

LORDAERON

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“Not all those who wander are lost.”
J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Foreword:

This shorty story is meant to be read while listening to music. Please find below the link to the playlist:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVa6iZusRzEm_fQQwfzswUlzoTYEHXtDF

The numbers of each piece of music are indicated along the story. There are some bonus tracks at the end of the playlist.

I hope you will enjoy this experiment and if you have any suggestions, I will be happy to listen to them.

¹I stumbled upon this place on my way to meet up with my friends. A sparse red wood composed of Japanese maples, pines and oaks unfolded in front of my eyes. Everything was red: the crimson foliage, the burgundy leaves and needles covering the soil, and even the scarlet sunset sky. My footprints revealed the granite under the forest soil. Some boulders stuck out here and there. Straight ahead, there stood a thin rock bridge across a deep ravine which scarred the wood. Some adder's meat grew peacefully near that arched bridge. This plain but elegant overpass connoted the crafters' origins. In the distance, mystic ruins of the same kind rose up on floating islands. Sadly, the ruins were too far for me to appreciate their delicate architecture. Those islands seemed to have been torn away from the ground. Patches of the same forest covered on the unbuilt isles. A stream ended its course at the edge of the largest one. A rainbow was produced by the waterfall. Their uplift had to be due to some kind of magic perhaps meant to protect those sanctuaries.

A blackbird was singing nearby. A blue jay answered. I paid attention to more varied warbling, but unfortunately they were unknown to me. The trees were rustling and a small stream was murmuring away in the ravine. Some insects were waking up. Cockchafers were humming around the trees. Leaves and twigs were creaking under my feet. Suddenly, a fox crossed my path. Its red coat was attuned to the forest tones. A squeaking mouse was caught between its jaws. Some cubs were in for a new lesson.

I couldn't smell anything... But I could imagine the scent of a forest at nightfall. The delicate perfume of humus and resin enhanced the fresh evening breeze.

This place is a lost paradise. Here lived some Sin'dorei a long time ago. They were esteemed by all the other races. Those high elves lived peacefully in this country and prospered thanks to the trade of magical items. With their knowledge of arcane magic, they protected themselves and their country.

But they had to face the invasion of the Scourge, a major undead faction, and fled to a neighboring region. Their source of power, known as the Sunwell, was taken over by Lich King Arthas and his army. They were forced to retreat and thus, lost most of their powers. Those elves had no other choice than to take up arms. A part of them chose to ally with other Hordes. Now these people call themselves Blood Elves.

And I am one of them.

“What are you doing?” said Andreas through my earphones.

“Sorry, I'm on my way.”

I caught up with my friends in front of the town of Shattrah.²

“Tonight, for the first time, we are rushing through the Sunwell Plateau instance, so we can improve our stuff to go to the Black Temple. If possible, we'll meet up here every night this week to collect the whole set of equipment,” explained Steve. “There's only ten of us, so it won't be easy.”

Our first go at it was not effortless. However, four hours later, this instance was finished twice.

¹ Playlist – Track 1

² Playlist – Track 2

“That’s all for this evening. See you tomorrow at 8.00. Good night!” concluded Steve.

“Good night everybody!” I replied.

I logged out from the game. I stood up and collapsed on my couch three steps away. Hope the server will not crash that week. Fucking government!

A dreamless sleep took over me shortly after.

6.00 am. The alarm rang. As usual, I was too slow and missed my bus.³

My boss welcomed me with these words: “You’re late... I need the models of the new campaign on my desk this evening!”

I remembered what the government had asked me: “Something new! Something fresh! Something everybody understands!” The usual brainwashing, they should have said...

Last week, I worked on posters alluding to famous blockbusters such as Star Wars or Jurassic Park. They were designed to speak to everybody. I found it funny that people should cherish references to the first decades of the 21st century. Even if they hate the current state, they will not ever dare to do anything against it, I thought. I was no better. All I did was put some hidden Easter eggs in my posters. They were so well concealed that the governmental watchdogs could not see them.

I finished my series of posters during the afternoon and gave them to my boss.

“You could have worked a bit faster,” he said as a thank you for a huge amount of work finished in due time.

“You’re welcome,” I replied. Damn it! I have to stay completely neutral. He is an expert in communication, he could soon fire me if he had any suspicion of me lying or being disrespectful.

“I like the government’s new motto: ‘Safety for happiness and prosperity’. Relying on film references is a good idea. I’m not sure they will accept the Star Wars posters because of the saga themes. The Jurassic Park ones are quite good. T-rexes or raptors are efficient security symbols. I’ll show them to Mr. Smith, the new official in charge of the department of culture and communication. Come and meet him. He’ll certainly be happy to talk to you.”

I smiled wryly.

“The meeting is at 10.00. Don’t be late,” my boss added.

Back in my office, I worked on the new company website. Lifecom® has the leadership in global domestic communication and advertisement. They are also under the government’s thumb. With the new policy, I had no other choice but to join them. They had bought many small companies including my former employer’s. My field was gaming-related communication and advertisement. However, this area had been taken over by Washington.

When I left this office, I stopped at the Asian supermarket to buy some food for the week. Back home, I switched on both my laptop and my desktop and began cooking ramen noodles.

“You have 21 new messages,” said Cortana’s dumb voice.

All ads... Then I checked my other mailbox on the desktop. I had one new email:

“Hi! I have updated my version of the server. We have to save it on your copy. I think we can do it after this evening raid. I’m working on the new patch which should be ready when we finish this one. Speak to you soon, Andreas.”

³ Playlist – Track 3

I finished my meal and then logged in.⁴

“Hello! Is everybody ready for tonight?” said Steve. This launched our gaming evening. It seemed like a rewind of yesterday’s game session. We went through the instance a few times and that was it. Not so much fun, but it was relaxing and refreshing after a long day of work. After that, Andreas contacted me through the vocal chat of our server.

“Well, I guess you have read my email?” he asked.

“Yes, I have. Let’s begin updating,” I replied.

As the file was downloading and the update installing on my copy of the server, we engaged into casual chatting, until Andreas mentioned something odd.

“By the way, this update is not meaningless...,” he said, sounding at once somehow grave.

“What do you mean? Are you in trouble?” I said worryingly.

“Well, I do not really feel... safe... you know,” Andreas sounded hesitant.

I understood he feared that they might have been detected by the FBI. And I also knew Andreas had some illegitimate activity.

Andreas is a highly skilled technician with a degree in computer sciences and a specialization in networking. He was working as a freelance network technician for various companies. Concomitantly, he did his “unpaid work”, which involved a lot of skill and roaming over the dark web. Andreas saw himself as a modern vigilante, some kind of “freedom fighter” in the “bit-fields”. In some way I envied him, he fought for freedom, against our government. I did not have the skill nor the courage to follow his path and work against the system. However, I never felt completely powerless. With my job in communications, I had the opportunity to act in a very subtle underground way. The downside of it was that the impact was reduced, the masses did not grasp the hidden messages - either because they did not see them, or because unconsciously they did not want to see them. They were trapped in their daily, happy, routine, unaware of or unworried by the loss of their freedom. Maybe I should have done more? Try to gather other people like in a hidden society! It was stupid... I would have ended up in jail before my first message had been released.

“I know. Do you plan to vanish, to stay quiet, or to be more active?” I added, fearing that he might throw himself into the melee without thinking about it.

“I don’t know... yet... I am not sure, in fact,” my friend answered. “I certainly do not want to flee. Hide or fight, those are my options. But the outcome may play against me... And you might be in danger as well, given our relationship.”

“I am aware of that. I’ll stay put. I think it best if we avoid any contact, or at least stop any suspicious reference.”

“For the moment, we will remain quiet. I’ll get back to you later on.” Those were Andreas’s last words before he logged out.

I shut the computers down and collapsed on my couch. Sleep did not come easily, as I had expected it. The rye bottle came to the rescue, once again.

Mr. Smith was late, which I also expected.⁵ Being late for no reason allowed him to show his control and superiority over our company. However, after an hour of pure idleness, a balding

⁴ Playlist – Track 4

⁵ Playlist – Track 5

middle-sized man – grey outfit, white shirt, black tie, brown shoes – stepped in, preceded by a bodyguard – black outfit, white shirt, black tie, black shoes, black sunglasses.

My boss introduced me to Mr. Smith.

I sensed this meeting would be really interesting, akin to gazing at fruit flies roaming over a basket of ripe fruit.

I could see that Mr. Smith was a smiling, joyful man, but it was also very clear that despite his apparent bonhomie, he could turn into a mean, powerful dragon. And that day, I had no heart nor will to end up roasted like a mindless knight in armor.

In that tense atmosphere, I explained my work, and all the - acceptable - symbolism of my line of posters.

He laughed a few times. He seemed to be pleased which was reassuring.

Mr. Smith finally thanked me, shook hands with me and left the room. The day resumed its normal course. I worked, and came home.

As I was searching for my keys in my pockets, I discovered something that was not supposed to be there. A white square of paper with a handwritten message:

“We know.”

I freaked out. Hide, flee or fight?

First things first, I opened my apartment and stepped in. I locked the door and immediately started to pack my things. I jumped into my old faithful Honda Civic and drove to the only place where I could think peacefully.⁶

The following morning, I was sitting on a tree stump, staring at the landscape before my eyes. A real, earthly landscape.

My strokes on the white paper caught the softness of the Appalachian hills.

The dark green firs were everywhere, a monotonous landscape at first glance. However, faint tinges of orange revealed the presence of a birch or an oak. There were a few bizarre bent trees. Those odd inhabitants had not been felled down. I felt related to them. However strange they were, without them the forest would have been a boring landscape of clones...

At noon, I came back to the cabin I had built a few years before. Hidden in the woods, it could only accommodate one person. The forest industry was far from being active in the area and hikers has deserted the place. A pot of beans with a can of beer made my lunch.

I chopped down wood for the rest of the afternoon, in case I should have to spend a long time here. I let my thoughts flow.

I still was unsure as to what to do. I certainly did not want to go back to my job again. I was bored with it all. I had - I wanted – to escape the system. The question then was: should I fight against it or should I simply live as a hermit?

Right now, the call of the wild was stronger. I needed to take a break from cities – from society.

At sunrise, I packed and put on my trusty hiking shoes. In my side pockets, a handful of pencils and my father’s knife. This black military Swiss army knife was the last and only thing I had kept from my parents. The plastic grip had melted a bit, but its blade was still sharp. This item

⁶ Playlist – Track 6

reminded me of my father's love for nature and his unquenchable yearning for discovery. He used to be some kind of modern natural philosopher, thinking nature in physical or philosophical terms.

When the sun was at its highest in the sky, I ended my errand.⁷ I settled under a grove of willows and alders, on the banks of a river. Its bed followed what was once the path of a mighty glacier.

The autumn air was warm, I relaxed. With my eyes closed, I could almost smell the sugar accumulated in the reddening leaves above. I ate some bread and cheese. The soft air embraced me like a lover and the gurgling water lulled me asleep.

I woke up a few hours later. As I looked at the river and the trees, I glimpsed at a weird-shaped head peering out of the leaves of a willow. I recognized it: it was a forest spirit, a Kodama. Soon after, a dozen others came into view and began to dance around and through the reddening thicket. Their movements followed the sound of strings and pipes I could not see at first. A minute later, nixes were swimming in the river. Their delicate fingers were pinching the strings of a harp or dancing over the holes of a pipe. Farther away, I could glance the shape of a giant stag grazing in the vale. It stood like a noble and ancient god. These creatures kept the place safe, wild and mystical. My heart was craving to mingle with them and perhaps become one of them.

At the end of the afternoon, I looked at my drawing as if I had just woken from a kind of trance. It was time for me to go home. Halfway, I stumbled across a deer skull. It seemed quite recent, but it was clean from any rotting flesh or skin. It reminded me of the giant stag in my dreams, so I chose to take it along with me, as a talisman.

Back home, I was thrilled by the experience I had lived. The beauty and simplicity of Nature was offered to my sight.

During the evening, the deer skull kept staring at me from the top of the shelves, I understood what it meant. Even if my heart wanted to be here, this was not where I belonged⁸.

I had made up my mind, but the decision was not easy to take.

The next day, I wandered through the forest and the hills, along the rivers and the lakes. I said farewell to the land.

I left the place the following morning and drove back to the city. Slowly I opened the door, half fearing my apartment might have been ransacked by some zealous governmental agent. It was not.

It seemed no one had entered since I had left.

I hurried towards my computers and checked my emails. I had not taken any electronic device with me so that no one could know where I was. Well, nothing unexpected. I was fired, and my friends were not worried, or at least, understood it was best not to contact me following Andreas' advice.

Home again. The other "home", the "civilized" one. Still, it felt good to be back.

I played online, alone, the entire day.

I went through an icy desert. It was harsh. I could almost feel the biting cold wind on my face and ears. Monstrous ten-foot tall polar bears attacked me. They were not easy to eliminate.

⁷ Playlist – Track 7

⁸ Playlist – Track 8

The sight of blood almost made me squeamish. For the moment, I was uncomfortable with this unnecessary violence. The shimmering surface of a huge natural wall of ice caught my attention. I stood below some huge iceberg stranded more than ten walking days away from the nearest shore.⁹

The white and blue hues of the snow and ice seemed nearly unnatural under the majestic starry sky. The milky way was fully observable. I recognized the constellation of the giant stag, the wise owl was also brightly visible in the northern sky. Flashes of green, red or yellow crossed the sky. I was blessed with northern lights.

I stepped towards the glimmering part of the gigantic fortress of solid ice. A hidden entrance appeared. I drew the runes on the frame of the door. They immediately reacted to my magic and began to light on, flickering some pale aquamarine tone. The ice door began to melt. It was tall enough to let a medium-built/size humanoid in. I went through, once the entrance was completely cleared. I felt uncomfortable since I had never heard of this place.

The ice above the door collapsed.¹⁰ I was forced to step forward. A long hallway sank into the iceberg. On both sides, houses several stories high, with shops at street level, were completely frozen, ice filling every corner available. The silence was complete and oppressive. Sometimes I could hear the ice cracking. I progressed slowly, avoiding any surprise attack and trying to understand who had built this city, and how all this could have happened. No exit was visible. I walked for more than ten minutes before I reached the end of this hallway. I arrived on the main square. Something odd was standing in the middle of it... A frostbitten poplar. Behind the square, a huge door stood out of the ice. It seemed to be a castle entrance and runes were engraved on the frame. Unfortunately, I could not read this language. I opened the door and went in. I had hardly walked a few steps when I heard a big thud. I jumped aside. A huge stone axe smashed onto the floor. It was held by a giant dwarf statue. The dark hall was immense and empty. The structure was supported by stone pillars. It was clearly dwarvencraft... Strangely, I could not see any corpse. Did they have time to flee? But the city was so well-preserved... It must have been frozen very quickly.

At its farthest end, some twenty steps led up to another huge door. This time, I opened it carefully. Here was the throne room. It was a dead end. Some runes were engraved on the walls. I came closer to the unique throne. The back wall was entirely frozen. I rubbed its surface to see if I could find a door. I stopped. I could make out a gigantic claw preserved in the ice. It seemed that it was only a skeleton. So I continued to slowly rub the surface at my level. I could not see further than two feet. I moved back and decided to cast a spell to totally clean the surface of the ice. It slowly became transparent. It was a giant frost wyrm! I definitely should not have come here¹¹.

A faint blue light began to shine around the position of its heart. I slowly retraced my steps. It was too late... A spark ignited in its eyes. I immediately began to prepare the strongest spell I knew as the ice was melting. Alone I could not do anything.

When it rose up, I cast my spell. It was a critical hit. A mere flick regarding its life expectancy. The light coming from its chest grew stronger. The air all around was sucked in. It was counterattacking. I was lost.

I got hurt but kept fighting. Its fighting style was really clever. It knew and foresaw all my moves. I was a dead man.

⁹ Playlist – Track 9

¹⁰ Playlist – Track 10

¹¹ Playlist – Track 11

Then I heard a massive scream behind me. I looked back. About forty dwarves were charging. They were ghosts. This was a scene from the past! Or maybe not... I tried to help them but my spells were useless. So I watched this strange dance.

The one that seemed to be the leader - maybe their king - said:

“You, Sindragosa, queen of the frost wyrms, can’t leave this place! You are doomed! We will always stay here to protect the freedom of the outside world!”

His words echoed inside the throne room. The wyrm struggled, but it was outnumbered. At the end, it was captured and imprisoned in the ice again. Its cry was heard one last time.

I understood how this place had been created. The dwarves had sacrificed their homes and themselves, frozen into their own magic ice.

After all the dwarves had left through the wall, I came closer to the wyrm. It was nearly in the same position as before. But its face looked strange... It was turned down. I followed its eyes and I was horrified by what I saw.

Down there was Andreas’s body...

I violently pulled the plug out. My screens went black but the image was printed in my mind. How was it possible?

I badly needed to go out in the open air.¹² It was the middle of the night. I bought some junk food at the Asian supermarket and went for a walk. The air clammy. There was no wind. A few cars passed by.

As I came closer to my apartment, I glimpsed at two men on the other side of the road. They seemed simply walking and looking around. One of them whispered to the other right after glancing in my direction. I thought they might be cops. I would never be quiet any more.

The next day, I woke up at 10.00 and I decided to clean up my place. I had a strange feeling. I was stressed, however I did feel my room was not exactly as I had left it. I decided to thoroughly search through my apartment, looking for clues. I had found nothing but dust bunnies. I reckoned if they had to spy on me they simply would have hacked into my computer. I slumped onto my couch and contemplated moving out from this place.

A few days afterwards, thanks to Steve, I rented a small apartment from one of his acquaintances, an old lady who subleased a part of her house to supplement her retirement income.

Nothing was official. I even gave her a false name. I felt safe, hidden in the center of the city. Just a random jobless youth.

In the following months, I continued to draw every day. I had taken my computers with me, but I kept them offline. I thought about working as a freelancer to earn some money. However, the government would have investigated and I would have run into trouble. So I found some private collectors to whom I sold some artworks thanks to acquaintances. The only things I bought were a poster printer, some ink and paper. I kept all this hidden. I did not want my landlady to go into trouble, she was so kind to me.

During my free time, I played some old offline games for fun. I also took long walks through parks to seek inspiration.¹³ One day, I was wandering inside a tropical greenhouse. They were many beautiful trees. I sketched some of them. The atmosphere was damp but pleasant. I

¹² Playlist – Track 12

¹³ Playlist – Track 13

could hear some small fountain whose sound was soothing. I sat on a bench near a lollipop plant and closed my eyes. The quietness of the place was undisturbed until two kids came running and laughing.

“Catch me if you can!” said the young girl.

“Give me my cake back!” replied the boy.

I smiled. They continued to run all around the place until their mother caught the girl. They all laughed. This sounded so cheerful.

“Mummy, is that man over there dead?” asked the boy, his mouth full.

“No, he is asleep, I gather.”

“Mummy, he drew something! I saw it!” said the girl.

“Yes, don’t you like drawing too?”

Then they vanished as fast as they had appeared. The place became a serene paradise once again.

After some time, I decided to go back home.¹⁴ On my way, I walked into a back alley. I fell upon a series of posters. Each of them was a work of art: *The Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault, *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, *Number 1A* by Jackson Pollock, *Balloon Debate* by Banksy, *Freedom Sculpture* by Zenos Frudakis, the *Four Freedom* series by Norman Rockwell and of course the *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix. Under each masterpiece was written:

“Do you know me?”

“Of course, they don’t,” I replied.

All this was beautiful! But doomed to disappear...

The prints bore the signature of FfF: *Fight for Freedom*.

I came back home wistful.

The following morning, I sorted out papers and cleaned my room. I stumbled upon the server which contained WoW†. All this work... for nothing? It reminded me of Andreas. I needed to contact him.

A few weeks later, I met my friend at the city fair. I had arrived earlier to visit the place and look at the various exhibitions. One of them was an outstanding little city made out of ice.¹⁵ The entrance was guarded by two golden griffins carved into the ice. Their hollow bellies sheltered a flickering candle. Similar lights were displayed everywhere in the ephemeral city. Blues, greens and yellows rendered the majesty of an ancient Persian town. This sight was heartwarming! Right in the middle was a giant castle, blazing blue like the desert sky. I went through a series of gigantic arched doors. Sphinxes and winged bulls were sitting at the feet of the huge columns. I stepped into the central room of the building, the main tower stood above my head. Its walls were adorned with finely-carved bas-reliefs representing battlefield scenes.

Andreas was there, examining a phalanx of spearman slaying a fearsome Nephilim.

“What do you think about that?” I asked.

“Hum... it gives some hope.”

¹⁴ Playlist – Track 14

† World of Warcraft

¹⁵ Playlist – Track 15 (not found)

“How are you?”

“Still the same. Oh! By the way! Happy birthday!!!”

“But that’s...” I cried out. He gave me a hug putting something into my bag at the same time.

“Thank you!” I replied with a smile.

“Wish you all the best!” he said.

“My pleasure. Let’s resume our visit, shall we?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t stay here. We will meet again for the cake some other time!”

“Sure! Bye!”

“Bye!”

Why was Andreas in such a hurry? I was intrigued and my nosy attitude led me to follow him¹⁶. He was waiting near the castle entrance. I hid behind a winged bull. He looked around as if searching for someone. He then froze, could he have seen a ghost? He walked back briskly inside the castle. I kept undercover. Nobody was following him, so I came closer. When he was in the largest room, he searched for another exit but they were guarded by security agents. Five six-footers came in by the main entrance. Andreas saw them, looked stressed, but he could not do anything against them. One of them stepped closer to him and asked him something. His face turned livid. He finally followed them through a back door.

Abashed by this surreal scene, I could not decide to do anything but come home. My way back was like going through a dense fog: no sound, no image, no thought, only the way.

My mind finally cleared up. I was sitting on my old couch. The only conclusion I came to was the worst: Andreas must have been caught by some governmental agency. I was frightened, I had to flee, again.

As I was packing, I found Andreas's gift. It had slipped out of my mind. I discovered a USB stick. I plugged it onto my computer. It was a final update for our server. I took it with me.

I promptly put my things in my car, left a letter on the kitchen table (with this month's rent in cash), and drove away.

I still did not know where I wanted to settle, I simply went westward. The cabin was not a valid solution, I wanted - I needed - to keep a network connection.

It has been several days now that I have been on the road, driving from a dull motel room to another dull motel room.

As time goes by, the landscape has changed, but my resolution has become stronger and stronger.

Under the glowing evening sky, I dropped my crow bar and opened a sand-covered hatch¹⁷. I am in the middle of nowhere, the road has stopped a dozen miles before.

I am going down the numerous rungs. My feet finally touch the concrete floor. My torchlight reveals a small room, with another hatch facing the ladder. I eventually managed to turn the rusty wheel and penetrate the complex.

¹⁶ Playlist – Track 16

¹⁷ Playlist – Track 17

The Cold War Era atomic shelter is composed of three rooms: a large ward with tables, chairs, benches and military beds, a kitchen with dehydrated supplies and a common bathroom. All of it is still in a pristine state, protected from time.

This is the perfect place. I open my backpack and set the server on a table. I search for a piece of paper and a pen in my trousers, and begin to write.

“Dear visitor,

Please, take this server along with you, it contains a world. A world where freedom rules. I hope you’ll enjoy it, with friends and strangers. Share it and enrich it!
Most of all, have fun!”

This is how my journey ends, but other quests await me in this vast world...¹⁸

¹⁸ Playlist – Track 18
And Bonus Tracks