



# LINES

Cira M. Ansorena



*Lines*



**Cira Mozos Ansorena**

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Kosmovisiones acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the Country on which this book was created, the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, and pays respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

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*We are not alone.  
We are threads of the same quipu.*



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## KNOT I

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### THE LINE THAT UNFOLDS

The cry of a bird awoke Ikan. He stood quickly, stirred by the message woven into the bird's call, and stepped out of the cabin. A sensation swept through him, a summons to embark on another journey of power.

The first tremor beneath his feet made him run. Pushing up the hill with unshakable determination, he reached a rocky ledge rising above the sea. There he paused, breathing in the air thick with salt and electricity. Lightning split the horizon, briefly illuminating the shadows looming over the Outer Reserves. As if performing an ancient rite, he opened his hands and pressed them slowly against the damp ground. Carefully, he moved a heavy rock, fixing his gaze on the *quena* resting beneath it. He looked at it with reverence and humility. Feeling its permission, he lifted it in his hands, elated.

The taste of cane tuned his breath, and with unwavering *Intent*, Ikan drew a new sound from the *quena*—a deep melody offered to the wind. Suddenly, a strong tremor ran through his bare feet. He staggered as he watched rocks break free and tumble into the ocean below.

Ikan, watching as the storm drew closer, continued playing the *quena*, feeling himself part of the chaos descending

upon the Outer Reserves. On that cliff, he tested whether he possessed enough power to sustain the entire battle, making the sound a bridge between worlds. The earth itself answered him with distant echoes.

Then, he noticed a surveillance device emerging from between the rocks: a sphere, spinning. The metallic orb positioned itself at his level, observing him through its many lenses. Another unexpected tremor shook the rocky terrain. In that instant, seizing the opportunity, Ikan swiftly grabbed a nearby stone and hurled it at the vigilant sphere. The impact landed with a dry thud. The camera fell and vanished into the furious sea.

He brought the quena to his lips once more and kept playing. His defiant eyes lifted towards the distant lights of Sector B, gleaming like a constant threat.

*They're like those black clouds, he thought, heavy, oppressive, covering the horizon of the Outer Reserves like a storm of technological domination.*

From a higher vantage point, Elías watched in silence. His serene posture and steady gaze revealed the wisdom of a life spent in search of understanding. Amid the roar of the wind and distant thunder, Elías perceived something else—a deep and steady heartbeat. It was as if the storm itself were the drum of the cosmos echoing through the cracks in the veil separating the different *Pachas*, those invisible threads where past, present, and possibility touch in a spiral.

When he felt the third tremor, he knew the nocturnal spectacle had come to an end. With a slow gesture, he pulled a condor feather from his belongings and released it to the wind, a sign of gratitude and acceptance of his role in the weaving of time. He descended calmly to where the boy was.

‘Ikan,’ he said in a deep yet gentle voice, ‘we are gathered in the cave. Nuna wants you to join the assembly; she knows you have played the quena.’

Ikan, with the quena as his instrument of communion with the mystery, knew that through its sound he had joined the shifting currents of reality. Though he couldn't yet see the purpose in its entirety, he was certain of one thing: in that battle, he had gained enough power for another encounter with the unknown.



Naran watched between the buildings as the pale winter light faded away. She walked slowly, her steps heavy after hours of wandering through cobbled alleys. In one hand, she held a photo of her father, wrinkled and worn by time; with the other, she timidly approached passersby, pointing at it and asking if they had seen him. She barely lifted her gaze, afraid someone might notice her youth and vulnerability. Every few steps, she raised the photograph again, but the hurried crowd ignored her or dismissed her with a gesture. A drop of rain blurred the image, and Naran wiped it clean with her blackened hand. She tried showing it to a woman, but the woman silently shook her head and walked away.

Hopeless, she leaned against a building, letting its cold façade support her sadness. Another day with no news. With a brusque movement, she tried to wrap herself more tightly in her jacket, but the freezing wind sent a shiver through her. *I should have grabbed warmer clothes when I escaped the centre*, she thought, scolding herself. She had already run off in search of her father several times that month, and now she blamed herself for not having learned to pack her backpack better. She barely had any clothes and, even worse, they were wet. If she didn't find shelter soon, she knew she wouldn't survive the night's frost.

Sheltered beneath the building, she watched as heavy raindrops seeped into her worn shoes. Her attention, however, was far away: it wandered, lost among the images unfolding

in her mind, triggered by the smell of soup wafting through a nearby window. *What are they having for dinner?* she wondered, as memories of the centre returned to her. Nothing seemed more distant from the cold, hostile street than the metallic atmosphere of the youth shelter. The caregivers' indifference, the disconnection between the young people... everything was cold. And yet, in that darkness, that coldness had felt like a kind of safety. *Maybe I should go back,* she thought, feeling like a solitary tree on a frozen plain.

A noise made her tense. She looked to her left and saw a man, a vagrant, approaching as he dragged a shopping cart full of broken objects. The man stopped in front of her, his gaze vacant, and offered her an old, tattered blanket.

'No, I'm fine, thanks,' Naran replied, turning her head to avoid the musty smell of the garment. She didn't want to strike up a conversation with a stranger.

The man looked at her with an expression she couldn't decipher and whispered, 'Dark times are coming.'

He handed her a pamphlet before continuing, dragging his cart.

Naran looked down at the paper and shrugged, not really knowing what to say. Her need was primal, too immediate to worry about times to come.

'These streets have borne the weight of several empires. There was a time when countries claimed to have brought civilisation to the millions of indigenous people they enslaved and killed,' the man said without stopping. 'Now, the central sectors do the same with our minds.'

'What does that have to do with Karanza?' asked Naran, reading the name on the pamphlet.

'Karanza is a refuge. It's our only hope to resist. Look there; maybe you'll find the answers you need.'

‘Have you seen him?’ she asked then, showing him the photograph. ‘He’s my father, and I haven’t heard from him in over a month.’

‘Look in Karanza.’

‘How do I get there?’ Naran insisted, searching for directions in the pamphlet that might point the way. When she looked up, the man was already turning the corner of the alley, shouting as he disappeared.

‘Remember!’ he whispered as he retreated. ‘Every coloniser has their cracks. No empire lasts forever.’

His words, heavy with bitter truth, struck something deep within her. For years, she had felt in tune with those ideas, carrying them like a burden. But she had to admit they hadn’t brought her answers—and now the weight of her circumstances made her crumble. The vagrant manifested something that terrified her: the possibility of being so marginalised herself. If she were connected to the system, she wouldn’t be in this situation. *I need to find my father quickly*, she thought, staring at the pamphlet in desperation.

She hadn’t been able to locate him; mobile lines were cut for civilians, and only communications through MIO remained active. Which meant she was in the same situation as that man—banished from everything she once considered hers, wandering, divided, bitterly recognising that a part of her still longed to access that newly established reality. A wave of rejection and anger washed over her, and she raised her voice: *Why is it my fault I can’t access that wretched program?!* she shouted, as tears soaked the dark strands of hair clinging to her skin. She wiped her eyes with her arm, clearing her greenish, slanted features, and looked again at the pamphlet, wondering what she could do.

The pain in her chest intensified. The cold air slashed her lungs and she could barely feel her hands. The temperature was

dropping fast. She couldn't return to the youth shelter—the metallic atmosphere of that place gave her chills. The young people there didn't know what was really happening. *Why are we kept there? Have they turned us into prisoners just because we're incompatible with the system?* she thought with a mix of frustration and anguish. But she couldn't go to the police either; they would send her back to the centre, where they would tell her the same thing as always: that Alan, her father, was busy with the research project and that, due to the state of emergency, she had to follow orders. But she could no longer accept that situation—she had to find him.

The pamphlet in her hands was a fragile object, but now it felt like an anchor. Naran needed to know if the latest system update was safe, if with it she could finally become compatible. She looked again at the printed words... *Karanza might be a solution if I can't find my father*, she told herself, trying to soothe the uncertainty devouring her.

A cold wind blew something against her hands. Startled, Naran grabbed a feather. *How could a bird survive in this inhospitable climate?* she wondered. For a moment, that condor feather, so simple and light, evoked distant, warm landscapes where nature still offered refuge. She could almost feel the lushness of the trees and the deep green of their canopies, and a fleeting peace enveloped her. But the past was only an echo—a voice lashing her mercilessly like the gusts of wind, a song of faded memories and broken hopes. In that moment, the present terrified her: desolate streets, abandoned buildings, neon lights screaming colours and repetitive messages about MIO—that artificial reality projecting horizons that promised everything and offered nothing. Those landscapes were virtual confines she feared but also longed for, and to which she couldn't gain access because she was incompatible.

With those thoughts, she wandered distractedly for a while, roaming with sleepy eyes through the shadows of the night. Another freezing gust snapped her from her trance and reminded her again who she was: Naran, a seventeen-year-old girl who had witnessed a reality vanishing beneath the imminent confinement of the population, destined to hibernate in bunkers connected to the MIO system during the glaciation. That thought brought her a pain as real as it was useless. Upon realising it, she shook off the nostalgia she used as her only shelter, and an impulse urged her to survive: she had to find a place to spend the night.



The wind blew fiercely as Naran stumbled through the desolate streets of the peripheral sector. Amid the gloom, disoriented, she barely recognised the echoes of her own footsteps. Her legs hardly obeyed her; exhaustion weighed down her every movement. To shake off the numbness, she jumped a couple of times, though the relief was fleeting. Her drowsy eyes caught a glimpse of space beneath the stairs of an old building—a hidden spot that promised some respite to survive the endless night. With the last of her strength, she dragged herself there, pulling cardboard boxes from a nearby dumpster to seal the entrance to her improvised refuge.

But upon arrival, reality struck harshly: the floor was soaked from the recent rains. A puddle became a mirror, and her gaze shifted to the surface, where her thoughts projected the same results from the graph, repeated endlessly after each test, alongside the blinking words: *incompatible*. A breath of cold air pulled her back to the present. Shaking her head, she tried to dispel those memories, those burdens chasing her like persistent shadows.

The image of her warm home, the one she once shared with her parents, crossed her mind, bringing a moment of fleeting comfort. A shiver ran down her spine and she let the memory go with a sigh, though its departure left a painful void. With tears in her eyes, she headed to the dumpsters to search for an alternative. A sudden cramp shot through her legs, tensing her body to its limit. She knew she couldn't afford to linger in that emotional state; she needed to gather strength to survive. *There's no time*, she repeated as she looked at her hands, purple from the cold.

Suddenly, distant shouts broke the silence. She turned her head towards the sound and saw two teenagers running at full speed, crossing a main avenue. To her surprise, the kids turned a corner and entered the alley where she was. A van approached behind them, trying to cut them off.

As they raced past her, Naran stepped back, startled by the uncertainty. She was too exhausted and absorbed in her thoughts to react. *I just want to rest*, she thought, wishing to escape the anguish consuming her for a moment. But something inside her snapped to alert; her senses sharpened, and her body reacted instinctively. With a leap, like an animal on guard, she broke from her lethargy and recognised the van approaching. *It can't be*, she murmured, astonished.

The hum of patrolling drones filled the air, accompanied by the shrill echo of alarms. The van advanced fast, and Naran, driven by instinct, followed the two teenagers. Though her body was at its limit, something within gave her strength. Suddenly, a cramp brought her down, but a hand quickly appeared to help her up. The boy pulled her back into action, and Naran looked at him with gratitude, too breathless to speak.

'Hurry!' shouted the girl leading the escape as she climbed an exterior staircase.

‘Follow her!’ the boy exclaimed, still holding her arm. ‘You can trust her; she’s my sister, Maia.’

The boy’s voice was urgent. Maia motioned for them to enter the building through a broken window. As they climbed the façade stairs, Naran observed the girl’s agile, determined movements. Maia, strong and fast, wore a black hood that concealed her features; her loose, functional clothes reinforced her air of resolve.

But at one point, Naran slipped and fell backwards. Instinctively, she grabbed the boy’s leg to prevent a worse fall, and that fleeting contact made her realise he wore a prosthetic. The small detail led her to glimpse the relationship between the siblings: Maia was her brother’s protector. Her strength and determination came from her need to keep him safe—and that somehow made Naran feel safer too. That perception became an anchor amid the chaos.

For the first time in a long while, she felt connected to someone, even if they were complete strangers.

Finally, they slipped through the broken window, and Naran collapsed to the floor, gasping. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to process everything that had just happened. But her mind was a whirlwind of images and emotions. *How did I get here?* she wondered, overwhelmed by the past few days of fleeing and despair. Exhaustion overtook her, and she slipped into darkness for a moment until a sudden shake woke her abruptly. The boy was calling her, his voice thick with panic.

Naran opened her eyes and felt reality slipping through her fingers, blending with what seemed like a dream: heavy footsteps echoed through the building, and through a gap in the staircase, they saw one of the security men climbing, getting closer.

‘Néstor!’ shouted Maia, irritated to see her brother moving aimlessly. ‘Focus!’

‘What do we do now?’ he asked, nervous.

‘Wait here!’ Maia darted off to find another way out. Within moments, she returned and pointed in a new direction.

‘We’ll go down the exterior stairs on the other side.’

Naran, however, suddenly stopped. Her thoughts turned inward, and before her, different possibilities unfolded. She could see how each choice would affect her destiny and that of her companions. Reality, malleable before her eyes, turned into a fan of potential futures. Though she couldn’t guarantee the certainty of what she saw, her intuition sharpened with each perception.

‘Wait!’ she exclaimed firmly. Her tone stopped the siblings, who looked at her in surprise.

‘What is it?’ asked Maia, her anxiety evident.

‘Not that way,’ said Naran, convinced. The images and sensations she had just experienced reinforced her decision. Though she couldn’t fully explain it, she knew continuing down the exterior stairs would be a mistake.

‘How are you so sure?’ Néstor asked, sceptical.

‘I’ve considered the possibilities—another vehicle is coming that way. If we go there, they’ll trap us in the alley.’

The siblings exchanged a glance, doubting Naran’s certainty, but the growing noise of the door being forced pushed them to act.

‘There’s no time, let’s go!’ said Naran with determination.

Despite their doubts, Maia and Néstor followed her. They exited through the back door and quietly descended towards a dark basement car park. They searched the vehicles for somewhere to hide. After several failed attempts, Naran noticed that a van’s window was open. They slipped inside and huddled on the van floor, holding their breath as the security men passed nearby.

When they finally heard the sound of the patrols moving away, the group let out a sigh of relief. Naran, still trembling from the weight of her decision, pressed the photograph of her father to her chest. In the darkness, her mind tried to find clarity.

Even though doubts persisted, one thought clung to her heart: there was still hope.



Alan, his eyes glazed with tiredness after another long day, listened to Nelida speaking, as if from a distance. Fatigue was etched on his weary face; his mind wavered between the responsibility of the project and his personal worries. The past weeks had been exhausting for everyone at the Research Centre, but he felt particularly drained.

‘So, Alan, with what we’ve accomplished today, do you think the report will be ready by the deadline?’ asked Nelida, her voice thick with anxiety. ‘You know we have until next week at the latest.’

Alan slowly released a device connected to a computer by several cables and pushed his chair back to recline. The bright light of the office irritated him, and he squeezed his eyes shut while stretching in an attempt to relieve the strain.

‘Are you alright?’ she continued, unable to hide her concern for her colleague’s state.

Alan’s silence was answer enough: the Incompatibles were about to arrive at the Centre, and everything had to be ready for the project’s final phase to be approved. The pressure was immense, fuelled by Margot’s constant interference. The coordinator, fearful of being dismissed by the central sectors, kept changing the plans. The atmosphere was thick with tension.

‘You know I got into this project because of my daughter,’ Alan finally responded, lowering his head as if speaking more to himself than to Nelida. ‘Well, I mean... for a whole generation of young people, to believe in their possibilities. Even if the circumstances are against them, whether socially, environmentally, or financially, everyone should have the chance to become who they want to be, not be relegated by the force of something bigger than them.’

Nelida nodded slowly, hoping the conversation wouldn’t stretch on. It was late, and they had a crucial meeting the next day where they had to show solid progress. The results needed to convince all parties; otherwise, the project could be doomed. However, Alan’s fatigue seemed to push him to voice the doubts he had been repressing.

‘Do you think each of those young people can find that sliver of luck—that second that can completely change their life?’ he asked, pausing to exhale and release some of the pressure he felt. ‘Do you think, being connected to a machine, they can still find their destiny? Or are they doomed to do what we adults want from them? Worse yet, what a program decides for them.’

Nelida watched him, her concern for him growing with every passing moment.

‘I think you’ve gone too long without sleep, Alan,’ she replied gently.

Alan leaned forward, covering his face with his hands. His voice trembled slightly when he asked:

‘Do you think I’m a good father? I’m so deep into this that I feel like I’m drifting away from her.’

His colleague placed a hand on his shoulder in a silent gesture of support.

Alan knew she was right, but the weight of his thoughts kept him trapped. He felt like he was struggling to keep a ship afloat, trying to balance the expectations of everyone involved

in the project. But if things didn't go well in the next day's meeting, he would have to make a difficult decision—perhaps even abandon everything he had worked for.

That night, after weeks of failed attempts, he tried to contact his daughter, but communications were down. The feeling of helplessness overwhelmed him, and uncertainty became his shadow. Despite it all, the scanner was complete, and Alan trusted that his work would be worthwhile. He believed that, in the end, the project's leaders would understand why some teenagers couldn't be connected to MIO. Yet deep within his exhaustion, a doubt persisted: was he truly doing the right thing? Could this effort prevent the project—and all the young people he was trying to protect—from sinking into a system that seemed inevitable?

'You need to rest,' said Nelida firmly.



The morning light reflected from the van's rear-view mirror, illuminating Naran's face. The sun's glare woke her with an uncomfortable blink, and Maia, urgency clear in her voice and movements, pulled her from her drowsiness.

'Wake up, we have to go quickly!' she exclaimed, shaking both Néstor and Naran. 'Someone could come into the garage at any moment!'

The recent events still reverberated in Naran's mind like a confusing tide. The images of the past hours—full of running and tension—faded as she forced herself to focus on the present. Still dazed by the abrupt change in her surroundings, it took her a moment to process where she was. Maia, seeing that Naran was still disoriented, leaned towards her.

'Are you alright? We need to move now,' she insisted, her tone firm but not aggressive.

Naran nodded slowly, feeling reality pressing from every direction. Néstor, his face still sleepy but curiosity awakening in his eyes, broke the silence:

‘How did you know there was a second car coming from the other side of the building?’

The question pulled Naran out of her trance. She remembered how she had seen those images in her mind, how her intuition had caught something the others couldn’t foresee. But she hesitated before answering, unsure how to explain it.

‘I think I... followed my intuition,’ she murmured, almost in a whisper. ‘My name is Naran.’

Saying her own name made her falter. Speaking it aloud forced her to face a part of herself that seemed blurred, fragmented by painful memories she couldn’t piece together. The words seemed to get stuck in her throat, each syllable heavy with crushing uncertainty. Maia watched her carefully, trying to decipher something more in the young woman’s face. Yet Naran lowered her gaze, unable to hold eye contact.

The tension in her chest was suffocating, and though she wanted to trust them, a part of her remained alert, unable to stop seeing them as strangers. Finally, she found a possible way to connect with them, even if it came from a shared wound.

‘I escaped from a youth centre two days ago, and I don’t want to go back. I’m looking for my father.’

The words hung in the narrow space of the vehicle. Maia and Néstor exchanged a brief but loaded glance of understanding. After a short silence, Maia spoke and shared her own story: the siblings had also escaped from a centre for Incompatibles, and now they were trying to reach the suburb of Karanza, where they hoped to reunite with their parents.

Maia was older than Naran, and her presence carried a maturity beyond her years; her shaved head and sharp fea-

tures gave her a combative air, reinforced by her tall build and broad shoulders. She hadn't yet turned eighteen, which meant she hadn't been implanted with the device for permanent connection to MIO, and she bore no integration mark at the base of her neck.

Néstor, younger, was around sixteen and contrasted with his sister in many ways: his frame was thinner, more delicate, with slanted eyes that reflected a mix of curiosity and fear. Maia clearly led the duo, and he seemed to find refuge in her strength.

'Karanza...' Naran repeated, letting the name echo in her mind. An image of the pamphlet she'd been given the night before crossed her mind. 'What's happening there?'

'In Karanza, all those who disagree with the new MIO program update are gathering. There are people who refuse to connect or those who simply can't. It's our last chance,' Maia answered, her tone blending determination with worry. She shifted her posture, her face hardening as she continued:

'Besides, our father is sick. Our mother is with him, and with all this chaos, we decided the best thing would be to take refuge with them in Karanza.'

Maia's revelation left Naran deep in thought. The idea of Karanza, until recently nothing to her, was beginning to take on deeper meaning. The option presented to her the previous night started to feel less abstract and more urgent.

'Are you sure this is really happening in Karanza?' she asked, searching for some certainty.

'Yes, part of the population is rebelling against the central sectors' orders,' Néstor affirmed with unexpected conviction.

'They're tired of Sectors A and B being used as a social laboratory by the system's controllers. Sector A was the first to connect to MIO, and in Sector B almost the entire population is already connected. Now we know those in the system are

beginning to experience adverse effects...' Maia's voice carried the weight of anger.

Something within Naran shifted. The air around her felt heavier, charged with meaning. Finding others with a purpose made her feel less alone in the search for her father.. The idea of joining Maia and Néstor on their journey to Karanza began to solidify in her mind.

'I'll go with you to seek refuge in Karanza if I don't find my father along the way,' she announced, her voice tinged with gratitude and resolve.

Maia nodded without surprise. It seemed she had expected it.

'Then let's go now,' she said decisively. 'They've started cutting communications between the suburbs to prevent people from moving; they don't want more people reaching Karanza. We have to leave before it's too late.'

The urgency of the moment pushed them to act. Together they began gathering what little they had, preparing for the next stretch of their uncertain journey towards the place of resistance.



Maia led the group, discreetly signalling for them to head towards the square as they exited the garage; it was crucial to avoid the main avenues of the sector.

Néstor, with the cunning of someone who had learned to survive in scarcity, veered off towards a row of abandoned shops and returned moments later with several cans of food. The faint clinking of metal in his hands sounded, for a moment, like a small victory in the midst of uncertainty.

The first rays of sunlight filtered between the buildings, casting a dim light that barely pierced the stubborn morning

fog. In the distance, the peaks of the mountains wore their first dusting of snow—a quiet but relentless reminder of the coming glaciation.

‘How much time do you think we have left?’ Naran asked, her voice a blend of curiosity and fear.

Maia answered without taking her eyes from the horizon, her tone steady but laced with a certain melancholy.

‘In a few weeks, these streets will be completely frozen. Life on the surface won’t be possible anymore.’

‘And in Karanza? Do you think people will survive?’ Naran pressed, her worry clear in every word.

Maia sighed, her gaze fixed on the glow of the distant central sectors.

‘They’ve built a network of underground galleries. Even so, it’ll be a challenge to spend so many months locked away. But I’d rather that than be connected to MIO—cut off from what truly matters: my family.’

Néstor, walking a few steps behind, added in a heavy tone,

‘We’re worried about our father.’

Naran nodded silently, taking a moment to absorb Maia’s words. There was something in the siblings’ quiet resolve that unsettled her. They didn’t want to be connected to the system, while for her, connecting to MIO still felt like the only possible way out, a final, desperate attempt to fit in and escape the shadow of being incompatible.

She had worn that shadow for so long, it no longer felt like shame—it felt like skin.

A distant cry broke the monotonous rhythm of their march. From a higher ground, the group watched as a brigade of police officers evicted several families from their homes. In the square, a bus waited with its doors open while the agents forced the last people remaining in the suburb to board. Sector

B was on alert, and evacuation orders were merciless. Most people obeyed as an escape from the crisis, knowing they had to enter suspended hibernation in the bunkers—enclosed facilities beneath the city designed for months of artificial sleep, disconnected from each other, from the surface, from what truly mattered.

The buildings, stripped of humanity, stood like monuments to the sterile logic of technocratic control. Their interiors had become empty cells while the inhabitants were moved like numbers in a system shielding itself from the glaciation with algorithmic efficiency.

One family waited until the last moment before being separated: a weeping mother tried to drag her small children towards the bus, holding a baby in her arms, carrying a few belongings. Her face reflected the helplessness of having to choose between obedience and destruction by the system. The children clung to her legs, screaming, while the father tried to calm them. And finally, the family said goodbye in a heartbreaking embrace. The woman with the baby was taken to special housing. The father and children were forced into the vehicle.

Naran watched it all with a mix of anguish and helplessness. The pain of that reality seemed to pierce her chest. She wondered how many families, how many children, were facing a similar fate. The sense of helplessness paralysed her for a moment—until she felt Néstor's hand pulling at her arm.

‘We can't stop,’ he said, his tone firm but understanding.

Naran's legs wouldn't respond. Her body trembled under the emotional burden of everything she had witnessed, but she knew she had to keep moving.

Maia and Néstor quickened their pace, anxious to reach Karanza and reunite with their family. They crossed several neighbourhoods and stopped at an abandoned shopping centre.

The flickering screens still projected MIO ads, promoting the safety and comfort of connected life.

Maia, hiding her face beneath her hood, rummaged through a nearby dumpster and returned with some food containers.

‘We have to keep going,’ she said, nodding towards a tunnel that connected to the outskirts of the sector.

As they moved through the passage, Naran once again felt haunted by uncertainty. In the past century, the world had changed in unpredictable ways: first came the floods that submerged most countries, then the establishment of the central sectors and the confinements caused by epidemics. Now, the imminent glaciation threatened to impose a long isolation that would erase the few remaining traces of humanity.

Was it easier to live back in the age of nations? Naran wasn’t sure, but something in her longed for the illusion of stability those times seemed to offer—before the sea swallowed the coasts and the sky froze over the cities. She wondered in silence, watching Maia and Néstor swiftly crossing an avenue. She hurried her steps, realising she had fallen behind, her heart racing with fear and adrenaline. Though the shadows of past and present pursued her, she couldn’t afford to slow down. She had to move forward, even if it meant facing a destiny she still didn’t fully understand.



Without warning, a fierce tremor shook the asphalt beneath Naran’s feet. She stumbled, her heart racing from the jolt, her limbs suddenly heavy, as if gravity had turned against her.

A dizzying sensation overtook her mind; the world seemed to fold and unfold before her eyes, revealing a tangle of interwoven flashes and lines, like a fractured tapestry.

Reality tore open before her.

Disoriented, Naran perceived alternate dimensions collapsing and intermingling in her stunned consciousness. It was as if all the possibilities that had ever existed unfurled at once, flooding her with a cascade of impressions. And there, in the midst of that whirlwind, an unexpected figure emerged: a white llama, adorned with vibrantly coloured ornaments on its ears and neck. It walked forward with serene steps, radiating inexplicable calm.

Something in its presence awakened echoes of Naran's childhood. Buried memories surged back with force, stirring a fragile blend of nostalgia and confusion. But the animal was not alone. Beside it, on the edge of a mountainous landscape that felt like another reality, stood an older woman with grey hair cascading in waves and dark, piercing eyes shining with logic-defying intensity. Her sun-weathered skin and the deep lines across her face spoke of ancestral wisdom. Solid and ethereal at once, her figure moved between unseen layers. The Pachas—the invisible threads of time—vibrated with her.

Naran felt both presences, the llama's and the woman's, intertwining in a symbolic dance that transcended understanding. For a moment, time and space ceased to exist. It was as though the fabric of reality had torn open, offering a glimpse into something vaster. Silence filled her within, as images, sounds, and emotions wove together in an impossible symphony.

A screeching noise—cars, brakes—tore her from the vision. Urban chaos crashed back into her awareness like a slap. Naran was in the middle of the road, surrounded by vehicles skidding, stopping, accelerating, barely avoiding her.

'Naran! Get out of there!' Maia's voice, sharp with alarm, snapped her from the trance.

Néstor, from the side of the road, shouted her name too, bewildered. How had she ended up in such a dangerous

place? Naran, dazed, tried to move, but her body lagged behind her mind. Maia ran to her, seized her arm, and dragged her to safety with strength that defied her frame. Néstor joined them, incredulous.

‘What were you thinking!?’ You almost got yourself killed!’ Maia exclaimed—furious, but also clearly shaken.

Naran, without replying, turned her head towards the road. She searched for something, any trace of the llama or of the woman, but everything had disappeared. The mountains, the vivid colours, even the sense of wholeness she had experienced—all had completely faded away. Only the cold grey of the city and the oppressive noise of the engines remained.

‘Are you okay?’ Néstor asked, his voice soft with concern.

‘Yes...’ she whispered, though she wasn’t sure it was true. The enigma pulsed in her chest, spinning like a persistent echo.

Maia, still pale, steadied herself and adjusted her backpack.

‘We have to keep going. We can’t stay here.’ She tried to sound calm, but her trembling hands betrayed her.

Naran nodded slowly. But her thoughts were still anchored in the vision. Was it a dream? A hallucination? Something in her said no. Whatever it was, it had marked her.

As they walked, the experience replayed in her mind. Time had cracked. Reality had opened. The woman’s eyes, the llama’s steps—they lingered. She couldn’t recall the words, but she felt their weight.

Something inside her had stirred. Something long dormant.

After a long silence, Maia said, ‘Whatever happened back there, let it go. Right now, the important thing is getting to Karanza.’

Naran didn’t respond, but clenched her fists tightly, aware she couldn’t ignore what she had seen. Though the meaning still escaped her, something within sensed that the

encounter was a key—a threshold to something deeper. Her perception of time and reality had begun to crack, hinting that nothing would ever be the same.

*That woman, that animal... What is happening to me?* she repeated in a frantic inner dialogue. The enigma lingered like a whisper from another time, wrapping her in a journey through uncharted territories belonging to both the world and her own mind.



The teens jumped over a railing and crossed the muddy fields where several rusted train cars, once part of freight convoys, lay abandoned. The damp ground soaked their shoes and made each step difficult, but Maia, determined, stopped to point them in the right direction.

‘On the platform to the right are the trains heading north, to Karanza,’ she said quietly, turning to the others. ‘We can circle around and reach the platform through the open field.’

Naran tried to keep up with Maia and Néstor, but her mind remained trapped in a whirlwind of images. The perceptions that had unsettled her on the road kept resurfacing, disrupting her focus and blending fragments of past and present into a confusing tangle.

‘Wait a moment,’ she said suddenly, stopping. There was a warning in her voice. ‘A patrol is entering the station. It’s heading for the next train bound for Karanza. We’ll have to wait until nightfall and get on one of the freight cars.’

Néstor scoffed, his irritation unmistakable.

‘Again with your visions, Naran! We don’t have time for this. Let’s go!’ he exclaimed, pulling at his sister’s arm to keep moving.

But Maia's face changed instantly. Concern made her stop.  
 'What is it, Naran? What did you see?'

'She didn't see anything. She just wants to slow us down,' Néstor interjected, impatience creeping into his voice. 'She's not sure she wants to come with us to Karanza and needs more time to think or to wait for her father to show up...'

'A patrol is heading for that train,' Naran warned urgently.

Maia, granting her a measure of trust, responded:

'The station is almost empty. We'll stop here for a moment and see if what you're saying is true.'

Néstor shook his head in disagreement and kept walking.

'I'm tired. I need to get on that damn train. If you don't come with me now, I'll see you in Karanza.'

'Wait,' Maia warned, pointing to the patrol that had just entered the station. 'Naran's right... we'll wait until nightfall.'

They passed the time eating in silence until Néstor broke it, taking advantage of his sister stepping ahead to see if the way was clear.

'I would have preferred to stay connected to MIO instead of having to go to Karanza, but...'

Naran looked at him intently, wondering about the source of his discontent.

'It's because they used to disconnect us from the program when...'

'What do you mean? You mean you couldn't connect?' she interrupted hastily, not wanting to show her concern and fear about the subject.

'You know, when you're inside the system...' Néstor moved closer to her and almost whispered, as if he didn't want anyone else to hear. 'We have certain skills for inserting information. That's why they ended up cancelling our access to the program, calling us Incompatible.'

‘Incompatible... that cursed word,’ Naran exclaimed.

‘I want to keep trying,’ he clarified, ‘so I don’t have to think about this anymore, at least for a while.’ He pulled up his pant leg, showing her his prosthetic. ‘Lately it bothers me when I walk,’ he continued, ‘and it’s a limitation. But inside the program, I felt, in a way, free.’ He made a gesture of frustration as he adjusted the prosthetic straps. ‘First, I want to take my sister to Karanza, but after that I’d connect to the system... with conditions.’

Naran felt surprised by Néstor’s openness about his incompatibility. He leaned even closer to her and whispered softly:

‘And what skills did you have inside the program?’ he asked. ‘I imagine you didn’t follow the rules either.’

Naran was confused by his words. She longed to piece together her experience within the program, but her memories surfaced vaguely and distantly, as if they had been lost in some corner of her mind. Her frustration grew and, in silence, she admired Néstor and his ability to show himself as he was. *He can speak freely, while I strive to fit in, hiding what makes me different, hiding my limitation*, she reflected. Her thoughts consumed her, prolonging her answer once again.

‘I don’t have any...’ she finally answered, as if trying to protect herself.

Néstor held his penetrating gaze on the girl’s fearful eyes, and his thin face was sharpened by an ironic smile.

‘After freezing up in the middle of the road, I thought you had escaped from one of those places where they lock up those who don’t fit in.’ His words slid out slowly. ‘But I know...’ He paused briefly. ‘I know you’re scared, I know you want to be compatible, and it’s very unfair that they’ve labelled us with that damned word, as you say.’ He moved closer slowly, trying to earn her trust. ‘We’re in the same situation, Naran,

and we need to connect to that program. During the hibernation period, it's MIO that determines reality, and we don't want to be isolated from it. But we also have the right to set our own conditions...'

Néstor stood with a slight jump and stretched his numb body, continuing to move and speak as if he were playing a role that, this time, was no longer secondary. Without his sister in front of him, he seemed more relaxed and decisive.

'That's why you were in a youth centre, because of incompatibility, and therefore, you also have certain abilities within the system.'

Néstor nodded as he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

'We decided to escape because someone gave us this message, distributed by Karanza.'

Her eyes showed the impact the information had on her.

'Do you really want to know what's going on?' Néstor continued, looking at her with a hint of irony and superiority.

Naran nodded. Despite her indecision, she needed to clarify the whole situation somehow. And Néstor began to read until his sister approached, and he quickly tucked the note into his pocket. The boy's words penetrated her mind and sparked an internal struggle that left her speechless. Before she could respond, Maia returned with urgent news.

'The patrol is already pulling out,' she announced, pointing towards the open field. 'We have to move now. There's a freight train leaving in a few minutes.'

The three moved quickly and quietly, but soon noticed a new danger: a pack of dogs began barking in the distance, their eyes glowing intensely as they approached. Torches switched on behind them, and the voices of their pursuers filled the air.

'Crouch down and follow me!' Naran ordered, her voice firm and determined.