

# A WORLD WORTH LIVING IN

Sci-fi project



Daylight was quickly fading, as the sun began to disappear beyond the trees. She had to keep running, chasing what little light still remained before the darkness took over. She could still hear the roaring of engines just off in the distance now, but she didn't dare look back. She knew her home would already be engulfed in flames, and that wasn't how she wanted to remember it. That's what they did after they collected who and what they wanted- they'd burn the buildings to the ground as a symbol of their power. She still wasn't sure if she was being followed or not, and this fear fueled her adrenaline and propelled her forward.

The crisp autumn air whipped past her, stinging her eyes and face. Her breathing was harsh and heavy, and each breath felt like fire in her lungs. Tree branches ripped into her flesh as she ran blindly, deeper into the forest. She could hardly feel her legs now, but somehow they kept moving forward, one after the other, in a numbing, rhythmic pattern. How long had she been running? If anyone had been following her, they'd surly have caught up by now. As she finally began coming down from the rush, her stamina began to waiver. Every inch of her body began to ache, and her muscles begged her to stop. Reluctantly, she slowed her pace until her legs refused to take her any farther. The pain in her chest intensified, she could hear the pounding of her heart, and felt the blood pulsating and throbbing in her temple. Beads of sweat streamed down into her eyes and she fell to her hands and knees, there in the middle of the forest. She wanted to catch her breath, but the dryness in her throat instigated a violent coughing fit instead. Her fingers dug into the soft dirt as the coughing led a dry heave, and the contents of her stomach spilled out and absorbed into the ground in front of her. She remained there with her eyes closed, hunched over until she gained control of her breathing. She wiped her lips with the torn sleeve of her jacket, and rolled over onto a small patch of cool grass. She just needed to

rest for a minute, and although she was laying on the cold hard ground, she felt perfectly comfortable, allowing her muscles a much needed break.

With her eyes still closed, she ran her fingers through the grass and inhaled the clean, pure sent of the forest. It reminded her of when she was a child, before the war, before the world had been destroyed. She remembered playing outside in the woods with the other kids in the neighborhood every night. Back then, everything was perfect. She remembered playing hide and seek, lying in wait in the fields of grass. The grass still smelled the same now, but the world around it was much different. She was lucky to have lived in a part that still had any vegetation at all. Most of the natural world had been annihilated by the bombs and radiation. For years, most of the earth had been a barren waste land, inhabited only by those who somehow survived the terror. Eventually, the land began to heal itself and plants began to grow again, regenerating what had been lost.

The same could not be said for humanity, however. There was no law, no morals, no compassion, and no God. Her neighborhood was gone, and so were the kids she grew up with, and her family too. Everyone she had cared about had been dead for a long time now. If you wanted to survive, you either trusted no one, or found a group in which you became a loyal member. Although there was safety in numbers, the smaller communities were easier targets for larger, dangerous groups like the "Prophets". Members of the group were all men, who believed they were entitled to anyone and anything they desired, and nothing could stop them from getting what they wanted. She knew that these were the men who raided her community, taking everything from her, but right now, she was too weak to conjure any sort of emotion. She wanted to go back to her childhood memories of when things were better, and as she did, she felt herself drift off into a deep sleep, there in the grass.

The sound of a soft voice whispered in her ear, but she couldn't quite make out the words. It was her name, someone was calling her name, getting louder, crying out for her help. Hayden! *Hayden!* The scream pierced through her skull and she sat straight up, awake, back to reality. How long had she been asleep? Long enough for the moon to make its way into the sky above her illuminating the forest with a melancholy glow. With her head in her hands she sat and cried, playing back the image of those men dragging her friend outside and forcing her into the back of a van. All she could do was watch helplessly as Ember tried to fight them off, all the while crying and shrieking for Hayden's help. But there was nothing she could do to stop them. She was outnumbered and out powered by the men and their weapons.

She'd been up on the hill, watching the sunset as she always did, when she heard the vehicles approaching, and ran back towards the small village. By the time she arrived, it was already too late. They had taken most of the women, and were lighting fires under their homes. She ducked behind the bushes, where she watched as they murdered Jack- shot him straight through the head. She covered her mouth instinctively, and fought to keep the sound of her anguish from drawing any attention. The man who she had considered a father was gone just like that, killed for pure sport. Ember had witnessed it as well, and that's when the screaming began. Hayden laid there in the bushes, covering her ears, afraid to move. The men then began to spread out, looking for anyone that might have escaped. If she tried to fight, she'd never win, and then she'd end up imprisoned, and she was no use to the others if she was locked up with them. Left with no other choice, she ran as fast as she could, away from the "Prophets" and away from what was once a safe place.

Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she laid back down on the grass she stared up at the full moon. She remembered the last time she had been alone and afraid, left to fend for herself in

the aftermath of the chaos. She was only seven years old when the war finally came to her door step. The memories of the attack itself were fuzzy, but she remembered clearly when Jack had found her starving and cold, curled up in the ruins of what was once a school yard. He brought her to his sanctuary and nursed her back to health out of the kindness of his heart. Cassie was only a few years older than her, and had already been there when Hayden arrived. There, Jack had raised them together as if they were his own daughters.

There were others as well, and although everyone pitched in to support one another, no one was as close as Cassie and Hayden- that is, until Ember arrived. She was several years younger, but she fit right in, turning their duo into a trio. Their friendship became and sisterhood was what kept them going, and soon they became Hayden's adopted family. They had never been apart, and they agreed on a pact to always come find each other if ever they were to become separated. It dawned on her that she hadn't seen Cassie in all of the chaos, but she knew the men wouldn't have left her behind. Cassie's long black hair and Ember's piercing blue eyes would surely make them items of interest to the men. She shuddered thinking about what those barbarians would do to her friends, using them to satisfy their carnal needs. She felt the anger wash over her then, and she forced herself to stand. She had to keep moving if she wanted to help them. She knew that they'd both do the same for her, and if she couldn't save them, then at least she'd die trying.

She'd never been this deep in the forest before, and she wasn't sure how far from the road she was, but she knew she was headed in the general direction. The road would lead her to the nearest neighboring community, and just beyond that was the communal trading post, her final destination. The post resembled what would have been known as a flea market in the old world, and communities came from all over to trade, buy, and sell supplies to one another. This was the

only place safe from the “Prophets”, as it was home to the artillery suppliers, and patrolled by guards day and night. James had lived with Hayden and the others for a few years when they were adolescents. His father worked as a guard at the trading post, but fearing for his son’s safety there, left the boy at their sanctuary with Jack. In exchange for his hospitality, James’ father provided their community with basic weapons, and taught the adults how to use them.

Ember and Cassie regarded James as a brother, but his relationship with Hayden was something more. He had always been so sweet, bringing her flowers and walking her back to her room at night. What began as innocent flirting soon escalated into a romance that could never truly be. Though they slept in the same bed, they didn’t dare make love because the risk was too great. They agreed that it would be cruel to bring a child into the world as it was, and without proper medical care, the risk involved with child birth was also increased. They found other ways to please each other, but Hayden often dreamt of what they could have been if things were different. She imagined that James would have married her, and they’d have raised a family in a neighborhood much like the one she was born in. Their romance was cut short when James became old enough to work with his father as a guard, and to do so meant leaving the community. Hayden would visit him when they made their trip twice a year to restock and trade supplies, but the rest of the time she spent with him was in her memories. She knew James would do whatever he could to rescue their friends, and when he found out what they did to Jack, she knew the “Prophets” would get what they had coming to them. His influence with the guards and access to weapons was exactly what they needed to seek both justice, and vengeance.

She licked her dry, cracked lips and tasted blood. Her entire body protested each agonizing step, and she realized then how cold she was. She’d have to find some sort of shelter to rest in for the night whether she liked it or not. She made her way to a clearing in the woods,

and there in front of her was the rusted shell of what was once an airplane, crashed to the ground. It wouldn't keep out the cold, but it would have to do. The inside had been completely gutted, and all that remained was a hollow cabin. She curled up against the inside of the aircraft and pulled her legs to her chest to maintain what little body heat she had left. Her eyes were heavy, but her mind was still racing with the days' events, and the thought of what tomorrow would bring. She wondered where her friends were at that moment, and what she would say when she first saw James.

Just then, something caught her attention at the opening of the structure. For a second, she thought it was her imagination playing tricks on her, but then she saw it bathed in the light of the moon. A small red animal with a thick tail. A fox? She remembered seeing them in the fields as a child, but that was before the war. No one had seen an animal since then, and they were supposed to be extinct, gone forever. Maybe this was a hallucination, an effect of dehydration and exhaustion. But then, the animal slowly approached her. It raised its nose to the air investigating her scent, as if it too was bewildered by what it was seeing. Timidly, the fox laid down only a foot away, and they stared at each other until she could no longer keep her eyes open. Moments passed as she felt its presence inching closer, but she did not open her eyes. Then, she felt its soft fur push up against her as it curled up next to her body. The musk smell it emulated could not be a figment of her imagination. No, this was a real living animal, and it too just wanted to be comforted and warm. She fought the urge to reach out and touch it, holding back the cries of joy she felt inside. There it was, living breathing proof that the earth really was healing itself. In that moment, she let go of all her anger and fear, replacing them with an overwhelming feeling of love for this small creature. Right then, she was not alone, neither of them were alone. She was just grateful for the furry companion and the warmth it provided to

her, and her to it. Tomorrow, she would continue her journey, but for now, she needed to rest.

She couldn't wait to tell the girls about the Fox, but first she had to find them.