whoever this girl with the red eyes is, she'll be safe.

But I glare out toward the Wall, plumes of smoke billowing out from somewhere near the town square, where the cannon's roar emanated. It's only a feeling inside me, but I know Ian is out there. Caught up in something dangerous, something terrible. It may be foolishness on my part, but I'll go to him. I'll find him and keep him safe, no matter what.

Lucas

The First to Cast a Stone

It's something of a miracle I lived in Tenprus during such a time. That I was able to meet Ian, Eden, Spike, Riley, Miles, Kade, Angel, and all the other players in the rebellion that shook the foundations of Tenprus. That I was in the perfect place at the perfect time to record the history of Ian's rebellion. I may not have met him the day he received the mask, but it would be deception to say Ian met that young girl with the mask in the perfect place at the perfect time.

There was nothing to be done about it. The men are dead, and Ian knows it's his fault. He put on the mask, gave a simple command, and they obeyed. Perfectly. Absolutely. The blood and brains soaking into his shoes is proof of that.

Ian vomits before he can get the mask off. Not that he has much in his stomach anyway.

Briefly, he considers destroying it. He can't tell what the mask is made of, some kind of hard plastic or soft metal, but it feels brittle enough that it would shatter underfoot.

He stares at the mask for a long time, until flames lick at the insides of the building. The mask is alien, yet entirely human. It did fit his face perfectly, after all. Intricate line work and eyeholes stretched in anger. It only goes as far as the nose on the front, leaving the mouth revealed, and the back goes down nearly to the neck, meaning his hair will spill around it.

Gazing into the eyeholes, there's nothing but an empty abyss, like a lock without its key. *With this mask, Ian muses, I could do wonders. I could take on the giants atop the Wall. I could bring down the Wall. I could control Tenprus. I could make the Songbird my pet. I could make Lord Kyrie bow down before me. I could...I could...*

He could build a better world. One where children don't suffer, where innocent lives don't burn out before shining. A world of justice and peace. Ian knows this in his heart.

A world where Eden can be happy.

His mind follows her to the orphanage. Behind those weary eyes, filled with love but heavy with fear. He could take that fear away, and leave nothing but the love. All he would need to do is tear down that Wall, and together the two of them could walk into a promising new world beyond.

Ian is so lost in thought, it takes the acrid stench of smoke and sizzling flesh to bring him out of his reverie. And all at once, the pressing weight of action strikes. There's a loud crack above and the ceiling buckles. Soon it will collapse, bringing the whole building down with it. Maybe in a minute, maybe in an hour. It's the ephemeral nature of anything, from lives to concrete. And it's this thought that presses on Ian. He may die before he has the chance to use the mask.

Even if I die in the pursuit, it's worth it if I can create the world anew. For Eden.

Ian finds the girl with the red eyes cowering in the truck. He wraps his coat around her to give her something to fight off the cold winter wind, and carries her outside. The rain pelts down, flooding the street, and dropping Ian's visibility down to almost nothing. Without any lit streetlamps nearby, he has trouble getting his bearings on where he is. *If I can get this girl to the orphanage, she'll be safe.*

And yet, even in the rain, each drop sizzling against the concrete, the dark visage of the Wall looks down on him, humming an oppressive note, mocking him. And he won't stand for that. Not when he has the power to rival it.

It's easy to speculate about what might have been had he made a different choice at that moment. Between taking the girl to safety or chasing his ambition to the Wall. The lives that could have been saved if he waited for the girl to wait instead of rushing off without understanding the mask. The heroes and villains whose stories were set in motion because of Ian's choice.

And so, borne on by the calling of the Wall, the whispering which draws him where he must inevitably go, Ian finds a hiding place for the girl, out of the way from any soldiers who may happen past, and begins the long walk to the Wall.

He holds the mask tightly as he goes.

It's easy to deceive people without ambition.

The rain falls in torrents, and mist clings to the air, yet still the crowds move about. Morning is fast approaching, and the sun will rise, its rays reflecting off the Wall which rises over two-hundred feet into the air. But for the people of the Outer Centric, work comes before the warm light of the sun. In a world of stolen hope and hungry mouths, the people work from before dawn to dusk, and actually live during the night.

It's just another day in the Outer Centric. The air is heavy and the smell of perspiration swells in a cesspool of acid rain and mud. It suffocates Ian, caught up in the milling crowd. The townspeople gather in the square by that towering Wall of Asphodel, and the stench masks their hatred.

Somewhere high above, the Court of Watchers must be keeping tabs, making sure no one steps out of line. Ian keeps his face down, wishing for his coat so he could pull the hood down

over his eyes. Three Dawn soldiers stand on a podium addressing their unwilling audience, machine guns clutched tightly in their arms or strapped across their backs.

“There is a fugitive in your midst,” speaks the youngest of the three, holding a microphone in one hand and his gun, fingering the trigger, in the other. “The property of Upsilon has escaped and now seeks to sow the seeds of doubt and hatred in you good people. She has the appearance of a young girl with red hair, but don’t be fooled. She is here for no other purpose than to destroy what you hold dear. Listen to the word of Lord Kyrie.” He takes a breath. “You have been allowed the privilege of living as citizens of the nation of Tenprus, feeding off her land, and housed within structures built by Lord Kyrie’s predecessors. By his allowance, you are not turned loose to wander the Red Wasteland or die within the belly of the Songbird. And with that, I am to announce a new edict from his majesty.”

The crowd stirs discontent. Ian feels it move from one person to the next.

The Dawn soldier continues, reading from a screen on the platform in front of him, “Henceforth, Lieutenant General Nero, guardian of the Wall, will lead an extensive search for the dangerous property. Searches will be conducted within all households randomly and without prior warning. Conspirators attempting to hide Upsilon’s property will be taken into custody. An audience before a judge and jury may be requested, though the Dawn or another of equal or greater power may reject this request. Upon a stench of guilt, criminals will be cast over the Edge to the Forsaken or may choose death.”

After an uneasy silence, he concludes. “When we find the fugitive, the search will conclude. Anything done in the name of finding the fugitive goes, so we recommend turning her over as soon as possible, before she has a chance to corrupt your lives. Also, Lord Kyrie is willing to offer a substantial reward to anyone who brings the fugitive forward.”

“Bring Kyrie down here,” someone shouts from the crowd. “We’ll show him what a substantial reward looks like!”

Questionable outburst aside, a series of angered *‘yeah’s* and *‘you tell him’s* burst from the fuming populace. They all know what a Dawn search looks like. Just another excuse for an abuse of power, a show of force, and a number of crying families holding their dead loved ones—killed in the name of *‘concluding the search.’*

And if they don’t find the girl soon, they’ll grown more violent. They’ll kick in doors and shoot without question. They’ll tear the slums apart if the girl truly is so important.

Ian knows he should head back, find the girl, and get her to safety before the Dawn begin their search in earnest. And yet, he stays. With only a few soldiers in front of him to test his newfound powers on. He can’t simply leave now. Not when an opportunity such as this presents itself. His confidence tells him that with a few words, they’ll open the doors to the Wall, letting him rip out its guts from the inside.

When I wear the mask, they obey my command.

This is Ian’s understanding of the mask. He wore the mask, and a group of soldiers put guns to their head at his command. So it must work the same on these soldiers, no matter what he commands.

So, as the lively horde of people jostle him, Ian carefully slips the mask over his face once again.

The young Dawn speaks again. “We are here to help you. To keep you safe. Lord Kyrie’s law is infallible. If only you would listen, he can make the Outer Centrics a utopia like Upsilon.”

This raises a series of angry shouts from the crowd. It briefly occurs to the Dawn soldier no one reveres Lord Kyrie as he does. The two other soldiers standing behind him look at each

other with worried expressions. They question their decision to let the devout Kyrie fanatic be the speaker. Someone raised in the luxury of Upsilon before being stationed down here.

The crowd is getting riled up and, if the Dawn soldier fails to choose his next words carefully, a riot may break out. One hundred versus three? It certainly wouldn't make for much of a fight, despite the soldiers possessing riot shields, guns, and the mental fortitude to pull the trigger.

Before the Dawn soldier can speak another word, however, the soldier to his right steps forward and snatches the microphone away. With a pat on the back, the new speaker dismisses the Kyrie-fanatic.

"I apologize, good people, for my comrade, Kirin. He's a new recruit from Upsilon and doesn't yet understand the difficulties of life here in the Outer Centric."

This man means it, too. In fact, he was raised in the Outer Centric himself, but, through a series of lucky circumstances, ended up a Dawn guard. His anguish in being stationed back in the Outer Centric under the tyrannical leadership of Lieutenant General Nero was a harsh blow to his already fragile state of mind. He is, however, fully disposed to empathize with the people. A rarity in the Dawn.

An elderly man yells a list of expletives at the platform. Next to the soldier, Kirin, responds in kind with his own string of obscenities. Kirin reaches for his gun. The soldier holding the microphone stops him.

Not now! The man on the platform grows frantic. Brandishing a gun at this point is as good as signing their own death certificates. The Dawn meant to draw a small crowd who would disperse and dispense the information of the edict, but the mass of people continues to multiply. He is, rather frankly, terrified of the throng of seething individuals. Maybe they ought

to make a tactical retreat. Bring reinforcements. The man dreads the thought of bringing the issue to Nero's attention.

Ian silently takes in the din of the horde. He notices a pile of rocks a few paces from him. He decides now is the time to strike. Now, to get the soldiers' attention.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen, please be calm! You have my word I will bring your worry to Nero's attention. We assure you, searches will not affect your daily lives and, as long as you are not connected with the fugitive, you will not be harmed in any way!"

Lying to the people seems to be simplest way out. As if Nero would listen to him. No, the soldier knows if the girl is not found soon, Upsilon will put more pressure on Nero to find her. And there will be a bloodbath in the Outer Centric in the name of capturing her.

Much to the soldier's relief, the clamor of the crowd ebbs. They may not be satisfied, but perhaps they understand their anger will get them nowhere. After all, this is to be expected here. It's just another day in the Outer Centric.

But Ian is not so easily shaken. His determination fuels him. A deep-seated desire for action—to push the plot of his own life forward. Then there's the burning hatred. Hatred of the Dawn and hatred of injustice. He wishes pain on each and every Dawn soldier, regardless of rank. If they wave the blue banner of the Dawn, they deserve to be taken down. He won't let this opportunity pass him by. He'll show these people the true power of the Outer Centric.

Knowing he has mere moments to act, he scrambles up the pile of rocks, clearing his throat as he does so. Act now and think later. This is the moment to speak and the moment to act.

Lord Kyrie will eat the ashes of our labor.

"You! In the front! The rooster holding the microphone, hear me!" Ian cries above the clamor. Those who were leaving stop in their tracks, shocked at this boy speaking with such assuredness. They give him their full attention, and Ian devours it. "We won't be stepped on so easily by the likes of you! You've had your days in the sun, your privileged life beyond the Wall."

Perhaps all three soldiers understand now is not the moment to get worked up. That if they raise their guns against this boy, the anger of the crowd will return. So they let him speak.

Ian spreads his arms out wide. *Look at me! Don't take your eyes off me.*

"For the curtesy of the good people here, for the sake of bringing utopia to the Outer Centric," Ian raises his arm out in front of him, pointing his palm at the soldiers. Their eyes are trained on him without failing, but they don't reach for their guns. "For the sake of the innocents who have died under Lord Kyrie's rule, under the eyes of the Watchers, under the heel of Nero, I command you, open the gates of the Wall and let us walk through into freedom!"

Silence falls upon the crowd. A dead silence, a fearful silence. It stretches into eternity as Ian's final words climb like vapors up the heights of the Wall. And then, the silence snaps.

Laughter. The soldier Kirin, the youngest of the three soldiers, bends over with howls of laughter. Shocked, Ian looks at the other soldiers, but sees nothing but exasperation. The crowd appears embarrassed.

The soldier in front speaks. His words betray no emotion. "Go home, kid." He looks neither humored nor angry.

Kirin catches his breath and points at Ian, shouting through the laughter. "What's with the stupid mask? Wanting to make sure you hide your identity or something?"

Ian's arms drop, swinging by his side. *Why didn't it work? Nothing's changed, has it? Is it because the command was more than one word?*

Ian speaks again, but with less confidence. "Die!"

The soldier puts the microphone down, his expression looking both annoyed and, perhaps, even a little sad.

"Kid," he says. "We don't want to hurt you, but we won't stand for threats. Leave now and go to your daily work." His words are meant for Ian only. "This isn't your battle."

Ian bites his lip, frustrated and confused. *What am I missing? Does the mask only work once?* He grows frantic, unwilling to step down, wanting only to redeem himself at any cost. His pride kicks reason aside. *If I can't control the roosters, then I'll just have to use the crowd. And if the mask won't work, I'll win them over with my own words.*

"Are we going to stand by and let this happen? I see many of you walking away, seemingly convinced by the petty words of this Dawn soldier. The wool is being drawn over your eyes. He won't speak to Nero on your behalf and he won't temper his bloodlust when he searches for this fugitive. This man cares for your plight just as much as he cares for the bugs he crushes beneath his boot as he walks. Is that all we are? Mere pests—insects—whose sole purpose in life is to be tread upon in the dirt, our bodies only good for feeding the corpse weed? Laws and decrees come with a price," he turns to the soldiers, words tumbling end over end as if they always existed right there. As if Ian only needed to open his mouth, and there they were. "That price is fairness and representation. Equality. To be seen as human beings. Why is it we have never spoken a word with Lord Kyrie? Are there any in the Outer Centric granted an audience before the King? Has he even once graced us with his oh-so-holy appearance? If it weren't for the propaganda and video broadcasts, would we even know his face?" He pauses,

giving the people time to think. They hang on his words now. For a boy raised in the Outer Centric, he expresses himself like the educated in Upsilon. A rarity. For the masses of the outer Centric, his literate words are the words of God. "The duty of a king is to make the lives of his subjects better. The objective of a dictator is to heap more power upon himself. Now, which of these sounds more like our great Lord Kyrie? He is a dictator, an oppressor, and a lethargic tyrant!

"Why do I have no say in the affairs of Tenprus? Why do *you* and *you* have no say? Where is your voice, fair lady?" Ian asks, gesturing toward a middle-aged woman holding a child in her arms. Before she can respond, he continues, "You have no voice, because the government doesn't allow it. Speech is monitored, groups of people are monitored. We all cower under the eyes of the Watchers. To the government, we are all expendable. And yet they keep us around, just so they can take pleasure in destroying our hopes and our futures. Just so we can feed the corpse weed.

"These soldiers speak a few words of command, and we obey without question. Because we feel we're incapable, and if we keep our eyes down and go quietly, we'll be alright. Lord Kyrie tries to tell us what to think, what to believe, what to feel. How to hope, how to dream, how to live. Can we not decide that ourselves? Should we allow the government to regulate not only our actions and words, but our thoughts, as well?"

A dark aura swells among the herd of over a hundred individuals, clouding their eyes with anger, all restless on the border between disgust and fury. With the push of the right button, Ian knows he can get the herd to stampede.

Fancy words mean nothing when not put into action.

The volume and fury of the mob rise in tandem with one another. Exponentially they grow, until the roar is deafening.

The weight of Ian's actions catch up to him. By his word, those soldiers earlier died, and with a few more words here, he may do the same. But the consequences will come later. What matters to him in this moment is what he does, and he puts thoughts of long-reaching consequences away, deep in his mind. The immediate consequence could spell his death. Yet those long-reaching consequences, now buried somewhere inside him, would be far worse than any death.

His next words need to be chosen carefully. He must handle the fire of their hatred without burning himself.

He came here to open the gates of the Wall. And now his next words are intended to start a riot, to kill these soldiers up on their lofty platform. Ian smiles and continues his oration.

"What do you say of this freedom and liberty? Do you not wish to have the freedom of choice, the freedom of words, the freedom of action? To not fear every day that soldiers may kick in your doors and tear apart your family? Is liberty known only to the giants, or to the common folk, as well? We are entitled the same liberty as Lord Kyrie! So who does he think he is? This dictator of ours deserves one final resting place. Not a page in a textbook, nor a jar on a mantle. Lord Kyrie deserves to be stomped upon in the dirt. The dirt he has refused to sully his shoes with. Lord Kyrie deserves death at the hands of the people!"

He's overdoing it. He knows that. But he can't stop now. Years of pent-up anger about to be unleashed. And the anger of one horrible night catching up to him. He turns on the Dawn guards perches on their pedestal. Kirin glares down with rage, but the other guard stares in transfixed horror, understanding Ian's intentions. He mouths the word, *"Please."*

"Right now," Ian persists. "These guards keep us from liberty. They stand as one step between us and Lord Kyrie; one step between us and liberty."

Ian then addresses the Dawn specifically, and the audience waits with bated breath.

"Do you still stand by that command? That you will overturn the Outer Centric in search of this girl? What's the girl to you anyway? Doesn't seem like something worth putting your life on the line for. We, the people of the Outer Centric, declare war on Dictator Kyrie! And unless you stand aside and open the gates of the Wall, you will fall. What'll it be?"

Ian grins. To him, it appears as if the horde of townspeople can't bear to contain their fury. The fire of rebellion is lit.

"L-Lord Kyrie will honor us in death!" Kirin shouts, his whole body shaking, his voice betraying his courageous words. He raises his gun and aims it at Ian. "Death under his wing is the g-greatest honor we c-could hope to find!"

The other guard looks at Kirin horrified. In those few words, he chose death. And for what? Some search for a random girl?

"In that case, your decision has been made. You now stand as an enemy to the revolution. Prepare for death!" he declares with finality, putting a hand against the mask and outstretching his other arm. *This time. This time it has to work.* "Now, die!"

The swarm of ordinary townspeople rush the platform, a sanguinary cry in their throats.

"That'll show you to laugh at me," he mumbles under his breath as he slips the mask off, now one of the faceless, and leaves the crowd behind.

The congregation of men and women surge on the Dawn guards huddling on their platform. A few shots fire before guns are torn from the soldiers' hands. Shrieks pour from their mouths, but it only adds to the hysteria. They are beaten, thrown around, and stamped on.

This is how it ends, the Dawn guard thinks. I've tried so hard to achieve greatness, to rise above my simple upbringing and make something of myself. And here I die. Back in the Outer Centric. I guess I never really could escape it. It's who I am. The Outer Centric isn't a place; it's the people. And I'm one of them. We're trapped here together until we all die.

His head is twisted to the side and he watches Kirin, still trying to fight against his tormentors. The more Kirin struggles, the more pain it brings him. To fight against powers too strong only brings elongated suffering.

This is why the soldier makes no move to fight. He lets come what is due him. Slowly, slowly, the pain of merciless beating subsides. He feels boots stamping his face and fists against his ribs, but it no longer matters to him. Glass smashes over his head and fresh blood flows down his temple, mixing with the rain. He sighs and looks up at the sky. The clouds are hidden behind a veil of deep red. *Lord Kyrie did this to me. Not these people. The devil is Kyrie, so these people shouldn't be held accountable.* Fists and boots continue to pound against him. Someone stabs him with a broken bottle, puncturing his lung.

Kirin continues to struggle, growing weaker with each punch that falls on him. He will die kicking and screaming in only a few moments.

The other man is submissive and understanding as he is buried deeper and deeper into the mud. He takes one last look at that looming Wall—an entity that has dictated his entire life—and wishes success upon that boy with the mask whose words ended his life. His final thought is forgiveness toward the townspeople, and malice toward Lord Kyrie. His last breath escapes him, threading its way up to the Court of Watchers above, and his lifeless body floats in a pool of mud and blood.

The people cheer with bloodthirsty victory. They will never know the man they murdered forgave them with his final breath.

And then the gunshots begin. Dawn reinforcements sweep in from every direction. Soldiers on foot make it to the square first and waste no time firing clip after clip into the crowd. The people swarm the soldiers, overwhelming them and wrenching guns from their hands. Soon, there are guns going off on both sides.

It's a war zone and the mud swallows dead bodies.

The tank arrives second, torrential rainfall bouncing off its hull. Next, the HcANs fly in, snipers perched atop with night-vision goggles. With mud, limbs, and blood splattering, it's hard to tell who's Dawn and who's an enemy down below. But mostly the snipers just take the opportunity to make potshots at anyone moving in the chaos. It doesn't really matter who's who.

The people scatter. A rocket explodes in the crowd with the light of the sun, blinking out a half-dozen lives in a flash. In less than a minute, the only ones remaining in the square are empty bodies. Everyone else is escaping. The Dawn give chase. Bullets streak through the streets, through windows, through thin walls.

The time is 6:45 and 71 people are dead.

Just another day in the Outer Centric.