

## The Lone Tree

Enzo's heart pounded as a jarring impact threw him across the spaceship, slamming him into the wall. He opened his clenched eyes in relief; the journey may have been turbulent, but he was finally here. Enzo's heart was racing as the thick door begrudgingly creaked open. He was on the brink of unravelling the mystery that had eluded him his whole life. In the Dome, stories passed down generations presented their original world as a beautiful utopia - a lush and vibrant paradise teeming with life through its pure-hearted fauna and emerald, green flora. The warmth of the sun would illuminate the world, smiling down on the playing children as flocks of chirping and singing birds soared through the cerulean, blue skies. But what he saw was nothing like these timeless stories he'd been told.

Instead, it looked as if even the dry grass and the shrivelled leaves had forgotten what colours were. Enzo took off his helmet and stared into the desolate, burning wasteland, stretching endlessly into the horizon. Dominant grey hues blurred together with the polluted amber sky. The eerie sound of flames was only occasionally broken by the wind's timid whispers. The heavy stench of embers and decay engulfed his throat as he broke into a fit of coughs. Enzo climbed out of the rubble of his ship and stepped onto the cracked and parched ground, his boots causing dust clouds to form at his feet. Rubbing his stringing eyes, he looked at the barren world before him. It looked like the inside of an ashtray, with raging flames dancing across the landscape and smoke and ash blazing through the sky. Stripped skeletons of what used to be trees were scattered around the arid ground like remains after a great battle - the great battle between nature and who?

Enzo's heart dropped as this hellish and tragic scenery persisted in every direction he looked. Was this really his home? The Dome claimed that they had left the Earth due to changes in oxygen levels, making it inhabitable. They were right about that, at least. The remains of the lakes looked toxic, and the air carried a lingering effect of nausea. He bent over to touch the sterile, infertile soil; it felt like sand. Nothing could ever revive the life that had been here; it was beyond any point of recovery. Suddenly, a glimpse of movement caught the corner of his eye. He swivelled around to see a sight he thought impossible: a singular tall and towering figure swaying in the wind. It was a tree. A lone tree stood proud amongst its fallen peers. Overcome with shock, Enzo ran towards it, the deafening, intense silence fading as the leaves gently rustled against the wind. Relief washed over him as he marvelled at it; while its branches may have been brittle, and its leaves greying, it stood firm with strength and endurance, as a final bastion of life amidst a lifeless planet.

At the trunk of the tree, he glanced at an object he couldn't recognise in any of the stories he'd been told. The tree's rigid roots had wrapped themselves around a rectangular box. It couldn't have been natural, Enzo thought. Curiosity won him over as he pulled out his combat knife and shredded the roots entangling the object, before beginning to dig it out. Dusting off the cover, he realised it wasn't a box, it was a book. As Enzo flicked through the crumbling pages, disappointment wrapped around him: the ink on the pages had faded over the centuries, becoming indecipherable. His final chance of understanding what had happened to this world to end its idyll, had slipped through his fingers. But just as his hope had been drained, a small parchment flew out of the book, taking rest on the parched ground. Enzo picked it up to discover, to his relief and surprise, a legible poem titled "The Trails of Nature". He began to read.

*"The courtroom falls silent as the judge enters with might  
"Order in the court" echoes through the hallowed hall*

*To deliberate crimes which have wrought such blight  
Mother Nature cowers as she begins to recall*

*“The whirlwind of humanity’s greed and wrath  
Despite offering them all my fruitful gifts  
Ravaging and consuming everything in their path  
Their gluttonous appetite persists”*

*“Tearing down the trees that once stood proud and tall  
Grey painted sky casting shadows over me  
The innocent creatures of my world, flee and fall  
Echoes of their cries, begging to be free”*

*As she silently mourns before a heartless jury  
For crimes against nature, they refuse to admit  
Corrupt intentions they harbour impurely  
In the shadow of sin, her cries they acquit*

*The gavel bangs with fury, ruling her fate  
The verdict announced without any debate  
In the trail of despair, ruled by power and hate  
The eternal injustices remembered on that date*

*The court adjourns, but the justice feels lost  
Corrupt powers walk free, indifferent to the cost*

*Hear this; my final requiem  
Sing it when I’m gone  
All life lost for millennium  
A withered tree remains, where life had once shone”*

Under the shade and protection of the lone tree, Enzo placed the poem in the book and began to read. Time passed until he finally shut the book. His knuckles turned white as he clenched it, his fingers digging into the hardcover till it began to bend. His jaw clenched as he reviewed the lines over and over. The people responsible for forsaking the Earth weren’t just some faceless entities as the Dome had taught him. But rather, it was his ancestors, their greed, their negligence, their insatiable hunger for power that had led this paradise to devastation. They had all been lied to.

Enzo stood up, the book still in his hands, and looked at the lone tree. It was a symbol of resilience, the last beacon of hope amidst this wasteland. Determination surged through his body as he clenched his fists, this would not be the end of the Earth’s story. He would find a way to revive the life that had been lost, to bring back the beauty and love that’d been lost. The flames dancing across the landscape could still be extinguished. While he knew the journey ahead was uncertain and fraught with challenges, Enzo knew one thing for sure; he would fight for this world, for its future, for the truth that had been buried beneath its roots. With a final glance at the tree, Enzo set off, the leaves’ rustling wishing him off, a reminder that even in the bleakest of times, life finds a way.