

TALES FROM THE EXODUS I

EVAN HARPER

NI E O NI

UNIVERSE



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www.theneonuniverse.com

welcome@theneonuniverse.com

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“What I found could change everything, everything we are going through, and I can prove it, it just a matter of finding anyone who cares at this point [...]”

- Rhea Lutz, 2095

THE LAST TEAR



“Three”

“Four”

“Five”

“Six”

“Seven”

“Eight”

Gabriel swiftly closes the cylinder of his old revolver with a shake of the hand. He leaves it on a wooden table. The workshop in the small cottage is only lit by the sunbeams entering through the windows, dust particles swirling around the god rays.

Gabriel is in his late forties, unkept beard, black as his hair, and tired green eyes.

He takes his lever-action wooden .22 caliber long rifle, which stands next to the table, and starts loading sixteen rounds. He leaves it on the table and takes a backpack where he puts more ammo, a couple of bandages, a canteen, and a knife tied to the side.

Finally, he takes a bunch of papers, all of them drawn maps of the same area. He pulls out one of them and rests it on the table. There are a few spots marked on it: a cabin, a lake, a store, a hospital and a lookout post. With a pencil, taken from a nearby drawer, Gabriel starts to carefully trace a line between the cabin and the hospital, the graphite caressing the paper to delineate a deliberate route as he actively avoids certain areas of the map.

“Gabriel!” a woman’s voice comes from another room.

“Just a minute! I’m almost ready!” answers Gabriel without looking away from the map; at last, the pencil reaches the hospital.

“40 minutes,” he whispers to himself.

Gabriel takes a step back and looks over the table, making sure that he has everything set. After nodding slightly to himself, he takes a deep breath and exhales before exiting the room.

“There you are,” says the woman we heard before, she’s Ana, a beautiful woman also in her forties, blond hair, “Alicia wanted to tell you something.”

Gabriel turns his look to a little girl, who leaves her intense drawing to come by his side. He kneels next to her with an intrigued expression.

“Dad, I was thinking about you leaving today, and I realized it’s not necessary.”

Gabriel smiles. “And why is that exactly?”

“Because,” she pauses to breathe and think of an answer, “me and mom are going to miss you very very much,” she says looking at Ana, “what if you never come back?”

Gabriel looks at his wife, who smiles back, and then inquisitively stares at Ali.

“How many times have I left home and haven’t come back?”

She stops to think for a moment, lost in her thoughts while staring at the ceiling.

“Never?”

“That’s right, and it’ll stay that way”

“Alright” said the child satisfied with the answer before hugging his dad’s leg.

“Now go draw, that fortress’s looking pretty good!”

“It’s not a fortress!” she answers playfully, “it’s The City!”

Gabriel chuckles before waiting for Ali to start get back to her drawing. He looks at Ana before sitting next to her.

Ana whispers, “She’s been asking me about that city every night, and I’m just making stuff up! Are you sure you want to do this?”

“What else can we do darling? Sit here forever? Just the three of us? Ali can’t live like that; she deserves more than growing up alone in a hostile environment”

“I know, I just want to keep us safe, and I’m not sure I trust your home dad instincts for a journey like that,” says Ana, winking to Gabriel as she smiles, “even though you’ve been amazing this far.”

“Let’s stick to the plan, I’ll go to the hospital today and I’ll take as much insulin as I can,” he stops for a brief moment to look at Ali, who keeps rearranging the wooden blocks, “then I’ll be back, luckily I’ll be able to hunt something on my way and then we’ll have a lovely dinner” he says kissing Ana on the cheek, “If we leave tomorrow, it should be just about a week to the coast, I’m positive we will find a boat on the harbor and we’ll set to Florida.”

Ana looks hesitant, her eyes lower to the ground.

“We’ll get to The City, trust me, there’s no doubt in mind that we’ll be there and we’ll find it and have an absolutely wonderful life.” he kisses her and smiles before heading back to the room and getting himself ready.

With the revolver holstered, the .22 hanging on his back, and the backpack fully ready, he stands on the door and looks back, “Be back in a minute, have fun and rest, tomorrow we start anew”. He smiles and closes the door behind him.

He starts to walk away from the cottage that had served as their home for the last few months.

Gabriel had always been an idealist, that’s one of the things that caught Ana’s attention when they met 16 years prior.

Now, he was fantasizing about the city that everybody had been talking about; no one really knew who started the rumor, a neighbor said he met a guy that the maid of the vice president overheard a conversation about it. It didn’t really matter where it came from, if it was true, Gabriel was determined to see with his own eyes.

Almost 30 minutes went by with Gabriel not even realizing it, lost in his thoughts while hunting a few hares with the rifle. He had been closely following the planned route on the map when he suddenly saw something he hadn’t seen in a while: a black-tailed deer.

He stops in his tracks, trying to be as quiet as possible, “it’s about 22 meters away,” he thinks to himself while the deer peacefully eats grass, unaware of the lurking predator.

Gabriel had never been a fan of hunting, but obviously, the new world asks for people to reevaluate their whole way of living.

His look is fixed on the prey, as he slowly takes the rifle from his back, careful not to disturb the animal. He looks through the scope, raises the hammer, and tries to lock a shot to the head while holding his breath.

Suddenly, something sends chills down his spine, he realizes that two trees around the deer have clearly defined scratch marks; a defining feature of the last animal we would want to encounter in the forest. He looks off the scope to verify the sight.

Right as he realizes the gravity of the situation, the deer abruptly looks in his direction and starts running, he has been so focused on his prey that he has ignored the noises behind him; the crushing leaves and sticks, the low and steady breathing, now he is the prey.

In a split second, as soon as he hears the growling behind him, he jumps forward letting the rifle fall. Even though his reflexes had been as fast as possible, he felt the claws of the bear denting his skin near his ribs. As the rifle falls, loaded and hammered, it shoots on its own right next to Gabriel.

His ears ring as the beast gets startled for a few seconds. Feeling the ripped tissue on his torso, Gabriel doesn't leave a chance to doubt, and while crawling backwards as fast as he can, he unholsters the revolver. The bear, now back from his instant confusion, steps back and launches forward towards Gabriel who barely avoids the creature's attack rolling to his size. Three dry shots silence the air. Gabriel crawls a few meters towards a tree, his eyes closed in pain from the wounds.

For a few seconds, there was silence, only broken by Gabriel's heavy and shaky breathing. He looks at the leaves on the tree right above him, which delicately wave with the draft.

He breathes. Right next to him, the 250 kilograms of creature is lying dead. He slowly drags himself to lean on a nearby trunk. He opens the backpack and takes out some bandages. Before opening them, he takes off half of his jacket, dripped with blood. Using the knife, he cuts through his shirt to reveal the wound and proceeds to cleanse it using the water from the canteen. As he does that, suppressing the pain, he lays his head on the tree looking upwards.

He looks back at the claw marks, realizing that it's not a deep wound. He breathes relieved as he cuts the rest of his shirt open and takes off the other half of the jacket.

Even though he still bleeding, the water has cleared a lot of the blood, so he opens the bandages pack and starts compressing it around his torso. The bandage pushes the injury, spiking the pain. Once he finishes, he puts the jacket back on, zips it up and closes the backpack.

He carefully stands up, but realizes that he will be able to finish his mission, for Ali.

He picks up the rifle and puts it on his back again along with the backpack, after which he takes the map from his pocket and puts his finger on the hospital, trying to figure out his current location

“10 minutes, you got it”.

He starts hiking again through the forest, concentrating on his breath to ignore the pain; before he can even think about it, he distinguishes a huge building beyond the trees. With a sigh of relief, he keeps going until he reaches the main door of the hospital.

He pushes it with both his hands, the hinges squeaking as he opens it. Besides an endless hallway, there's an abandoned reception to his left, all of it mainly dark, excluding the light entering through the main door and some open rooms.

He enters the building cautiously, looking around.

Gabriel enters the reception and browses, quickly searching through papers and glancing through the documents hanging on the wall.

"There you are," he thinks to himself as he rips off a map of the hospital stapled to a corkboard. He clears the main desk with a hand sweep and lays the map on it, "the pharmacy should be somewhere nearby...".

As he slides his finger through the map slowly, a faint sound echoes in the distance, he glances around and waits quietly for a few seconds- He can hear something.

Suddenly, a taunting voice reverberates across the hallways, along with the faint steps of a large group of people walking down some stairs.

"Ho Ho Ho! It must be Christmas, cause apparently someone brought us a present!" The sentence is immediately followed by two shots. Gabriel puts his hands on his mouth ducking.

"I'm talking to you fucker! We saw you enter the building!"

Gabriel's blood freezes, he looks at the main door as the steps sound closer and faster. He crouches and starts moving slowly towards the main door. All of a sudden, the steps coming from the hallways turn into running, he starts running towards the main door, opening it in a trice when

two armed men appear from outside the buildings, guns pointing at him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I was just coming for supplies for my—” he says as he carefully steps backwards with both hands raised.

Click. The hammer of a gun raises up as the barrel touches Gabriel’s back of the head. A rough movement takes the rifle away from him.

“Now, gently take one step to the front and turn away, very, very slowly” says the same voice screaming in the hallways.

Gabriel does as he’s told, his eyes darting between the men in front as he turns. When he faces backwards, his breathing hastens. There are seven men looking at him. One of them, closer to Gabriel, is pointing a gun at him, and smiles.

“Looks like we have another little rat coming in, trying to infest our building, scavenging and stripping us of our sustenance.” says the man. He’s blond, but balding on the sides, older, his tired face is pointy and wrinkled. He wears a dirty doctor attire.

“I-I just—” Gabriel tries to speak.

“Shut up!” screams the man before looking around at the surroundings, “Come on out or I’ll blow his head off!” he yells at the forest, looking everywhere around the trees.

“Three”

“Two”

Gabriel whimpers and shrugs, his voice failing him.

“One”

The blond man looks at Gabriel and bites his lip with a worried look on his face.

“Are you alone?”, he asks still alternating between Gabriel and the surroundings.

Gabriel nods.

“Guys, step back inside.”

The men behind the blond guy start to make their way back into the hall, stopping at the intersection and creating a blockade on the hallway.

The man with the gun starts walking backwards slowly still pointing at Gabriel. The men outside wait still pointing at him.

“Now, we are going to come inside, just here to the entrance, quietly, and slowly.” says the blonde man to Gabriel, “and you two scan the area, just to make sure” he proceeds to tell the two men on the outside.

Gabriel hesitates, he slowly turns back to see the two men still targeting him. He slowly nods as he turns his head back and starts walking.

In a slow waltz, the two men walk slowly, entering the hospital without looking off of each other. When the blond man stops, Gabriel does as well.

“Now, kneel down and hand me that revolver,” he says.

Gabriel kneels down, his still hands in the air before giving the man his weapon.

“What are you doing here?” asks the mysterious man.

Gabriel can barely use his voice, “I came here for medication for my daughter.”

The man looks inquisitively at Gabriel, “Sure, medication for your daughter, just like any other junkie that comes in here.” The man starts pacing from side to side, methodically, still pointing the gun.

“Listen, man, let me show you something, it’s just a drawing” says Gabriel. He fidgets and struggles to get a folded drawing out of the interior pocket of his jacket. He gently unfolds the child’s drawing, which depicts him, his wife and his daughter all three of them wearing backpacks near some trees.

“These are my wife, Silvia, and my daughter, Alicia, she’s got diabetes, and I need insulin from the pharmacy” says Gabriel, almost begging, with tears running down his eyes.

The blonde man remains quiet, staring at the drawing.

“Yummy, looks like two cookies I’d take a bit off!”, a man from the group interrupts the silence. Swiftly, the man with the gun turns back, points the gun at the man and shoots him straight in the head.

The others startle and push towards the walls, Gabriel almost falls from the scare. The body of the man falls limp to the ground, the dry thud amplified by the halls. The silence is only broken by heavy breaths while the blood starts to spread through the floor.

“Burn the body and wait for me at the cafeteria, right now.” says the man with the gun, cold as ice. The other men obey him after composing themselves and start dragging the body. The blood smears and leaves a trail as they do.

The blonde man lowers the gun and looks at Gabriel.

“Stay right there, you said insulin, right? I’m guessing from a short to long-term effect.”

Gabriel nods, still shocked by the situation.

The man leaves through the halls, saying “You wouldn’t have found it anyway.”

After a few long seconds, the steps of the man fade in the distance. Gabriel, still kneeling and holding the drawing, looks around and back at the door. He stares at it, contemplating leaving the building.

He thinks of Alicia, drawing back at their current shelter, he thinks of Ana, waiting for him, foraging around the area, hopeful for the journey, or the destination. He looks at the blood trail just a few meters in front of him. He looks down at the floor as tears continue to drop from his eyes, one of them falling on to the drawing, which he slightly squeezes.

Seconds run by like water, as do minutes, when Gabriel snaps back at the sound of steps coming down the hallway. A plastic sound accompanies them. The blond man appears from the corner with a first aid bag, which he leaves on the ground before kneeling in front of Gabriel.

“There you have it, both insulin and other medical supplies to heal that wound” he says pointing to Gabriel’s bandaging.

After looking at the drawing for a few seconds, he looks back at Gabriel and proceeds to talk, “Listen, I just want you to take this and take care of your little girl” he pauses and breathes heavily, “36 years ago, a motherfucker took my daughter out to the woods after school and did some

horrible things to her; after the fact, he beat her to a pulp hoping she wouldn't live."

The man stops for a second, and looks at Gabriel before extending his hand to the drawing, "Can I?", he asks. Gabriel gives him the drawing and the man stares at it before continuing.

"An old woman found her like that while walking her dog, sent her to the hospital I was working at, right here, just a few floors up; the guy ended up in jail, but my little girl, Ana, ended up in a coma."

The man starts sobbing, incapable of stopping himself, "eight months later, a military strike dismantled the power of the city, as the lights went out, so did my daughter's soul, I've never left since then, still visit her room every day."

The man drags the bag towards Gabriel, "Do you mind if I keep it?" he says referring to the drawing. Gabriel denies, "No, of course.", the man nods and bitterly smiles with appreciation before taking it. He stares at the sketch for a few seconds.

"I couldn't take care of my girl; you take care of yours."

A FROZEN HOPE



As the resources essential for a working society had nearly vanished, no hope remained.

The woods echoed with a terrible silence, a stark reminder of a civilization thrown into a disturbing stillness, a message from a world that ended as we knew it.

The withered ends of old tree branches spread out like desperate hands, looking at a sky deprived of modernity's hum and buzz, thriving in the absence of massive activity.

For the people though, it was a barren landscape where the lack of supplies tossed shadows across the land, matching the emptiness of its residents' hearts after the staggering situation.

The war devastated the country in a matter of years, even with all the security measures carried by the former government.

When rumors about a city of warmth and wealth circulated in the inhospitable region, it was a sign of a former lifestyle, still prospering, all vivacious and vibrant; with resources thought lost during the war still accessible, hope started to take place in people's life.

They started to dream again.

Karla, a single mother whose husband had disappeared six years earlier during the war, and her young son, Luv, decided to embark on a journey that would take them far far away, carrying weights on their backs and leaving footprints in the freezing snow, all in search of that city across the ocean.

The City was believed by many to be their sole hope, as the piercing cold was growing harsher in the North; if a refuge

of light and life where electricity and resources remained intact even existed, it was worth the try.

Karla and Luv's connection was as strong as the biting cold that surrounded them. In the wrinkles that carved on her face, the mother, with calmed resolve, bore the heaviness of both the past left behind and the future that was yet to come, not only for her, but for her son.

She marched forward with steadfast determination, dressed in shabby clothes that barely kept her warm. Luv, still 11 years old, held his mother's hand tightly, as if it was the only anchor in a sea of uncertainty, mystery and fear, his eyes expressed both innocence and unflinching curiosity about their journey.

He had so many questions he wanted to ask, but the icy weather and his poorly tailored scarf stopped him from opening his mouth whenever unnecessary.

Their enthusiasm to escape the tight grasp of the frozen woods and embark on a dicey journey across the Atlantic Ocean was projected through every heavy breath, which dispersed into the chilling air.

Their final destination was not an ordinary city; it was a whispered story about a place they believed would provide a beam of light and warmth to their miserable life. Their determination was fueled by the existence, though uncertain, of a city in the United States, a refuge where electricity, which like a mythical power, fought the pervasive darkness. The relentless pursuit of this far away haven became the lifeblood of their existence, a shared yearning that pulled mother and son together in the face of insurmountable challenges.

The cold weather was not their only hurdle; the entire journey proved to be an exhaustive examination of their

physical and emotional endurance. The freezing winds howled like melancholic ghosts as they traveled, piercing their bodies, and the frozen ground under them was a constant threat, making each step a struggle against their harsh surroundings.

They encountered huge snow drifts that blocked their way, forcing them to navigate through the frozen maze. Harsh storms tried to stop them, even attacking them with dazzling snowflakes that pricked like a thousand tiny needles above their heavy clothing. Throughout the journey, the stinging cold made their fingers and toes numb and brittle; the weight of their survival became a burden with each step.

Emotional struggles hovered as gloomy shadows alongside the physical hardships. The mother carried the freight of the entire universe on her shoulders, overburdened with the responsibility of protecting her child from the unpleasant realization of her own ignorance about the existence of their destination.

However, she maintained a spark of hope in her eyes serving as a lighthouse amongst the darkest of seas. Despite every hardship and struggle, the woman's gaze remained fixed on a far horizon, her unwavering determination glowing like a weak glow against the pitch blackness.

The bitterly cold route through the mountains and forests finally ended, but another challenge awaited them: crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

When they first arrived at the port in Bremerhaven, the city seemed like a ghost town, its buildings, although impressive in their architecture, were run down, half eaten by the nature that was once subdued by human technology. They walked the streets, covered in snow,

leaving a trail behind like Thumbling. The deserted buildings around them appeared somewhat menacing, as if anything could come out of them at any moment.

As they approached the port, they started hearing mixed voices in the distance, with a man giving instructions louder than everyone else; it was the first time they heard someone else's voice since they left the village. A mixture of fear and hope filled them in an instant, as they slowly approached the row.

Finally, they saw a group of around 30 to 60 people gathering in a long line towards the ramp of a big gullet, with a hefty man shouting around, organizing the people around him. You could barely hear the people whispering and commenting throughout the line, their voices tired, their faces weary as their clothes.

They boarded on the ship to cross the ocean, and for the first time in weeks, Karla breathed a sigh of relief. They sat in a corner with many other individuals crossing the oceans with their own aspirations and needs. Throughout their whole journey, they kept walking. It was the first time they had taken a break.

The curious boy couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. He was curious as to why they had left their native land and where they were going in the face of such adversity. He finally had the opportunity to question his mother. "Where are we going, mother?" he questioned innocently.

"To the land of wonder" His mother answered. Despite the hard realities of their journey, the mother decided to tell tales of enchantment and magic filled with warmth and hope. "To a city beyond imagination, a place where power flowed without restriction, creating a warm radiance throughout the streets and buildings, adorned with prosperity, at night the light appears to be as beautiful as

the stars," she stated, recognizing her son's dissatisfaction with her first response. The little boy listened intently and attentively.

"You know, my dear, in the city we are looking for, the streets are not covered with ice, but with sparkling glassy roads surrounded by greenery that captures the very essence of sunlight. The buildings touch the sky, and at night, their lights dance like fireflies."

These stories, set up from the depths of her imagination, became a refuge from the agonizing cold, a reminder to a world where fantasies and hopes triumphed over reality's brutal grasp.

"How, Mother?" "How can there be light when we only see darkness?" Her son unknowingly asked another question that was bothering him.

"Ah! That's the magic of The City. It accomplishes this through the use of a power known as electricity. It works like a wizard's charm to keep the darkness at bay. And in there, every house has its own lighting to keep away the darkness. People walk beneath the enchanting lights, whenever and wherever and their faces shine with warmth even on the coldest nights." His mother responded with enthusiasm.

"Do you think we'll get to see it, Mother?" Another innocent question from the son.

"I believe we will, my love." The journey is challenging but our hearts hold a secret, a miraculous key to this magnificent realm." She responded by giving him, and herself, a glimmer of hope.

As the enchanting stories unfolded, the son couldn't help but ask another question, his eyes sparkling with amazement.

"If there's a place like that, why don't people from where we live join us? "Why are we going there by ourselves?"

"Hope Luv! Not everyone understands the power of hope, my love. Some people are hesitant to believe in things they cannot see. But, my dearest, we have a spark of hope within us. We're like roaming magicians, telling stories of enchantment and bravery to everyone who would listen."

The son smiled and his curiosity eased for a moment. The magical stories, told in hushed tones to protect them from the piercing realities, provided relief for the little boy. His eyes, which had before been filled with the brutal realities and struggles of their journey, now twinkled with the wonder of possibilities.

With each story his mother told him about the magical city, the weight of their problems appeared to lighten for a short period, replaced by the hope of a better tomorrow. The stories, like a quilt sewn from strands of hope, became their compass, directing them through the bitter obstacles towards the mystical city, a place where even the coldest of hearts might find warmth, according to the tales.

However, as they got closer to the unreachable goal of "The City," anxiety rose like an invisible storm on the horizon. In the face of the brutal reality around them, the once vibrant tales of the enchanted city began to fade. Doubt seeped into the corners of their minds like a creeping breeze. The mother struggled with the question as well.

"Does The City genuinely exist, or is it only a fiction of hope in a world covered in cold, brutal truths?"

They successfully crossed the ocean after several days. They had to swim all the way to the land since the ship did not drop them off.

They anticipated encountering the enchanted city, but instead were greeted by another cold region. In the gloomy embrace of the cold night, the mother and son started their challenging journey. They had walked, climbed, swum through cold rivers, and run for kilometers, demonstrating their determination to reach the end. They were exhausted so they decided to take a little break.

They gathered in front of a little flickering fire as the darkness deepened; because they had grown up in a chilly wilderness, they managed to flick flames easily. The fire failed to give them the warmth that their exhausted bodies demanded. The son remained silent as if he had lost all his spirit during the journey.

To keep the optimism and hope alive, the mother began her fascinating story about the lovely city. But as they grew sleepier and colder, the story was unable to be finished.

The words faded away in the same way that dreams do. The mother's final words, loaded with love and a kind of farewell, remained in the silent night. They vanished into the darkness, leaving behind the idea of a magical city and stories yet to be told.

The hope still lingered in the air but everything else faded somewhere in the darkness.

UNDER THE MIDNIGHT SUN



“Close your eyes.”

“Inhale.”

“Exhale.”

“Feel the morning breeze slowly caressing your skin, the smell of fresh mountain grass, listen to birds around you...”

“Inhale.”

“Exhale.”

“Imagine yourself in the city, let the vision sink in.”

“Inhale”

“You are safe”

“Exhale”

“You are comfortable”

“Hey Xiang, come here, look at what I got!” a male voice broke Xiang’s concentration, she opened her eyes and turned towards the voice. She was 36 years old, dark, straight hair, her face youthful and slim built.

She stood up and walked towards the man, “Zimo! I told you not to yell like that while I’m meditating,” she slowly approaches, realizing he had a water deer and three rabbits next to him and his bow strapped to his back.

“That is impressive though, could serve us for a couple of days,” she continued.

“I know, lucky hunt and impressive skills mixed together” answered Zimo, panting. He was slightly younger, also with

dark hair, and he had a wide smile on his face, “all those years training with my brother is serving me well.”

Xiang smiled, “Absolutely! And me too,” she said as she picked up the rabbits, “we should celebrate with a strong breakfast, we have quite a few kilometers to advance today”.

Zimo picked up the water deer and walked behind her towards the camp, “What’s the hurry? there’s no deadline to get there, we don’t even have a location!”

“I know, but it’s been too long already, I want to feel safe, stop running away from conflicts.”

There was a short silence, while both of them left the game next to the tent and Zimo started to work on a fire with some sticks and stones.

“I’m sorry, you’re right.” he said as he clashed two stones to create a spark. Xing was gathering ingredients from a fabric bag inside the tent.

“Maybe if you told me more about this whole thing, I’d understand you better.” Zimo continued, “it’s painful, I understand that, but after two years together I should know something about it. And I told you about the passing of Yuan.”

“I know, I’ll tell you soon, trust me” she said, getting out of the tent.

“I do trust you, I’m with you in the middle of nowhere, going somewhere that may or may not exist for a future that may or may not come.” Zimo finally sparked the fire.

“It’s not like I’m deciding everything, I still don’t get why you wanted to come through the mountains, the valley would have been much faster” Xiang replied.

“The valley will be filled with people, most of them dangerous I bet, and I insist, scouting the old farms will set us up for weeks”

“How far are we again? From the farms.” Xing asked while peeling a rabbit.

“A couple of days, depending on our pace, we can stay there for a few nights before the final stretch to the coast, our little hideout just for a bit”

“I hope you’re right and it is what you’re –,” suddenly, Xiang stops and looks at the horizon before looking at the sky around her, “Did you hear that?” she asked.

“Hear what?” answered Zimo, distracted.

“It sounded like a helicopter, in the distance,” she said.

“It must have been an animal or something, there’s no chance the military is here, there’s nothing valuable for them,” said Zimo, now lying next to the fire.

“You’re probably right, it would be strange, but I’d swear I heard it”.

After breakfast, both Xiang and Zimo packed their tent and their bags and continued their journey. They walked for hours up through the steep slopes of the mountains surrounding them, focusing on their breathing only interrupted by short conversations from time to time. The icy upper half of the mountain was proving to be a hard challenge, with the cold piercing their skin.

“We should get to a lower ground, the sun will set down in a few hours” said Zimo, feeling the mist as he spoke, “we can set up the camp and continue tomorrow, we are quite close to the farms.”

And so, they kept trekking for a few hours to a lower station on the mountain, where they found a fire watch tower.

“Look at that! It should be empty, right?” said Xiang pointing to the metallic tower, “looks like a cozy spot for a change,” she looked back at Zimo and smiled.

They entered the tower, with Zimo holding his bow, drawn towards the space. The sun was starting to set, but the cramped space was quickly lit once Xiang opened one of the windows.

“Doesn’t look bad at all, do you think your farm can get better than this?” said Xiang as she dropped her bag and looked around. The place had been clearly empty for years, as dust covered almost every inch. There was a bed, a desk with a radio station and a small kitchen.

“This feels like a time capsule, like someone just moved on and left their life here before the war started,” said Xiang. Zimo slapped the bed a few times to get rid of some dust and laid their sleep bags on top of it before resting on it. Xiang walked around the room.

She picked up a safety pamphlet with instructions in the case of spotting a fire, “It feels ironic to read a safety manual now, doesn’t it?” she looked at Zimo, who was staring at the ceiling, dazed. She sat down on the desk and came close to it as if working.

After getting the dust off of some forgotten documents and fidgeting with the radio dials, she took the radio

microphone “[Ghhh] Radio Earth to Zimo, Radio Earth to Zimo [Ghhh], are you there?” she said before looking back.

“Yes, I’m sorry, I’m exhausted, what did you say about safety?” he said sitting up on the bed.

“Nothing, it’s just nostalgic to see all of this, to imagine how the world was not too many decades ago, thinking of this radio thing working.” she answered, “[Ghhh] Isn’t it fun Zimo? [Ghhh] Talking from miles away.”

Zimo lets out a small laugh and smiles at Xiang.

“It absolutely is, but we should get some rest, cook something early tomorrow and continue towards the farms”, said Zimo.

“Wow, where is that laid back attitude from this morning? Were the oxygen levels too low up in the mountain?” said Xiang while standing up from the desktop chair.

“You know, I’ve been thinking it through while on the way here, and I do want to see that city, if there’s one at all.” Zimo looked through the window.

“Okay, I know what you’re doing, I’ll tell you about it.”

Zimo looked back at Xiang, “Really?”

“Really, come on out”, Xiang opened the door of the room leading to a 360° balcony outside on the tower. Zimo stands up and walks towards her, now resting her arms on the fence.

The night was palely lit by the moon behind a curtain of clouds, you could distinguish the forest going for kilometers in each direction. The silence was only adorned by the smooth breeze dancing through the trees.

“I learnt about the city thirteen years ago, while the government still existed, a few years after the war arrived here.”

“How?” Zimo asked curiously.

Xiang remained in silence for a while.

“I was the assistant of an important person back then; they told me about it. That’s why they all disappeared, why the war blew up, at least that’s what I believe. I was taking care of my mother at the time in her later stages of dementia.”

Zimo extended an arm over Xiang, embracing her towards him, “I’m so sorry, it must’ve been hard.”

“The thing is that one day, this person came into my house off duty and sat down with me in the kitchen. They told me they were leaving along with thousands of people from the government system, they told me to go with them to a secret place, away from the war, from all of them, a place with enough resources for everybody. They had received an offer that they could not resist, and they were sharing it with me.” Xiang stopped.

For a moment, there was silence again.

“And what did you say?”

“I said no, I said that I appreciated the offer and would wish them the best of luck, but I had to stay, for my mother. They asked me to not tell anyone about it and disappeared, both from my house and the world as far as I know.”

The silence lasted for much longer this time.

“I see,” said Zimo.

“My mom died six years ago, and ever since then I’ve been thinking about it, about the offer, especially when I met you.”

“And with all communications locked, you want to get there by ourselves.” Zimo said reflectively, “I really appreciate you telling this to me. Where is it then? That place.”

“In North America, somewhere near Lake Michigan” answered Xiang.

“That is... Far,” said Zimo, almost thinking out loud, “but we’ll get there, I’m sure, especially if we go to sleep now and reach the farms tomorrow, come on” Zimo gently walked with Xiang towards the bed, still embraced. They laid there, with Xiang asleep while Zimo quietly sobbed next to her, staring at the ceiling.

After a few hours, with both of them asleep, a sound woke up Xiang, it was faint and distant, but she was sure, it was a helicopter, but what was it doing there. She silently stepped out of the room towards the balcony.

She was positive, there was a familiar hum in the distance, one she hadn’t heard in a long while. She looked back at Zimo, thinking of waking him up, but the sound was fading in the distance. Xiang was puzzled, was she dreaming?

She sat down there in the balcony, with her legs crossed, and started to focus.

“Close your eyes.”

“Inhale.”

“Exhale.”

“Listen to the breeze, smell the trees, covered by the night’s dew, feel your body slowing down, the smooth wind on the top of the fire tower.”

The next morning, they started their early routine as usual, Xiang packing up their things while Zimo cooked stakes from the water deer. The day had risen sunny and warm. You could hear the animals running around in the forest, the birds singing and flying near the fire tower. The smell of the cooking spices added flavor to the scene.

“You are the bravest person I know,” said Zimo, breaking the silence, “I want you to know that.”

Xing was surprised by the sudden words and looked at Zimo, approaching him to kiss him, “I’m glad you know now”. She went back to preparing the bags.

“Me too, there’s just one thing nagging me, something I wanted to ask you about last night but it didn’t feel like the right time”, continues Zimo.

“Tell me then” answered Xiang.

“Who was it? Who told you about it?”

Xiang hesitated and remained in silence for a few long seconds.

“It doesn’t matter now, does it? It’s been more than a decade.” insisted Zimo.

“I guess it doesn’t anymore, it was Chang Heng,” said Xiang.

“Chang Heng? The Minister of Science and Technology?” Zimo stopped cooking to look at Xiang. She nodded

without taking her look off the bags. Zimo took a deep breath and looked into the distance through the window.

“Thank you for telling me,” He continued, “your mother was a very lucky woman.”

They remained in silence until breakfast. Xiang was praying to the world around her for them to safely arrive on the coast, worried about the sound she heard last night. Zimo, meanwhile, kept cooking with a worried look on his face, stirring the pot almost mechanically.

After finishing their usual affairs, they took off to forest, with Zimo, who insisted that their next stop had to be the farms, taking the lead on the route.

The sun accompanied them during the day, creating crepuscular rays all around them through the leaves and the trees. Animals crossed their path from time to time; luckily for them, they were mostly rabbits, lizards and deer. The view was endearing and the day warm, but both Xiang and Zimo remained silent for the most part of the day, saving their breaths and their thoughts for themselves.

It was a couple hours after noon when they unexpectedly saw a complex in the distance.

“There they are, the farms,” said Zimo succinctly.

Xiang looked at the various buildings, which were well maintained. There were no animals outside, but she could spot a few skulls and bones spread throughout the pastures.

“How do you know these are empty? It looks very well kept to me,” asked Xiang, who had been a few steps behind for the whole day.

“My little brother was working here when the war started, he told me they all left as soon as the news came in.” said Zimo before taking a heavy breath.

Xiang thought for a while before answering, “It’s beautiful to spend some days here then, for him and for us” she smiled at Zimo who briefly turned around to look at her.

They finally arrived at the main house of the farm through a dirt path, Xiang noted that the dirt seemed a bit stirred, but Zimo brushed it off as animals and the weather.

They spent the afternoon together, looking around the farm. They found lots of tools, seeds, and many memories from the family that lived there. It was a relaxed, joyful day, unlike most of the days in the years before that moment. They spotted some wild animals in and around the perimeter and Zimo hunted while Xiang picked up a variety of vegetables and mushrooms growing wildly.

As the sunset set in, Xiang found a wine cellar, sneaking in to get a couple of bottles, a surprise for Zimo for a night they deserved. When she arrived at the living room of the main house, where they had set up their camp, Zimo had turned on a fire in the chimney, lighting the house with a welcoming tone. The inside of the house was wooden, mostly painted white, with huge openings between the living spaces instead of doors. It was a cozy place; Xiang could almost see the family having dinner together on a cold winter night.

They sat down next to the fire and cooked deer loins on the chimney. In that moment, Xiang thought to herself, everything was perfect, Zimo, the food, the fire, the house, the farm; he was right, it had been a great idea, and now she knew how much it meant to him, saying goodbye to his brother.

After spending some time together, laid down, letting the night fade.

While Xiang fell asleep next to the fire, Zimo stayed wide awake, tears softly running down his cheek. They stayed just like this for the most part of two hours, when Zimo slowly separated from Xiang and stood up.

The fire was almost dying, so Zimo came closer to it to feed some sticks and dry leaves to it. The flame revived with a crackling sound. He kissed Xing on the forehead and left the house towards the old barn.

He walked through the farm, a full moon lighting the depths of the night. His steps were careful and subtle, his hearing concentrated in his surroundings. He was slowly approaching the barn when something came from the inside.

“Zimo Guo?”

“It’s me,” said Zimo, who looked at the house one last time before entering.

A younger looking woman dressed with a dark suit and a white shirt was standing in the middle of the barn, barely lit.

“Before proceeding to the conversation and with the purpose of avoiding any derailment or misdirection, for we don’t have much time, I want to show you this”, she said before pulling a smart device from her pocket and playing a video.

“Hi Zimo! I hope you are doing great; I’m waiting for you here with very nice people, we even have electricity! I really want you to come with us and start a new life here together” said a young boy from the screen.

“Yuan”, muttered Zimo with tearful eyes.

“Now, have you obtained the information?” continued the woman.

“I have, she told me the place she’s looking for is somewhere near Lake Michigan, in North America,” said Zimo.

“Who told her that?”

“Chang Heng, the former Ministry of Science and Technology” proceeded Zimo.

“I see, you have chosen the right path, now we have an urgent matter to solve, Xiang Jingfei has to die tonight, and you will have to do it”

Zimo’s expression darkened immediately after hearing that, “What? You needed the information, you got it, she doesn’t know anything else, I swear” he pleaded.

“I know, I believe you, but my people do not take risks, in exactly 7 minutes, a SWAT team will come into the farm. They will take you and me out of here and torture Xiang to death for the slightest possibility of extracting more information.

Zimo starts crying, “I can’t do it, I can’t, please”

“Will you do that to her? You want her torture in your hands? I am helping you because you have proven to be honest, but time is running”

Zimo stands there in silence for a while, contemplating his options.

“Come on, finish this and let’s go see Yuan,” finishes the woman.

Zimo takes two steps back and starts heading towards the main house in the farm. Now the night felt enclosing, he was thinking of Xiang, thinking of his brother. As he came closer and closer to the main door of the house, his determination quivered.

He approached the living room slowly, methodically, Xiang was lying there, asleep. He reached for his bow in his bag and took an arrow. He drew the bow and turned towards Xiang.

“Zimo, what are you doing?” said Xiang barely awakened by the sound of the bag, when her sight cleared, she quickly sat up and crawled back towards the wall.

“Zimo! What is going on?”

He stood there pointing his bow at her, “I’m so sorry Xiang, they have my brother.”

“What are you talking about Zimo? Lower the bow!” said Xiang before glancing at the main door, where the silhouette of a woman entered the house.

“What is going on?” continued Xiang, crying in a complete breakdown.

“It’s been two years Zimo! Two years!” she cried with desperation.

Zimo started shivering and sobbing slowly. He lowered and closed his eyes, trying to retain the tears.

“They found out about it, I wasn’t supposed to know,” he said.

“I told you because I loved you and I wanted the best for us, you were supposed to keep it a secret.” Xiang could barely speak.

“It’s my little brother Xiang, I have to help him, I’m sorry” his voice breaking down as he spoke.

“Zimo...”

“They would have tortured you...” Zimo looks at the drawn arrow and looks back at Xiang.

The full moon dimly lit the silhouette of the trees and plants around them, and revealed the group in the shadows. Meanwhile, the fire, crackling, drawing the figures of Xiang and Zimo from below, creating a stark contrast in their faces while they stared at one another.

He was still pointing the bow at Xiang, fully drawn.

“We have to do it now, Zimo,” says a woman from the group, “quickly, before the rest of the group arrives, you know what they’ll do to her.”

Zimo held his breath and stopped the shaking caused both by the tension of the string and the guilt. He looked at Xiang in the eyes, she was frightened and confused, tears running down her face.

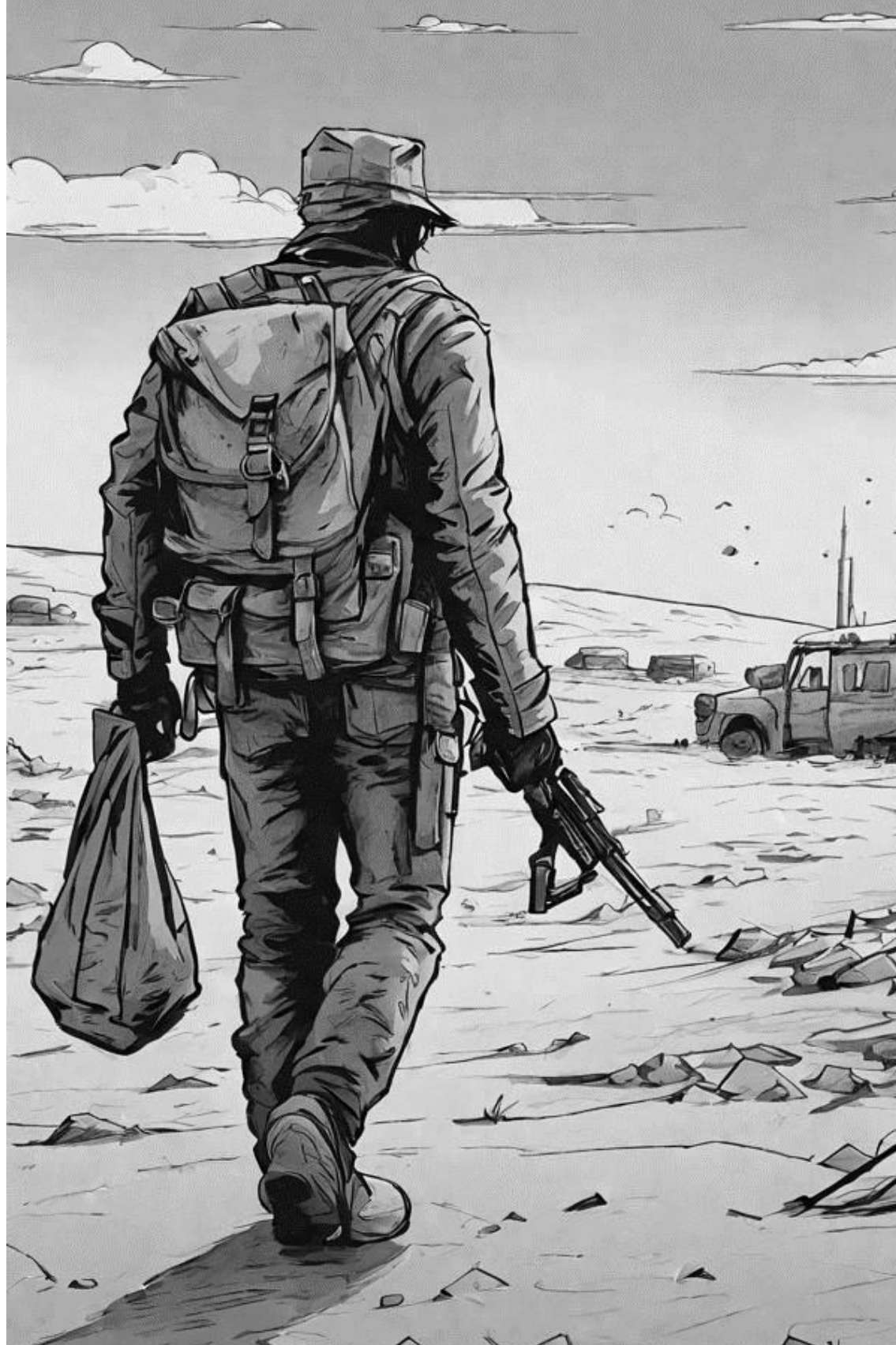
A whistling sound pierced through the air as a gunshot collapsed its sound.

“Exhale.”

“Inhale.”

“Close your eyes.”

A LONELY ROAD



I could feel the sun burning my skin, reddish and almost leathered as my steps grew weaker. I still had some fresh water in my canteen, and the salt-covered meat from the last deer I encountered was starting to run out; I started to doubt if it would be sufficient to arrive at The City, which, as far as I knew, could be but a legend, a rumor, or a mere effort to draw hope from those who had lost it.

I started to fear that my strength, or my foolish will-power, wasn't enough to take me there. If I knew something for sure, it's that it wasn't for many that came before me, as the sight of decaying corpses, bones and skulls had been reminding me every now and then that I was attempting a suicidal voyage.

"When the enemy attempted to cut off his communication by sea, he was obliged to avert that danger by setting fire to his own ships, which, after burning the docks, spread from there..."

I could feel the dirt mixing itself with the blood coming from my bare feet; the sores, a painful reminder of the long journey. I was able to pull off a few more steps before my right knee fell to the ground, my eyes staring deeply into the dry soil, the sand dancing before me, performing a ritualistic waltz, almost hypnotic.

We were 27.

My knee, melting, my mind, drifting, my courage, dissolving... But it was my heart that hurt the most. No, not my heart, the memories coming to life, fusing themselves with my dreams; was I awake? Was I fading? Was I dead?

I was alone.

"It was all but suffering shipwreck by the violence of its own tempestuous agitation..."

The first was Ur.

He was followed by Masika and Darwish, the desert was cruel and merciful.

I looked up at the sky, and even though I couldn't see it, I could visualize the hundreds of thousands of pieces of debris orbiting around, creating an ever-changing prison, one that forced us to rewrite our future, to learn the consequences of our actions, the downfall of our ambition.

Then it was Sadiki, Keket, and Edrice, all of them falling days before arriving at our first destination, my hometown.

"Situated on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, it was the center of intellectual and cultural achievement, a hub for scholars, scientists, philosophers, and poets alike, attracting some of the brightest minds of the time. It boasted impressive architecture, a bustling port, and a rich blend of Greek, Egyptian, and other cultural influences"

As my other knee started to fail, I started to distinguish the rough shape of a small town on the horizon, or what remained of it, but the warmth of the sand and the softness of the sun made for an inviting bed.

Then nine more fell. The sea was cruel, and it was not merciful, it was devastating, but it was all we could admire for several months.

I knew there and then that the weight I was carrying in my bag was dragging me back, but I would not abandon a

single thing, for the one I already left behind would live within me forever.

The sleepiness was getting to me, liberating me from the responsibility that I had so diligently carried for days, for months, for years. I was letting myself go as my consciousness traveled far beyond the land I was traversing, further than the limits of my own imagination.

We couldn't have foreseen that once we saw land, the journey was almost just beginning, that the obstacles we were to encounter were fierce and countless. A bow, and a gun, that's all I thought to carry, innocent, ignorant, filled with confidence, fed by a mere dream, not even my own, but ours.

"Charleston", said the first sign we encountered, the entrance to the land of salvation; a mixture of ruins and debris. We quickly realized that we weren't the first ones to arrive, for the port was filled with other vessels, both old and new. I looked at Dalila, who was tearful; then, she abruptly hugged and kissed me.

"We are here, my love, we made it" she said before quickly releasing me and looking around, walking, almost like a dance, like the sand.

I smiled at her and stood quiet, admiring her elegance on every move. It was easy to be impressed by our surroundings, nature took only a few years to start conquering the abandoned city again. We thought of ourselves as gods, both creators and destroyers of the world, but we were merely passing by, and our effect over it was but an illusion, the idea that it couldn't recover from it, from us, was only an exercise of pride and self-importance.

The vines were taking over the facades, the roots were sprawling from the ground, breaking down the pavement and creating a unique blend of human-made structures and pure vegetation; you could hear and distinguish animals strolling through what remained of the city.

“Wake up, darling, don’t give up just yet”, I heard her voice coming from hundreds of miles away as my eyes gently opened. I was there, laying on the ground, the heat came back as I started to stand. Again, I put my eyes in the town just before me.

I cleaned the dirt off my body and face, looked around for a moment, and started walking again with a newly found strength.

“I have to find The City, you will look at it through my eyes, you will find hope through my soul” I said to myself as I was coming closer to the ruins of the small town.

When I arrived, I rapidly checked around to see if there was someone there; when I realized it was empty, I entered a building, which seemed to be a small store ransacked months ago; the fridges were empty, the shelves had fallen, and the computer on the counter a sad reminder of how things were before. I sat on the floor and opened my backpack to take my map out.

I laid it in front of me, and started to gently move my finger through it until I reached what I suspected was my location; a sudden realization came to me, if I was right, I was just a few hours away from my destination, I was about to find out if the legend was indeed a reality.

The rest of the group wanted to stay and rest for a few days in Charleston, but Dalila insisted that the both of us should get going, we had been through so much and survived so many obstacles that the last steps of the journey should be

taken diligently, and so, we said our goodbyes and continued traversing the land. I drank some of the water, ate a bit, and continued the journey.

6 long hours passed, the sun was covered by clouds and leading slowly into a beautiful sunset, giving me a chance to move through the land without the exhaustion of the heat.

And then, I saw it, standing there in the distance, a colossal arrangement of buildings surrounded by enormous walls, with hundreds of transmission towers converging towards it, you could tell there were artificial lights coming from the inside. Its shape was particularly striking. From where I was, I could see three huge circular structures connected by steel ramparts. And for the first time in years, I saw what seemed to me to be a small plane; it was moving some sort of cargo above one of the circles.

“The City, Delila, we are here; watch it through my eyes, listen to the buzzing sound through my ears, smell the unique aroma through my nose. Your body may be lying near that forest, but your soul, your essence, I carry with me and will carry with me forever”.

As I came closer, I realized there was a small fence surrounding its skirt, and when I was near enough, I could read one of the many signs spared around it.

“No trespassing, only authorized citizens of Neon can enter the perimeter using your board-authorized beacons”.

I stood there, quiet, wandering.

“Hey you! Are you a citizen?” a deep voice shouted from behind me.

I looked back and saw two figures mere meters away, a woman and a man, both carrying some sort of rifles.

“Me?” I answered back.

“Of course, you, are you armed?” the man said.

“A bow and a gun, for survival, I come from really far away, just arrived”

“Do not cross that fence” the woman shouted with worry in her voice.

I looked back at the sign and started to walk towards them with my arms raised.

“No need to surrender, brother, we are not enemies, we are here just like you, but we arrived a few months back” the man said-

“So, we can't enter?” I asked, distraught.

“It's impossible, they shoot on sight to whomever crosses the line without one of those beacons, but come with us, we set up a camp a couple of miles away, a small community, but one to survive in”

“What are you doing here then?” I asked again.

“We have seen it, them shooting from the walls, ever since the first dead body we have been patrolling the area looking for people just like you”, the woman approached me with a few steps.

“So, it was true, The City exists, but it's closed?”

“It is for us, what's your name brother? I am Badru, she's Zola”

I was stunned by the information, both disappointed and scared of the structure behind me and moved by these people.

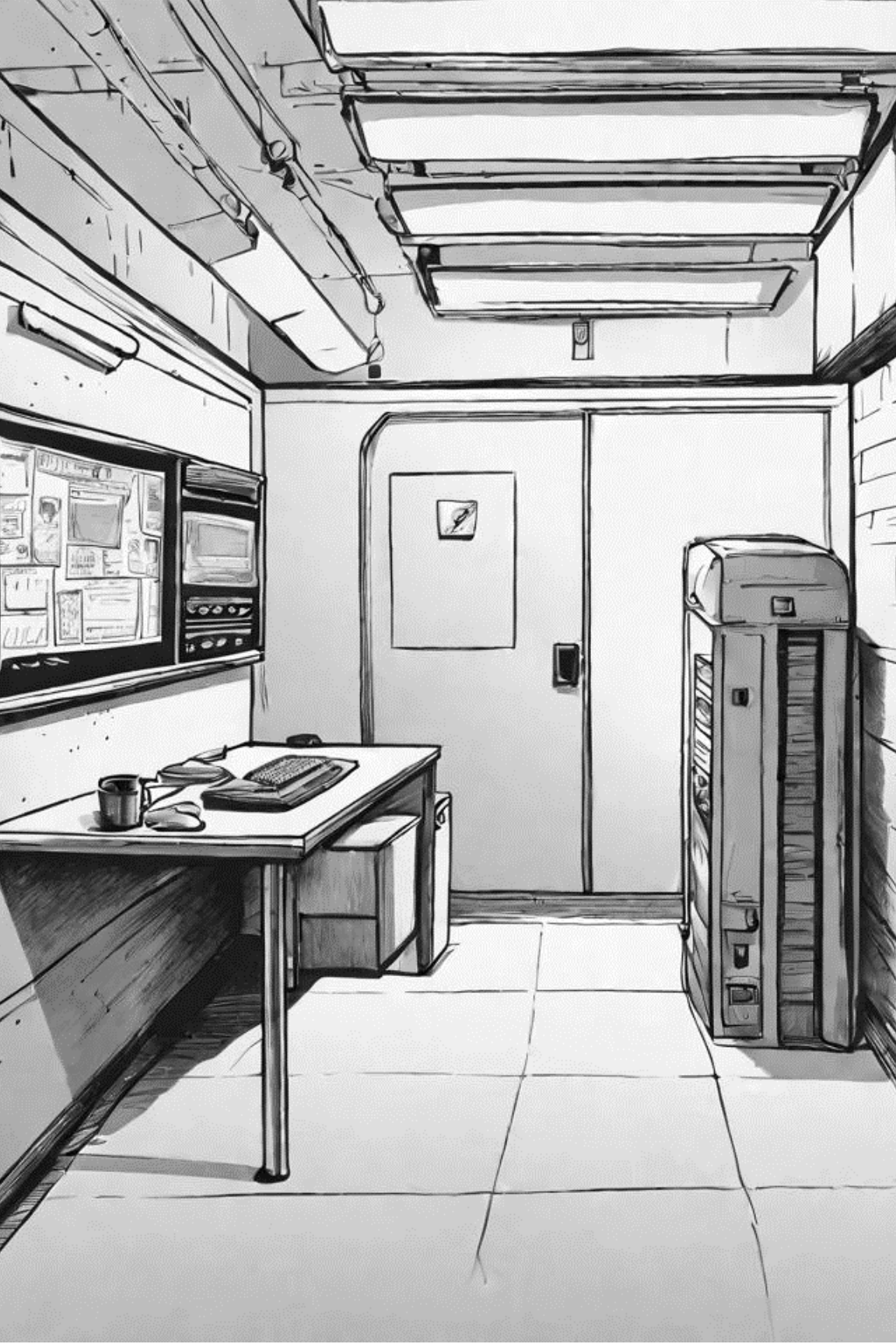
“Hager” I answered.

“Welcome Hager, there’s quite a lot we have to tell you about, and we need to heal those wounds before they get infected, or stop the current infection. Walk with us, we are set up in a nearby path of forest”.

I started to walk next to them in silence, listening to them, shocked at the realization that the journey, the loss of lives, the pain, Delila... It was all for nought.

Or maybe, maybe it wasn’t.

EPILOGUE



To: "Suzanne Rose" <suzannerosephd@protonmail.com>

CC:

From: "K" <missk@protonmail.com>

Subject: Exclusive Job Offer – Alma Rose

Good morning, Ms. Rose,

I contact you today on behalf of a very important client who was very pleasantly surprised by your resume and trajectory during your career inside the ISM. I know the circumstances surrounding us currently are far from ideal, and we want to do something to solve that issue, that is where you come in.

The job is extremely important to be executed with discretion, precision and exactly within the time frame that would be discussed.

I am convinced that you perfectly fit the role and you will be as well, and the conditions will make you feel at the very least safe in this situation.

You have received a file to access an FTP, once you access it type 'command-access-protocol-019', you will find further instructions and information about your potential task.

Thank you very much for your time and attention,

Miss K.



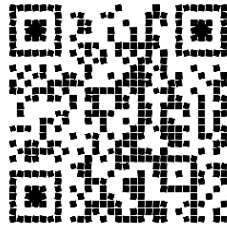
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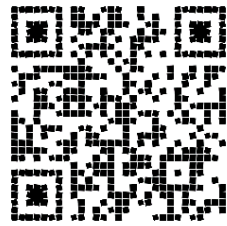
Welcome to the Neon Universe, a vast world with a vast history tailored for lovers of dystopian, sci-fi settings. We are prepared to slowly unravel the history of the Neon Era, with projects ranging from books to board games and interactive experiences.

(For more information, visit www.theneonuniverse.com)



We are a small team of creators based in Spain, and any kind of support would mean the world to us. On top of that, we want the community to be an active part of the storytelling process, so we would love to hear your ideas.

(To contact us, visit www.theneonuniverse.com/contact)



If you liked the stories told in this short book, please leave 5-Star Review on Amazon and tell us about your experience with them!

