

COMMUNITY 17



JOIN OR FIGHT.
ESCAPE OR DIE.

LOVE NOW
LOSE FOREVER.

JAMES CARDONA



Community 17

by James Cardona

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Gold Medal Winner 2015—Wishing Shelf Book Awards, Teenager Category

Spine tingling through to the very last page! Full of action-packed drama, heightened suspense, and young romance, all in the middle of trying to save the world from a dystopian society. Great read!

—ReaderViews.com

A chilling story in the best tradition of SF. A must read!

—Winifred Morris—Author of *Bombed*

A great book. Strong and magnetic moments. Excellently portrayed.

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Makes you think. A whirlwind of conflict.

—Kayl Karadjian—Author of *Broken Blades Don't Sing*

Some of the characters will enrage you, while others will tug at your heartstrings; all of them will evoke emotions that will leave imprints in your mind long after you put down the book.

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Join or Fight. Escape or Die. Love now. Lose Forever.

In a dark future, Jessia and Isaias, two pleb teenagers scraping a living by selling scrap out of the dump, want to program, become citizens and escape the fetid slum lanes of *Community 17*. But if they don't both make it, they will be eternally separated.

Can Jessia share her feelings with Isaias and risk their friendship? Can she allow herself to love a man that might remain a pleb forever? Can he?

Living in *Community 17*, Isaias is exposed to a constant push-pull struggle. He wants to escape the fetid slum lanes by becoming a citizen—if he can only pass programming. He has a dream: a small home in the city, married to Jessia, surrounded by his children at his knees. Is that life even in his grasp?

A heartrending, dystopian tale of a controlling society and the fatal choice to join it or fight against its atrocities, *Community 17* is sure to delight fans of dystopian, romantic drama.

Chapter One

Edra's Vest

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over Community 17, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

An ice pick of fear stabbed the back of Isaias' spine as he realized Edra intended to blow herself up.

He gripped the torn shoulder strap of his backpack, digging the cracked plastic into his palm. His limbs seemed disjointed, as if his legs disassociated themselves from his body. He forced himself to maintain his normal pace and his torso somehow floated forward under its own power.

If I run up to her and try to stop her, he thought, it will make a scene. The soldiers would surely notice. They would both be arrested and probably harmonized. But if he did nothing Edra would die along with the rest of plebs at the checkpoint.

The soldier on the left stared at the line of plebs with disgust while two others shoveled backpacks, lunch pails and clothing items through the particle scanner.

Isaias' knees locked. His mouth felt baked dry and parched. He tried to lick his lips but he merely pasted them with the glue-like substance that was on his tongue.

He wanted to turn, to run, to escape from the whole situation. He didn't want to be too close to the blast of course, but that didn't concern him as much as witnessing the event unfold. *Edra planned to blow herself up! What can I do?*

A pair of pleb workers behind him began talking about building a vanity for a city woman. Isaias flinched hard at the sound of their voices. They caught at his sudden movement, then started speaking again, happy to have the work. Better than sifting garbage for stray chunks of aluminum foil.

He clenched his teeth. His heart pummeled his chest as the squish-squish-squish of pressure squeezed through the too-small veins in his temple. Isaias decided he needed to do something.

He wasn't the type to run bare-chested into a brawl, diving out of high windows and running across roofs with Agency men in pursuit firing their weapons. Nothing like that. Such foolishness led to a quick harmonization and a painful death. No, he was a man that knew how to hide and keep his mouth shut and he credited that as the primary reason he'd survived so long. But he couldn't stand there and watch her kill herself along with all of these people.

He stepped out of the line and yelled up to her. "Edra, hey, wait up."

She turned, displaying panic on her ghostly white face.

One of the soldiers, the one clearly in a foul mood, stared at Isaias, frowning.

Isaias reached Edra and pulled her aside. "Your mom sent me to stop you. Said you forgot one of your books." He spoke loud enough for the soldiers to hear. Isaias grabbed one of her hands, ice cold and shaking.

"What the hell are you doing?" he whispered, glancing down at the explosive-laden vest under her jacket. A code stamped in white ink jumped out at him: XY1214. His eyes weren't playing tricks on him. She wore a vest; she intended to blow up the checkpoint. He twitched, unsure of what to say or do. The soldiers stood right there.

She stared at him, eyes bulging, pulling him closer. She didn't make a sound, but motioned with her eyes, moving them back and forth rapidly.

She's afraid someone's watching, Isaias reasoned. She couldn't communicate with words. Words were too easy to decipher. Of course, they could speak in the code, but if she didn't want to do that, it meant that the freethinkers might be listening too. No, language would be impossible right now. Facial expressions and body movements could betray them too. All they could do was pull in close, face to face, and communicate using the old way, eye signing.

She held his cold and clammy hand, quickly swishing her eyes about, signaling that they forced her. She intended to not go through with the terrible deed, she motioned with her eyes. She would go to the checkpoint and throw herself at their mercy. They would take her away from her family; she would be harmonized, but, at least, there would be a chance she would live.

Edra stopped moving her eyes and stared back at him. She flared her nostrils. She seemed as though she wanted to scream, that she was barely holding her ferocious anxiety all in and he made everything worse by stopping her.

Isaias swished his eyes back at her, —*Don't you see this is madness? I'll go back with you. We'll talk to them. Tell them you refuse.*—

Her hands flashed one stiff, long tremor and she released his, leaving his palm wet. Edra shook her head and turned from Isaias. The whole conversation took less than a few seconds.

He forced himself to stop hyperventilating. His heartbeat thrashed in his ears. The soldier eyed him, his forehead forming deep furrows.

Isaias needed to put on a show. He dropped his backpack to the floor and whipped open the top dramatically. He spread his arms wide, casting his eyes at the dark sky and announced, "I can't believe that I forgot my notebook. And Agency History is due today."

He turned back towards the long row of shanties that bordered the neon blue wall, jogging away from the checkpoint line. His pulse raced. His legs sprung as if his muscles had taken on

the consistency of gummy, rubber bands. He wondered if his gait appeared odd.

As he approached the tin-roofed, lopsided shacks, he spied Edra's two parents nervously watching her from a narrow slum lane. Her father clutched her mother's hand as she wiped her face. She tried to hide her tears.

Not far from them stood Malekai in his long priestly robes, lurking behind a pile of garbage, observing the scene unfold.

Isaias had walked this same path every day, from his home to the checkpoint, then on to school for programming. They all did: him, Edra, Jessie, Tamar and the others. He hadn't seen Jessie and Tamar yet that morning and he didn't find their absence odd until that moment.

"They must have known. Edra must have told them to be late. In case, she decided to blow herself up." Isaias spun. She had lied to him. There was a possibility that she would actually go through with it. She didn't want him to stop her. She wasn't shaking for fear of what the Agency men would do to her, her fear came from indecision. She was preparing to die.

Raw terror stole Isaias' face. They weren't supposed to show their emotions openly like this, especially in front of the soldiers, but he couldn't hide his shock. Not now.

He wanted to move, to do something, to squeeze his eyes down tight and make the whole situation go away by a force of will. Isaias wanted to run to her, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Stop! Stop! STOP!" But he did nothing but stand there motionless and watch. Just like her parents. Just like Malekai.

Edra's head turned back as she was next in line at the checkpoint. Maybe she wanted to take one last look at her parents, but her eyes landed on Isaias' face. She bit her lip. She snapped her head back to the guards and shuffled her feet forward.

Isaias wished he could speak to her. He needed to communicate, to tell her once more to stop, to think about her life, to not give up hope.

She placed her eyes back on him, pushed her long, stringy hair out of her face and nodded. She gave him the slightest shake of her head.

He sighed. *She had decided. She wouldn't do it.*

Then she exploded.

Isaias found himself twenty feet away, on his hands and knees, staring at the ground, a puddle of black liquid pooling on the sandy dirt underneath him.

The world felt strange. Silent. Everything appeared fuzzy. His chest heaved as the air was hard coming. He reached down and touched the pool of black, not sure what the fluid was or what was happening. His two fingers were wet with the hot fluid. *Blood.*

He rolled over and sat on the ground.

People were running and shouting. He knew this because he saw their mouths moving, but there were no sounds. The sound of the entire world had been turned off by the flick of a switch.

He saw the neon blue of the barrier closing in on the checkpoint, sealing the plebs out of

the city. One guard struggled to push himself past the gate as it closed. Several shock troops arrived, smashing running plebs on their heads with their rifle butts and grabbing those trying to escape, pummeling them to the floor and arresting them.

Isaias gazed down slowly at his stomach. A small, black piece of twisted metal stuck out from a jagged gash in the side of his gut. *That's where the blood came from*, he thought, as if he'd just cracked Fermat's last theorem.

An unpleasant buzzing sound rose at the back of his head then, in a frantic rush, all the sounds around him flew in at once. Loud. Too loud.

People were screaming in pain. Others running towards the checkpoint, crying for help, dragging loved ones away, most of them dead. Body parts and debris were everywhere. A curl of ugly, black smoke rose from where the checkpoint once stood.

Red and yellow lights were flashing along the wall as a loud siren wailed.

Isaias saw a man carrying a bloody body. The shredded legs flopped loosely.

The sound of screeching metal pierced the din as the small tower to the left of the checkpoint collapsed in on itself.

A young boy emerged from the black smoke, running barefoot. His left hand was missing. He didn't seem to have noticed yet.

A group of people ran to scoop up bodies, anxiously looking at the sky for soon the aerial bombardment would start. They traveled in small packs as if safety could be found in numbers. In a daze Isaias thought, *No, crowds make things worse*.

Several distraught women ran from the soldiers. The women staggered, hoisting the lifeless, mangled bodies of the workmen who stood behind Isaias in line, the men discussing building a vanity. They had been killed instantly.

Hands grabbed at Isaias' shoulders tilting him back. Two faces met his glazed eyes. They rapidly pulled his jacket back, checking him, muttering to each other about the jagged chunk puncturing his side.

The man slid his arms under Isaias's armpits while the woman held his legs. He wondered where they were taking him. An empty void-like oneness, a stillness of spirit washed over him. He was perfectly content to sit there, on the ground like that and impartially study his surroundings as the events unfolded. He was disappointed that they were carrying him away.

They burst through a thin plywood door into a home, the man flinging items off a rickety table, knocking them to the floor and placing Isaias's body on the board. His skin tingled. Cold. Freezing. He was shivering.

He reached up to touch his forehead. His hand came back wet. It didn't make sense. If the air was so icy in this house, why was he sweating so profusely?

The man mumbled some words to the woman, but Isaias couldn't quite make out what they meant. She screamed back at him. Tears streamed down her face.

He barked then stormed out of the house.

The room darkened. Isaias darted his eyes around. *They could, at least, pull back the plastic sheeting and let in some light*, he thought.

The woman sobbed from the adjoining room.

Isaias laid there for some time, staring at the ceiling constructed of found materials, small chunks of plywood, black felt paper, cracked ceramic tiles and the like. He traced the areas where water leaked in with his eyes as he tried to understand what happened and where he was. Nothing made any sense.

Isaias heaved. It was extremely painful. The piece of metal in his side dug in deeper when he convulsed. He reached for the twisted chunk, wanting to pull the debris from his body. Hands stopped him, placing his arm back at his side.

Then the room grew black.

Chapter Two

Galen

Only there is shadow under this red rock.
Come in under the shadow of this red rock,
And I will show you something
Different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The doctor, if you could call him that, rushed in and stitched Isaias back up. Everyone knew the man was a veterinarian. And not even that, for he lost his license when he was ejected from the city. He'd been relegated to caring for pleb sheep, working for food and shelter. He hated plebs.

As he ran out, the doctor said, "Fifty-fifty chance. If he's not already septic."

Isaias struggled to sit up.

His mother pushed him back down. "You can't move, fool. Lie there and do what I say. You have to heal."

"I'm not going to lay here and wait to die. I need to try to reach the hospital," Isaias said, yet there he stayed. His entire side was on fire.

After a few hours, they moved him to a basement where they were hiding the wounded.

Everyone understood what would happen next. The Agency men would come, kicking down doors and smashing in heads, looking for anyone who was near the scene of the heinous crime. They would take them away and interrogate them. Many wouldn't return. Isaias couldn't lie, saying he wasn't at the checkpoint when he had twenty sutures across his abdomen, so he laid there and held his mother's hand and tried to not make a sound in the darkness.

"Mother, you're going to have to hide. I have to do this. I have to try."

"You're a stupid boy, just like your father. You saw the girl with the package, why did you stand there like some fool watching the broadcast?"

“Edra,” he mumbled. “Her name was Edra.”

“I don’t care what her fool name was. She was a stupid girl, now she’s dead and because of her, I have to hide in a basement with my fool son.”

At first, Isaias thought he had a chance of healing without antibiotics since he hadn’t eaten in several days before the blast. There was nothing in his stomach or his intestines to leach out and poison him, he reasoned. But the sour flavor in his mouth and the yellow jaundiced appearance of his skin told him otherwise. No, he had to try to get past one of the checkpoints, to get some form of medical attention. He would go to his school. It was the only place in the city his bio-identifier gave him access anyway. He would throw himself at the mercy of the nurse. She would have to help, to take him to a real hospital. They would probably interrogate him, but, at least, he wouldn’t die.

Isaias coughed, then held his breath for the pain was excruciating. “I have to try, mother.”

She nodded finally, shaking her head in disgust. Later that night she took the last of her thread and sewed up his jacket where the metal had torn through.

In the morning, she helped him dress and hugged him. Isaias slung his backpack over his shoulder gingerly. A stab of pain reminded him of what he was doing. His flesh tore. He adjusted the cloth towel wrapped around his side, checking to make sure his side wasn’t bleeding through. His mother kissed his forehead then he walked out of the house, following the others along the path.

They’d closed checkpoint 17, obviously, since it was destroyed. So the group would have to make the three-kilometer walk to 18. *Not that far*, Isaias thought. He used to run the loop several times a day when he was training for pelota. He knew the path well, but right now three kilometers seemed like a walk to the moon. The hot sun was already causing moisture to bead on his head. He smelled of fetid, rotten flesh and fear-sweat. He tucked his elbow into his side, preventing the cloth from shifting, ignoring the pain.

He followed the others, trying to maintain pace, forcing his step and gait to be somewhat even in its awkwardness, not favoring either side. Pain stabbed him on each step now, like the metal was still lodged into his side, digging deeper with every move. He’d only gone halfway and he didn’t know if he would make it to 18.

He tried to shift the backpack. Perhaps distributing the weight more evenly across his shoulders would help, but when he did a blinding white light flashed across his eyes and his chest tightened. He gasped. “That really, really hurt. Don’t do that again.”

He cursed himself for not listening to his mother and carrying less in his sack. If he showed up at the checkpoint with less than a normal load, he reasoned, the soldiers might pull him aside for questioning. He wanted to make everything seem as common as possible. Now he realized how foolish an idea it was.

The people-choked checkpoint was in sight. No way he could turn around now; he had to go forward.

He wiped his hands on the side of his jacket again, but they were wet in only a few moments.

A hand grasped his elbow. He glanced to his left. “Hey Jess,” he mumbled, startled by her

appearance. "I don't think you want to be seen with me." The shakiness of his voice surprised him.

"Nonsense. You tried to help Edra. It's the least I can do. Just try to not say anything if possible. You look a wreck. I'll help you past the soldiers."

Jessia pushed her arm in his and propped up his body. Isaias hoped the blood leaking from his side wasn't going to stain the arm of her jacket.

"I wanted to ask you, did Edra tell you to avoid—"

She interrupted him before he could complete the sentence. "Don't say her name. You know better than that. And no. I was late waiting for Tamar."

"I missed you," Isaias said as he glanced over at her, knowing now was not the time to lose himself in the unbearable beauty of her eyes.

She looked back at him uncomfortably then forced her eyes forward.

"I look that bad?" he asked.

"You're white as a ghost. I can't believe you're doing this."

"I need medicine. Septic. I'm dying."

She exhaled hard as they reached the end of the checkpoint line and stopped. The two turned to face each other.

Isaias had a crush on Jessia for years for she was a pretty girl, but right now, in the blue light of the protection dome that shielded the city, she appeared as an angel to Isaias' eyes.

"Don't stare at me like that," Jessia said moving her eyes down and away.

"Like what?" he said, refusing to avert his gaze. If she was going to be the last person he saw before they dragged him away, he was going to let his eyes feast.

"Like you want to eat me, like I'm on the menu."

The two shuffled forward.

"Jessia, I don't want you to—"

She quickly cut him off. "We're friends, you know. I told you before. Just be quiet and try to act natural."

It took too much energy to argue, but he wouldn't drag his eyes from her. No, not now. Not when he was like this, the scent of death on him. So he continued to ogle her, studying her face, the way her chin curved slowly up to the bottom of her ear, softly arcing in a delicate curve. He loved her small ears and her long auburn hair. He loved the way she carried herself, her composure and stance, not off-putting, but with practical elegance. There was an indescribable quality about Jessia that Isaias found insanely attractive.

She tilted her head, glanced at him and smiled, flashing her dimples at him, then turned away. "Stop," Jessia moaned. "People are going to notice."

"I'm dizzy. I need to focus on something." He lied.

She looked up into his face with light brown eyes, staring back at him. "I'm trying to help you, you know."

"And I appreciate it," he whispered. He didn't have strength enough to speak much louder.

They took another step forward. There weren't much more in front of them, so they turned from each other, standing side by side. The guards didn't like people too close to each other,

regardless of relationship, because they might be hiding something.

One of the Agency men barked, "You plebs stink!"

Isaias hoped they wouldn't figure out the rank odor was coming from him and single him out. He clamped his arm tighter against his side.

Jessia placed her backpack on the scan table. Isaias saw a black, wet splotch on her sleeve. He had bled on her. Of course, that meant the blood had seeped all over his side. He shook his head lightly. It was too late to do anything about the stain now.

Isaias tried to ease his bag off quickly, without an edge of difficulty, but the stabbing pain made him gasp. One of the soldiers turned his head toward the young man and watched him intently. Isaias set his sack on the table and smiled at the man, tucking his elbow hard into his side.

Jessia stuck her arm in the bio-scanner. The soldier on the other side waved a baton at Isaias so he did the same, walked through, picked up his bag and shuffled away.

At the exit, Jessia stuffed her arm around his, supporting his weight, trying to make it seem as though they were amorous. "We're through. Now to school. It's not much farther. Look at me. Isaias, you can make it, can't you?"

He huffed air, squinted down, then nodded.

"Good, good. I'll have to release you when we get close. Once you're at the building, you can go to the infirmary and they'll take care of the rest."

Isaias tried to not talk as walking was hard enough.

When the school was in sight, Jessia released his arm and went ahead. Isaias waited for a few moments, stumbled towards the structure then on to the nurses' office where he nearly collapsed. White office tiles rushing towards his face was the last thing he remembered.

Voices mumbled around Isaias. Muffled. Distant. Isaias tried to open his eyes and found he couldn't. He attempted to move his arms, his legs, anything. His shoulders tensed. Nothing seemed to want to cooperate. His heart thudded dully in his chest as if it needed to rest in between beats. He relaxed, giving up on the effort.

Isaias laid there, shivering and delirious, trying to tilt his head at the shadows carved into his eyelids.

Voices. He tried to make out exactly what they were saying but they were too far away. And not clear at all. They sounded as if they were speaking through a tin cup. He made out one word: Isaias. His name. They were talking about him.

He pushed to move, to roll his head toward the sound of the voices, but his head didn't budge. He wondered if maybe it had moved and he couldn't feel his body. He tried to sense his fingers, then his toes. He wasn't sure if he was connected to his body. Was he dead? Was this what death was like? Being surrounded by cold, impenetrable darkness? Not being able to see or feel anything? Only hearing voices in the inescapable deep and not quite being able to make them out?

The sounds became louder. Two men. A door opening and the sound of footsteps struck his ears. They walked into the room and stood over him.

One said, "He's nearly healed. His side. It's time for the meds."

Another one spoke, his voice much deeper, "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely." The voice sounded hesitant.

Air pushed through a hose behind him. To Isaias' ears, the noise was much like a bicycle tire pump. The reddish shadows grew fuzzy and black.

A slow beeping noise monotonously pinged. A heart monitor. *I must be in the hospital.*

"Scalpel," a man's voice said behind him.

A pressure ironed across the back of his head. It wasn't painful.

Someone was back there poking on his head. He felt a tug. He wanted to speak, to tell them he was awake. He wanted to know what they were doing back there. His injury was only on his side, wasn't it? Why would they be sewing up his head?

"We'll tie the wet wire here," the voice behind him said.

Another yank shifted his neck, then another harder one.

Isaias tried to think. Had he hit his head? During the blast? No, his only wound was to his side. He recalled hiding in the basement with his mother, waiting for the Agency men to leave. He remembered Jessie helping him to pass through the checkpoint. He would be dead if it wasn't for her. He went to the nurses' office. He was woozy. He passed out. Maybe he hit his head on the way down?

Without warning white hot pain shot through his body. The black surrounding him was replaced by violent, stark white. Isaias gasped. His eyes popped open. He saw a man standing over him, a blurry, fuzzy man who barked, "He's awake." A cool liquid poured over the top of his brain and everything faded.

The next thing Isaias knew, he was sitting in a chair looking at the white coat of a man in front of him who was staring at the top of his head.

"Oh good. You're awake." The man grabbed Isaias's skull and held it steady. "I'm almost done examining your stitches. You had a nasty fall. Did you know that?"

Isaias mumbled, "What happened?" A heavy stupor clouded his mind.

"I'm doctor Ahmed. You're here at Agency General. The hospital. Do you remember anything?"

He pawed at his side and tried to peer down. The doctor repositioned his head forward.

"I was injured."

"Yes, yes, we patched that up. You hit your head too. I'm almost done examining your stitches. Tell me your name."

Name? The concept was slow coming. "Isaias. Isaias Cohen."

"Cohen? A pleb?"

"Yes, from Community 17."

“I see,” the doctor replied. He poked at Isaias’ right forearm. His bio-identifier flexed underneath.

The young man explained, “I’m being programmed. Hoping to soon be a citizen.” A high-pitched warbling noise jarred him. A clinking sound reported as the doctor set the instrument down on a table behind him. “Impressive. You’re looking really good.” The doctor turned back as the door opened and two men stepped in. One of them seemed vaguely familiar but Isaias wasn’t sure where he saw his face before.

The older of them smiled wide and spoke to the doctor without looking at him. “How’s he doing?”

“Fine. Just finished,” the doctor replied.

“You can go,” the smiling man said. Isaias recognized it was one of the voice’s he heard when he thought he was dead.

“My name is Galen. I work for the Agency,” the smiling man said.

Isaias heart sank. Even though he knew going to the hospital meant he would be interrogated about Edra’s actions, maybe even harmonized, he hoped he would somehow avoid it all.

“We need to ask you a few questions.” Galen nodded at the other man who retreated behind Isaias. Isaias tried to follow him with his eyes but found he couldn’t turn his head more than a few centimeters for something was attached to the back of his neck holding it securely.

Isaias reached his arm behind to feel what it was. Galen quickly grabbed his hand and set it back into his lap.

“You have a head injury. We’ve got a small bracket back there to aid in supporting the weight of your head. Did you know an average human head weighs approximately five kilograms?”

Isaias mumbled, trying to focus, “No, I—”

“Okay, so relax and look at me. Pay no attention to the man behind you or to anything he’s doing. Understand?”

Isaias attempted to nod, but couldn’t.

“Don’t move your head. Just speak. Do you understand?”

Isaias tried to form the words but they abruptly seemed difficult coming, as if something was impeding their flow. “Ye...Yea... Yes.”

“Good, good.” Galen peered behind Isaias and nodded.

Something moved near the back of his head. No, that wasn’t it exactly. Something was moving inside, something fluid-like, flowing, rinsing around in his head, like someone had the back of his skull cut open and was dripping lemon juice on his brain. Drip-drip-drip.

He reached his hand up again. Galen grabbed his wrist. He seemed upset. “If you do that again, I’m going to tie your arm down.”

“Y-y-yes.”

“Now, I’m going to ask you a series of questions. You are going to reply with a yes or a no. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Yes.” Isaias flashed a muted smile. Speaking was much less of a struggle that time.

“You were at checkpoint 17 when it was attacked.”

Galen waited for a response, but he had yet to ask a question. Isaias replied anyway, “Yes.”

“Good. Try to answer faster and we can get this over with much sooner. Now the person who blew up the checkpoint was named Edra.”

“Yes.”

“You knew her?”

“Yes.” He wanted to explain, to tell him she was only an acquaintance, that he only sat with her at supplements. He and his mother had nothing whatsoever to do with Edra or her crazy plan to kill herself and destroy the checkpoint. But he couldn’t seem to say anything other than yes. The words couldn’t come.

“You were aiding her in the freethinker plot?”

“N-n-no.”

“Good, good. We already knew that. Now, let’s continue. She was friend of yours?”

No, no, no. She wasn’t a friend. I can’t tell them that. “Yes.” He blanched as his mind reeled at the confession.

Galen peeked behind him, waited a few seconds then nodded. He returned his eyes to Isaias. “Thank you for speaking truthfully. I know that must have been difficult for you. You understand the Agency is here to help all people, both citizens and plebs?”

Isaias struggled. He recognized he couldn’t speak his mind about that. He couldn’t tell him he thought the Agency was evil to its core, thieves, liars and murderers. He thought of a nuanced answer but when he opened his mouth, all he was able to say was, “Yes.”

“Kelvin, did he get that one?” Galen said to the man behind Isaias.

The man must have nodded because Galen continued. “The freethinkers, they’re an evil lot. If it weren’t for them, Edra and all those people would be alive. Don’t you agree?”

His eyes momentarily dilated, the room flashed brighter. He squinted his eyes and rolled his head. *No, no, no. The freethinkers? They weren’t evil. They were freedom fighters. What Edra did was wrong, of course, and no way did he agree with that, but he understood their desperation. Blowing checkpoints was all they had left. Yet he still hated their tactics and they’d taken Edra from him. Misguided and wrong-headed. Certainly. But evil? No, he didn’t think that.*

“Kelvin?” Galen said.

Nausea seized Isaias’ stomach as fluid washed across his tongue, pooling in his mouth. His jaw fell open and drool poured out.

Galen waved his hands. “Shut it down. It’s too much. We’ll pick this back up in a few hours. Let him rest.”

Isaias’ body slumped forward, his chin pinning into his chest. Liquid poured across his brain and everything went black.

He woke to see Galen standing in front of him again as if he only blinked.

Galen nodded at someone behind him and said, “You dozed off. We’re going to continue as before. You reply yes or no to my questions. All right? The last thing I said was about the freethinkers. Wouldn’t you agree they’re a rotten bunch? Their actions are what got your friend

killed.”

Isaias wanted to respond. He wanted to say something, but somewhere deep inside of him a ‘yes’ was bubbling up. He knew that’s what he should say. He was supposed to lie, to tell them whatever they wanted to hear so he could get out of there. Somehow he couldn’t do that. He had to tell the truth; he was being compelled by some unseen force.

Then it hit him. They were doing something to him—the guy behind him—what was his name? Kelvin?—something to his brain to make him tell the truth. Isaias was going to have to say ‘no’ because that’s what he truly believed, wasn’t it? He didn’t think the freethinkers were evil. He disagreed with some of their more radical methods, but their position, at its core, was to help all plebs.

“Yes,” Isaias said. He puzzled. *Why did I lie?* Isaias tried to think, but he was confused. Everything seemed momentarily scrambled. What *did* he think? Were they evil?

They gave Edra a vest, taught her how to detonate the explosives and, in effect, killed her and all of those people. Only a few guards died, but how many plebs? It was a heinous act. Evil at its core.

Isaias struggled to move then looked up into Galen’s face, wide-eyed. He babbled, “Yes, yes, yes. Free thinkers evil. Yes.”

Galen placed his hand on his shoulder to calm him. “Good, good. You’re coming along fine now. Try not to get too excited.”

The questions continue for what seemed like hours. Every once in a while, Isaias was given a short break in which he would rest his chin on his chest and quickly drift off to sleep. He was beginning to really enjoy his little talks with Galen. They had so much in common!

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