*The Quarantine Zone*

“First, there was life. Things grew bigger and bigger, until bustling societies were along every coast, and every continent. The sun rose above our heads, and it was bright and beautiful. People sang and danced, and loved one another. Second, was the conflict. War ensued between nations, and men fought each other, to the death, an endless conflict, until, the Big Boom.”

Awes and moans echoed throughout the dimly lit room.

“Now, just darkness and ash. Remnants of The Old World.” Both men and women were slumped in the awnings of the dilapidated barn turned makeshift chapel, sighed and groaned in recollection of the better days, while boys and girls awed in wonder at the thought of such a silly, perfect world.

“But sir, if there was a big bright ball in the sky, where is it now? Is it really…”

A man stands up between the pews, piercing the crowd of heads. “It’s still there, kid, just covered by crap in the air.”

The preacher scoffed at the middle aged man in disgust. “Crap? The Great Green floods the skies, bringing forth an age of perfection! People far and wide flock to its grace. Simply incandescent.”

“Kids, don't listen to this old coot, he's gone bonkers on rad-water.” The man shakes the filth of the chapel off his long, tattered leather duster, and shuffles between piers of people huddling together, crammed into seats like sardines in a canister. Parting the two cloth drapes that acted as a makeshift door, the man’s embraced by the warmth of the green tinged sky, speckled with black clouds and smoke trails, peppering the atmosphere. Crowds of people are swinging through the open courtyard of gravel and asphalt mixture, surrounded by vendors offering “clean” water, “edible” food, and trinkets and oddities next to corpses strung up with barbwire strapped to large metal crosses, One of these ‘examples’ can be seen down every block, with each wrong doer having there crime painted across their chest. Their rotting corpses had a distinguished stench, but it was always masked by the smell of the citizens.

This slowly became Ted’s new found home, The Tallahassee Quarantine Zone. A sturdy woman hustled up towards him, cutting through the stream of filth and humans.

“Got any new info on this guy? Frank?" Clarice asked.

"Nah, there's no leads anywhere. It’s like the bastard just vanished,” Ted shrugged.

“We have to keep looking, we *need* those food stamps, Ted. This could finally be our big break. Just imagine, we can roam the world! Feel the sun again, climb trees, feel green, luscious grass between our toes once again!”

Ted ponders the idea. “It seems like a far-fetched dream by now. If such a place even exists anymore.”

“It very well could, just like it used to be. The Old World. If we catch this guy and bring him to the FPD, we'll be rich with stamps.”

Ted groans in compliance, “Fine, fine. Let’s keep looking. What did this guy do exactly?”

“No Ted, *doing.* He's been poisoning the water supply. Some sort of revolutionist type. Fighting for people, yet killing them slowly,” explains Clare.

“Typical anarchist, sounds like.”

“If we put our minds to it, we can get him. Dead or alive. They only want Frank. He’s our golden ticket. Don’t even sweat it Ted, I’m on top of this.”

“If you say so, Clare. Let’s get going then, curfew’s gonna be soon,” Ted hesitantly says, “You’ve seen what happens to people after curfew. FPD makes an example of you. And worse. Can’t step on their toes.”

“Well we might have to, things couldget *ugly,*” Clare cautions, prompting both of them to pan their gaze up past the hurds of people to the looming warning of the victims of the QZ. This one had ‘thief’ etched into his stomach, rather than splattered paint. He coughed in desperate anguish, still fighting.

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In a span of only a few hours, the green tinged sky began to fade into a deep, bleak pine shade. Ted and Clare approached a large parking lot where the water plant was tucked into a corner of barbed fence and concrete barricades, and crept into a nearby warehouse via a small crooked alleyway. Preparing for the fight to come. Ted is replaying the plan over and over in his mind, like a movie on repeat. “Clare goes into the water plant, and I have guard duty. We fetch Frank, and we get the hell out of here. Simple.” The distinct clang of brass being chambered into a pistol breaks his train of thought.

“It’s time, Ted. Let’s do this.” Ted patted the dusty wooden floors grasping for his things amongst the dark, desolate room. Coarse burlap strikes his palm, lifting and adjusting straps. “My bag.” Then, after more abrasive patting, feels the sting of cold and smooth steel, and the rigid cylinder sticking out of its center. Grasping the thick, laminated, studded and textured grip, lifting his thumb and applying pressure on the stiff hammer, clicking it downwards like a lightswitch. “My revolver. That's everything.”

Hustling outside, Ted stands near a dimly lit light post, the only one for blocks, juxtaposed to the dark green consuming the QZ.

Clare nods at Ted. “Stay here, I wanna get this bastard myself.”

Creeping up a narrow metal staircase to the seemingly empty narrow concrete infrastructure, vanishing into the dark with everything else, like a hostile blanket. Staring into the shadows, Ted sees the figure of another wrong doer, strung up like the others, but naked and shuddering. ‘Smuggler’. Minutes pass and Ted is still waiting anxiously. Glaring towards the man again, Ted is met with a locked gaze. The man's entrancing stare pierced his mind, giving him a thousand words. The smuggler tries to speak to him, but blood oozes out of his mouth and drizzles down his chest. All he can do is shriek in reckless abandon. Before Ted can run inside, bullets whizz through the air, and havoc ensues inside the plant. Between the revolutionists, the police, Clair, and now himself included. Ted’s only goal at his point is to find Clare, and get out. Hustling through the long metal corridors, groaning and yelling echoes through a narrow corridor. Ted slows his pacing and crouches, and sees Clare on the ground, hanging by her shirt collar. It’s Frank. Out of a combination of rage and reflexes, he swiftly pulls out his pistol, and shouts at Frank.

“You piece of-”

Another person rounds the corner and shatters Ted’s kneecaps with a baseball bat, striking him down and breaking the receiver of his flimsy pistol. Frank shouts something incoherent at the man that striked Ted, and they begin to argue. Ted only sees Clare on the ground, and the two men. Without enough time for him to come to his senses, Ted is flung against a wall and shouted at to wake up, until being struck across the face. Frank grabs Ted by his shirt collar in frustration. “You don’t understand, you fool! Waltzing in here like you own the place, who do you think you are!?”

“What’s going on, what do you mean?” Ted wipes blood off his face with his forearm, smearing what feels like his face, numb from pain.

“We aren’t the bad guys! We're trying to *save* you idiots!”

Ted can only cough right now, until passing out from the pain.

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Finally opening his eyes Ted is awake again. Through the ash and dust in the air, Ted can yet again see the green tinged sky. He’s being carried in a gurney by two younger militia men covered in tattered memorabilia. “These terrorists look a lot different in daylight,” Ted ponders. The man carrying Ted’s legs glances backwards, noticing he’s awake.

“Frank! The lunatic’s awake!”

“I’m not no damn lunatic boy! Who do you think you are?” Frank hustles back behind the front of the line, all marching out of the QZ. This was the first time Ted’s been out of the FPD’s strict watch since the Old World, before quarantine zones were ran by tyrants, and before quarantine zones even were a thing.

“You're a very lucky individual, Ted Harlow. Clare told me very much about you. You had a family once. Hope, aspirations, desire. What if I told you that you can rekindle that old flame? That there really is a whole world out here? Past the QZ. It’s out there and it’s real. Not just concrete walls, police checkpoints and food tickets. Clare stands with us, but what about you Ted? What do you say?” Ted struggles and consults his conscience, pondering everything that has happened up until this point. Has everything really been an elaborate lie to keep him behind walls? Could he find his true self once again? There's only one way to find out. Ted composes himself and slowly arises, shaking Frank’s hand. Clarice is farther up the line, but she sees Frank and nods affirmatively.