



**THE**  
**PREY**  
R. J DYSON



[absolutelyunprofessional.com](http://absolutelyunprofessional.com)  
Wadsworth, OH

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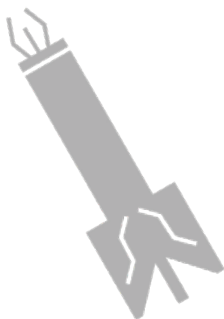
Wadsworth, OH 44281

[absounpro.com](http://absounpro.com)

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to those torchbearers of truth sparking  
fires in the wasteland





## 1 Down by the River

“Who’s there? These hands are lethal weapons. Chambermaid? Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” The hair stood up on the back of Chih-ming’s neck. Dropping the book he was carrying, tea spilled across the cover as it hit the dirt. He wasn’t used to seeing anyone down by the river so early in the morning.

“Morning, Ming,” the young man said. “Chambermaid?”

“Sheesh! It’s just you, Nuzrene,” Chih replied, taking a deep breath and wiping the tea dripping down the sides of the mug he managed to hold onto. “Yeah, well... it’s a nickname Joanna and I gave the monitors we think are snooping around these woods.”

The older student continued watching the dark river water flow by. Chih had only known him for a few months, but it was clear Nuzrene was careful with his words—willing to let silence sit in a conversation. “You really *have* been getting up early, haven’t you? The sun’s just sneaking up on us, and you’ve already made tea. You doing alright?”

“I was looking forward to drinking it too,” he said, flashing a smile in the fog now creeping along the riverbank. “I guess I just like the sound of the river before the busyness of the day.”

“Sort of like your time sneaking into the museum every night on a quiet compound?” There were few things about Compound 40 that Chih looked back on with warm memories, but his time alone in the library, scouring off-compound records, and surfing the chain behind Stream made the cut. Nuzrene had quickly figured out that Chih-ming was as much a man of quiet routine as he was willing to dive into an adventure.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” said Chih, wiping muck from the well-worn book. “But that makes a lot of sense. I’d been creeping into the museum since I was a Seeker. Seems a stretch of silence in the dark each day is part of my DNA now.”

“I know what you mean,” he replied, patting the stone beside him and inviting Chih to sit. “I was an Interpreter when C-21 fell. For years I would sneak off-site through an underground infrastructure tunnel designed for water lines

and electrical systems. It ran beneath my dorm and at the end was a hatch in the middle of nowhere right next to an internet relay tower. I traveled the world through that tower.”

“So you’d be an Applier now, or a graduating one anyhow...You know, if you were still at the compound.” Chih sat down, placed the book on his lap, then set his mug on top of it. “What was it like? Your compound?”

Nuzrene looked upstream. Reaching into the thigh pocket of his khaki pants, he pulled out a small silver key. Without looking, he began to rotate it in between his fingers slowly. Chih waited patiently. He had learned you couldn’t rush Nuzrene for an answer.

“My compound? Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it *mine*,” Nuzrene said, chuckling at the thought. “Someday, someone’s going to write a comprehensive history of the rise and fall of the Anti-Libertas movement. I think future generations will be shocked by the evil utopian nightmare inflicted upon the world in the name of *good*.” Watching the bank along the opposite side of the river, Nuzrene took another deep breath. When he had first escaped, the young Interpreter took every opportunity to talk about the horrors of compound life in the Middle East. Now, he only shared what seemed beneficial in helping other students make sense of life beyond the walls.

Chih took a sip of tea and then opened the book. It was a small book about the size of the tablet still strapped to his

forearm. Thin with a hardcover, he had borrowed it from the director's house.

“Still working on those few lines? You know, from that ancient letter Heschel and Joanna found. One of the elders in town had a partial copy in his study, right?”

“Strange that there would be a few pages of the same old book, or letter, or whatever it is that we found on C-40 tucked away here in town,” said Chih, shaking his head and thumbing through the ragged pages.

“With the glow always a step ahead, I'm not sure anything could surprise me,” Nuzrene replied. “What seems like luck or coincidence often turns out to be some sort of guidance toward a presupposed outcome. An old sage I once met called it providence. Haven't found a solid definition of it on the chain yet. A few elders seem to have a good grasp of the concept.”

Chih nodded, watching each yellowed page slip past his thumb. “This is the reason I'm here in the first place...I think,” he said, running his fingers across the spine. “The reason the glow has partnered with me. I can't help but wonder if there's more to unlock in these pages. More hidden messages, ya know? More clues that'll get us back to Hesch? Not sure I deserve....”

“Deserve what?” asked Nuzrene.

“Nothing,” he hastily replied. “Nothing...Just working out some thoughts after leaving the compound.”



Nuzrene grabbed Chih's shoulder and nodded. Pushing down, he rose to his feet. His right leg slowed him down, but it hadn't stopped him. "If it's anything like the few passages we've been able to unlock from some of John's ancient compatriots, I have no doubt the glow will stir up more than you can imagine—though, in my experience, probably not what you'd expect."

Squeezing the small book with both hands, Chih nodded, smelled the cover, then shook his head. "Every morning, I come down here, sip tea, and translate another few words. I know I could read the English draft on the chain, the one you've already worked to decipher, but when I do it this way...I don't know...I believe part of the mystery is in the ancient language itself. That I have to earn it. Like the truth is guaranteed to be in those strange signs and symbols if I work at it long enough. It was the last time anyhow...and I don't want to miss it."

It was late summer. Mornings by the river were cool and peaceful, though still just as humid as they had been in the courtyard on his way to session one. While the air felt the same, time moved at a different pace in town. A change Chih was thankful for.

Since crawling out of the cold river with Joanna at that very same spot, he had continued to stand a little taller, attempting to live up to his namesake, at least as far as others could tell. On the inside, though, he was wrestling with a nasty creature—tangling with the nagging hiss of

guilt that claimed he had sacrificed Hesch for his own safety. An idea virus working its way into his heart. But in the morning, during his time by the river, alone, with the little red book, and the ancient text within it, he felt relief.

The glow wasn't always visible, either. Not like it had become at C-40. And it seemed to burn a little less within him lately too. Mostly illuminating his time in the little red book. Yet he could still feel it toiling, as though preparing him for the moment he would be called on again.

Nuzrene stood back and watched Chih settle into place beside the river, open the book, and begin to absorb the text. He had done the same thing when he arrived in town. In the same spot. At the same time of day. It's where he began to make sense of the glow.

"I'll see you back in town, Chih." Turning to walk away, he caught a glimpse of the glow from Chih's eyes lighting up the page. Of all the ways he had witnessed the orb in town, Chih's eye-glow was a first. "And watch out for those Chambermaids."