

*There is a country that most call Idris, but the rebels call it Paslan. Not many know of the history of this land. The history has been buried in years of propaganda and lies. The people who do know the history and want others to know are marked as terrorists and are cast off to brave life in The Ruined Cities. The Ruined Cities are towns, once filled with the bustle of life but now filled with only the remains of bombed buildings. Few survive life as rebels. There are mostly children and teenagers in The Ruined Cities because the Paslanians rarely survive to adulthood. This is the rebels' cause: to spread the truth and hopefully lead the country to peace and justice.*

I wake up to the sound of a girl screaming. I jump out of my bed, not fully awake, and peer out of my grandmother's window. I pray that the girl was the neighbor's child having sleeping problems and not... my thoughts end abruptly as a gunshot sounds and the girl's screaming comes to a sudden halt, leaving the night air heavy with fear and apprehension. I slowly trudge back to my departed grandfather's bed, thinking, as I thought several times before, *it's almost over. The war has to end eventually, right?* My American citizenship protects me, mostly, but I do not worry about myself. My parents, family, and friends were all born and raised in Paslan. They are in constant danger. I was born in a busy city in Michigan, where I was safe and never in immediate danger. I hated it. The children were spoiled and shallow and I felt useless and almost as confined as I do here. Of course, there wasn't a giant cement wall blocking my way from the rest of humanity in Michigan. My brother and I moved last year. This past year was enough time for my brother and I to become involved in the mayhem. My name is Skylar Black and I am part of The Rebellion.

I hold a piece of toast between my teeth as I lace up my combat boots. I slip in a knife and stand up.

"Grandmother!" I call. "Tyler and I are going to Cela and Jason's!"

"Don't stay long!" my grandmother calls back. "Stay safe!" My brother Tyler and I run into the glaring morning light. I grab his hand and avoid eye contact as we pass soldiers holding guns as big as a toddler. As we get out of the soldiers' range, we roll under the barbed wire fence, careful not to get cut. We sprint to our friends' house, avoiding the ruins of once beautiful houses, schools, and libraries. I knock on Jason and Celastrus' door and they appear immediately. Cela is wearing beat-up converse, torn jeans and a hoodie, despite the 90 degree

weather. Probably trying to cover up her tattoo of the symbol of The Rebellion, which is a dove holding a pair of handcuffs in its beak. She's only 14, like me, but if you go to the right places... Celastrus has intense blue eyes, tan skin and midnight-black, curly hair like her brother. Jason is wearing a skin-tight black shirt, black skinny jeans and high top Nikes. Stolen, probably.

"Ready?" I ask. Cela and Jason give me a curt nod. I turn to Tyler and he gives me a lopsided grin, twirling a can of spray-paint.

"Put that away!" I hiss, looking over my shoulder, hoping no one saw him. He shrugs and throws it to Jason, who catches it with speed and agility. All that training must have done him good. Jason sticks it in his back pocket, pulling his shirt over the can, concealing it. Cela and Jason jump off their porch and we run into the woods next to their house. Thorns cover the ground, forcing us to weave and swirl to avoid being pricked. Still, we get torn up pretty bad, but it's the poisonous ones we try hardest to avoid. When we get to the piles of abandoned cars, we all take out our spray-paint and get to work, leaving our marks. We paint shields, handcuffs, doves and the words: *We will fight. We will speak up. We are strong.* Satisfied, I take pictures with my phone and post them on my Instagram.

"Do you know who can see that?" a voice says. I turn around and find myself facing Jason. "You might reveal our location."

"I got it under control," I reply. "My signature is anonymous and I cut out any background that could have leads. I know what I am doing." He sighs and stretches his arms behind his head. He acts so mature, but at only 15, he is one year older than Cela and me, two years older than my brother.

"We should pack up and head to The Tower," says Jason. We all nod.

The tower is a soldier watchtower overlooking the wall, the barrier intended to make sure no one comes in and no one gets out. The Tower is abandoned. That's where we eat our lunch.

"I'll go first," I volunteer. I quickly glance around, making sure we're alone. We are. I pull my knife out from my boot and hold it between my teeth. Jason and Tyler boost me up and I start climbing. When I reach the top I grab the hilt of the knife to ease the window open. I look inside, verifying the room is empty.

“All clear!” I call down. Jason is the first to climb. I pull him up and let him pull up Celastrus and Tyler while I search for our stash. When we discovered this place for the first time, we stocked it with food. “Hey, where’s the pile?”

“Hold on,” Jason grunts as he pulls up my brother. When Tyler is safely on solid ground, Jason comes up to where I was standing and takes my hand, leading me to the back of the room with a smirk and a mischievous glint in his eyes. I blush furiously. We stop at a trapdoor in a closet I never noticed before. Jason pulls it open and I gasp.

“How did you get all this?!” I exclaim. There are sandwiches, sweets, cookies, sesame covered bread toast, fruits and so much more. We haven’t had such luxury since the war started. It wasn’t available to the rebels.

“You know how I got it,” Jason says darkly. “Those soldiers should guard their food better.” I stare at him, wide eyed. I mean, it’s not like we don’t steal food all the time, it’s just we have never stolen directly from them. And we only steal when our families are starving. I turn away.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I whisper. “It was dangerous. Even for you.”

“Come on, Sky,” he teases. “You do stuff like that all the time. You know you want to taste it one last time.”

“They have guns, J!” I turn to him. “I mean, if we were starving we could have just gone to the market and stolen some bread, or poached in the woods next to your house, but this is too much. I can’t lose you too.” Jason is the one who looks away this time. He knows how I lost my mother. I was six and my brother was five. We tried to go through the border to see our family on the other side when the soldiers began shooting indiscriminately at a group of kids throwing stones. My mother was hit. The ambulance was prevented from reaching us for hours because the soldiers insisted to search it for weapons. When the ambulance finally was allowed to pass, it was too late. The driver started to drive to the hospital but we knew it was pointless. She was dead. Once we were out of danger, he turned to us and asked our mother’s last name. Through the tears streaming down my face, I told him her last name was Kai and he said he knew my grandmother. He drove us to her house and left.

“I’m sorry, Skylar,” he mumbles. “Won’t happen again, but don’t tell me I have to eat *all this food* by myself!” He gives me a half-smile and I smile back. He’s right. I *do* want to taste it again. We grab all the food and go to the front of the tower where my brother and Celastrus

have their heads together talking seriously in a low voice. “Soup’s up!” Jason throws the basket of food and laughs as Jason and Cela both dive for it.

Soon, we’re sitting in a circle enjoying the food, laughing and joking around. Almost like the war didn’t exist. Like the separation never happened. My phone rings. I answer. *Who is it?* my brother mouths.

*Grandmother*, I mouth back. After a few minutes, I hang up. “She wants to know where we are and when we’re coming back,” I turn to Celastrus. “I told her we’re at your house and we’re spending the night.” Celastrus nods. Tonight, we’re going to do something we’ve never done before: kidnap an Idrilite and not let him or her go until the soldiers promise to stop killing people in our city.

“What happens if your grandmother comes to our house and finds out no one’s home?” Celastrus asks.

“We’ll tell her we’re out,” I say. “Playing or something.”

“Anyway,” Tyler adds. “It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t have very good vision. It’s not likely she’ll risk walking to your house.” Celastrus nods, satisfied. Jason stands up, wiping the crumbs off his mouth with the back of his hand.

“We should go,” he says, looking out the window. “It’s almost sunset.” I follow his gaze and realize with surprise, it is. *How long have we been up here?* A while, apparently.

We take turns jumping out of the window. First Jason, then Tyler, Celastrus, then me. I leap out the open window and land with a sickening crack. It was my ankle. I fall to my knees and bite back tears as I take off my boot to assess the damage. Right away, I know it’s bad. Jason and Tyler quickly run over to where I am on the ground. My brother rolls up my jeans, takes off my sock and places my foot on his lap. My entire foot is swollen, multicolored and bent awkwardly. Tyler bites on his lip and I hear a sharp intake of breath, which turns out to be Jason.

“It...it’s not so bad,” he says.

“I can tell it’s dislocated, Jason,” I mutter through the pain. “You don’t have to sugar-coat it for me.” Tyler looks up.

“Okay,” Tyler says. “This is going to hurt. I’m gonna have to pop it back into place.” Jason squeezes my hand and I squeeze back.

“Alright,” I say, gritting my teeth. “Go for it.” Tyler takes hold of my foot again and pushes his other hand to my ankle. The pain is excruciating. A steady fire builds up from my ankle to my leg, my torso, my body and head, leaving my ears ringing. Finally, I hear a loud \*pop\* and the fire flames, then recedes a little, but my ears are still ringing.

“You did good, Sky,” Jason says encouragingly.

“All I did was slow down the group,” I shoot back. “We need to go. Where’s Celastrus?” I look around unable to find her. Jason’s face hardens. He stands up.

“CELASTRUS!” Jason yells.

“Quiet!” I grab his arm. “You’ll reveal our location.” He shakes me off and starts running, yelling his sister’s name. Tyler gets up calmly and tackles Jason to the ground covering his mouth with his hand. Jason struggles, screaming incoherently at Tyler for holding him back, at me for distracting him, at the war, at the Idrilites and Paslanians starting it.

“We can’t help her like this,” Tyler growls. I crawl over, my ankle screaming with pain. I look into Jason’s eyes.

“We have to keep moving,” I whisper. “We can get her back. They wouldn’t kill her without interrogating her first. You know that. We have time.” Jason’s struggling falters and he takes Tyler’s outstretched hand. He brushes himself off.

“Sorry, I just kind of snapped,” says Jason rubbing the back of his neck. “She’s the only family I have left.” I nod, understanding. My mom and many of my cousins died, but I still have my dad who is working in Michigan, safe and sound, oblivious to what we (Tyler and I) get into everyday.

“It’s okay, but we *really* need to get going,” I say, looking around. “We’ve been in one place for too long.” I try to get up but immediately fall over, my ankle bursting with pain.

“Here,” Jason offers. “Let me wrap that for you.” He takes off his shirt and walks over to me. Jason crouches next to my leg and starts wrapping my foot with his black shirt. A tingling sensation occurs at every brush of his fingers on my skin.

*No, I think in frustration. This attraction has to stop. He can be killed in a second. All of us can. If something starts between us-* My thoughts are interrupted by a sharp pain from my ankle. I bite my lip to keep from crying out and soon taste blood.

“Almost done,” Jason mutters as he secures the shirt to my foot. “There.” He stands up and looks around. He runs off and comes back, holding a long stick, and throws it to me.

“What’s this?” I ask, staring at the stick in my hands.

“A walking stick,” Jason replies. “You’re welcome.” I roll my eyes.

“I do not need a walking stick,” I huff. Jason raises his eyebrows.

“Then get up,” he says. I throw down the stick and slowly rise to my feet, wobbling, and fall to the ground the second I try to take a step. Jason chucks the stick at me, smirking. I scowl and grab the stick, rising to my feet once more. I walk with ease, which makes me angrier.

“C’mon,” I grumble. “Let’s kick some Idrilite butt.”

Jason walks in the front, I walk in the middle and Tyler walks in the back. The boys claim that they are protecting me by making me walk in between them. But they can’t protect me from whatever creeps on the floor of these woods. Jason stops suddenly and I walk right into him.

“Hey!”

“*Shut up, Sky,*” Jason hisses. “Don’t...move...” He backs away slowly from whatever scared him so bad. When he moves, I catch a glimpse of the ground in front of him and see this huge snake. It has beige scales with a dark brown and white pattern. I recognized it immediately. It is the famous Saw Scaled Viper. Five times more venomous than the Cobra and found in these areas...uh oh... Tyler moves forward.

“Hey what’s going on-” the snake lunges at Tyler and sinks its fangs into the flesh of his shin. I completely lash out, ripping my knife out and stab the snake as it is retreating. The viper falls to the ground, blood gushing from where I pierced it. I rush to my brother’s side. Jason is already tending to the bite, wrapping it in leaves and dribbling water on Tyler’s tongue. I take the laces off of my combat boots and tie it around my brothers calf to stop the poison from spreading.

“Tyler,” I whispered. “You have to say something for me.” My brother took a staggering breath.

“S-swag,” he wheezed. I smiled.

“Keep breathing,” I say. “In and out. In and out.” He does what he is told and his pulse keeps beating. I tighten the laces on his leg and choke back a sob when I see the black veins crawling up his leg. The poison is spreading. “Jason,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “It-it’s not working.” Jason glances at Tyler’s leg, and freezes. The black webs spread further and further up my brother’s leg and there is nothing I can do about it. Tyler’s eyelids droop.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Tyler asks, his voice jagged. I rest my hand on his cheek and tears stream down my face. “Sky? Am I going to die?” I sob, hugging my brother. He takes my hand and squeezes it. “It’s okay,” he whispers. Tyler coughs, his lips glistening with blood. “We knew the risks before we joined. Just, st-stay strong...” My brother’s head rolls back, his eyes open, but empty. I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn around. Jason is there, his eyes filled with sympathy and determination.

“We should go,” Jason says softly. I slowly get up, but immediately crash to the ground. Jason catches me. “Careful,” he grunts, pulling my arm over his shoulder, holding me up. I wipe the tears off my face with the back of my spare hand. Just because I lost my sibling doesn’t mean Jason should have to lose his as well. I feel a sudden burst of adrenaline, determined to save Celastrus. I grab my walking stick and puncture the dead snake that killed my brother. The snake is now attached to the stick and whenever I look at it, pure pain and rage will keep me going. I let go of Jason and pick a nearby flower setting it down at my brother’s feet. A single tear trickles down my cheek as I take one last look at my brother. I turn to Jason and nod.

“I’m ready.”

The sun is far from set and the stars high in the sky when we reach the Idrilite interrogation center. We stop at the top of the hill overlooking the building. It is a dull gray, swarming with soldiers holding their big guns. There are three entrances. The main entrance, which is the most heavily guarded. An entrance on the side, which is probably where the suspects enter. Then, there’s a back entrance. I don’t know what it’s for, but it isn’t guarded well. I look at Jason and pointed at the back door. He nods and started walking. I pull out my knife and follow with my walking stick. We edge the woods, careful not to be seen, and sprint to the door. I pull at the handle.

“It’s locked,” I say through gritted teeth. Jason tries pulling at the handle then kicks the door in frustration when he finds it’s locked. I roll my eyes and cross my arms. “What, you didn’t trust me?” I ask my voice dripping with sarcasm. He blinks at me uncomprehendingly and starts to search the ground for something to pick the lock with. I take two bobby pins from my boot. I rake the lock once with one of the bobby pins to loosen it up, then flex the bobby pin and inserted it into the top of the lock. Then I took the second bobby pin and wiggled it into the lower part of the lock, pushing the first one up, and felt around until I heard a faint *\*click\**. I turn

to Jason, who is still looking, and bow dramatically, gesturing to the open door. Jason grins and grabs my arm, running in.

The lights are off and the second we enter the hall, alarms blare, casting a red light and penetrating the peaceful black.

“Run! *Run!*” Jason yells, pushing me down the hall. A sharp, deep pain ran up my leg from my injured ankle when I tried.

“My leg!” I scream, limping towards Jason. “Go without me!” He slows down and grabs my arm, dragging me.

“C’mon, Skylar!” he shouts. “I know you can do it!” I shake my head and grimace from the intense pain. Soldiers come running up the hall.

“*GO!*” I screech. “Save yourself! Bring reinforcements!” Jason looks from me, to the soldiers, to the door. He kneels down next to me and brushes the hair from my face. “I’ll come back. I promise,” he whispers. He kisses my cheek gently. “Stay strong.” Jason runs out the door. The soldiers grab me from my arms and roughly pull me into a standing position. Tears drip down my face and Jason’s whisper echoes in my ear as I am shoved into an interrogation room. *Stay strong.* They push me onto an electric chair. *Stay strong.* The lights go out. *Stay strong.*