

To watch the skies burn is a most hellish spectacle. The smoke blocks most of your view, of course, but usually you can make out at least a few flames. Morning is the best time to look skyward – then, most of the smoke has settled. Try it sometime, listen to the flames crackle above. After all, there's nothing better to do down here.

My name? Eldin. No last name – I hear those used to exist, years ago. But here? Not at all. Here we're all the same. At least that's how it's supposed to be. If you ever remember anything about me, remember that I hate it here. Who doesn't? Just look at the ground, charred and covered in a sea of ash. To touch the ground is to sink. To inhale the poisonous air is to die. See the water, lapping up onto the ashen beach, thick and black with whatever oil hasn't burned yet. But rest assured—it will burn. Like everything else. The world ended decades ago, and somehow we're still here. Trapped.

I heaved a sigh. Smelt the fresh air from my oxygen mask. Gripped my sniper rifle tighter. From my post on the tower, I could see everything in our flaming world. Up the mountain, clustered with burning lumber and an expanse of charred cliffs, were a few rusted trailers, and the shadows of some soldiers, prowling the cliffs. They were the Saints. At least, that's what they called themselves. To me? They were just the enemy. The fuel that kept our burning world on fire.

"Eldin!"

I spun around, swung my rifle up to stare down its long barrel. We were trained to be ready. Always. But it was only Rafael, my brother, sauntering up the ash-covered stairwell that wound up the tower's side. He was more than a brother, though—everyone in our base was my brother, but Rafael was my best friend. His slit-like black eyes gleamed in the shafts of scarlet light that were breaking through the clouds of smoke above us.

"Rafael," I said, lowering my gun. Talking through an oxygen mask was tough, but after awhile you'd get used to it. "What is the news?"

Snorting, Rafael took a step beside me. He was likely a foot taller, with skin that looked like leather. You could see a lot of it, with his beige shirt unbuttoned and

flapping in the hot breeze. Two pistols hung from his belt, a machine gun was slung over his shoulder. We were all warriors. "News? Is there ever any news?" he grumbled. "Another attack, this one on the north side. Two dozen of our troops shipped in."

"Any I know?"

"I didn't recognize any names."

I allowed myself a sigh. Being shipped off meant death. No one had ever survived a skirmish with the Saints. They were a religious bunch, sure – hence their title – but they were damn good fighters. I never understood why we fought them. No one hated them, we were all just...at a disagreement. For some reason they believed in an ancient book – the Bible or something like that – and they believed that the end of the world was still to come. They thought that some savior was bound to return sometime soon. It sounded ridiculous, but...

"What if they're right?" I asked, looking up at Rafael.

"Who?"

"The Saints."

Rafael shrugged, gazed up at the trailers atop the mountain. "Who cares, Eldin? We're trapped here, we're bound to burn sometime."

"It doesn't make any sense," I muttered. "Why do we fight them?"

"Because there's nothing else to do on this planet. We fight them because they believe in something so idiotic as an ancient book that predicts the future. Does that make sense to you?"

I shook my head. "But...I just don't get it. I know we've talked about it before, but what happened to everything? The world? I mean, where's our families?"

"Do you even remember your family?"

I gulped. "No. But I remember what it felt like. To have one."

Rafael laughed, wrapped his arm around my neck. "Hey, buddy. You'll always have me."

Shaking off his embrace, I kept staring at the flaming skies. It was like thousands of bombs were being dropped from space and exploding in midair. Burning. "We should get inside soon," I breathed. "I'm getting the chill." Getting a chill was never good in a world that averaged at fifty degrees Celsius each morning.

"Aw, you'll be fine," Rafael said, looking around the flat stone floor. "I kind of like it out here, you know? Nice and warm."

I nodded, plopped down onto the roof of the tower and sat cross-legged for a while. It was only three minutes later that my best friend died. Sniped off by a Saint gunman on the mountain. It surprised me that I didn't cry — well, if I did my tears dissolved in the heat — I only sat there, hunched over Rafael's bleeding corpse, wondering how on this flaming earth the Saints believed that the end of the world was still something of the future. That there was still hope. I didn't believe it.

At least, not until only moments later, when I was jerked down onto my back. I screamed. Stared down at my chest, where a crimson hole gaped. Blood splattered everywhere, and I realized I'd been hit, too. Moaning, I clutched at my wound, felt warmth seep between my fingers. Blood. I hated blood. Why did we have to fight? Somehow I knew we didn't. My muscles ached, and I collapsed again. Then, the flaming skies paled. Everything around me was suddenly gleaming white. And I felt a cool breeze — I'd never felt anything cold. I looked around. Mist hung in the air, huge green trees shot up from the ground. A few people were clustered around what seemed to be a garden, and somehow I recognized them. My family. Then, I realized it.

For the first time in my life, I was alive. I swore never to pick up that blasted rifle again. And I did something I hadn't done in so, so long.

I smiled.