

Welcome to Phases: a short story anthology following the events of Moonbase Theta, Out.

Story 5: Nima

Narrated by: Serena Rahhal

They crossed back from the NAC at midnight. The tunnel beneath the Red creaked every so often as they passed through, which Elena had assured them during the last trip was normal and expected. All the same, Nima couldn't breathe easily until they emerged on the other side, solid ground under their feet and a visible sky overhead.

A sky that was quickly beginning to brighten, so they hurried to get to cover before dawn. There was a safe house not too far from shore, beneath the rubble of an apartment building; Rayan was waiting there with food and lemonade and tea. "Welcome back, chief," she said, as Nima sank into a dusty couch with a sigh. "What happened to Wafa and Ahnung?"

Nima inhaled a mug of tea before replying. "Wafa will be back when it's safe to move supplies and replacement bots. Ahnung ... isn't coming," they continued with a hint of disappointment. "They're planning to return to America, travel back to the North. I guess the NYC is looking up that way again."

Rayan nodded. "It's a struggle all over. But she'll be missed; she was one hell of a fighter."

Nima paused halfway into a refill. "How bad has it been?"

"Things are rough. They keep throwing more bots at us every night, and the drones are almost constant. I've been using some tricks Elena showed me to get into their system, but that only does so much. Don't get me wrong, we're holding. Nayef thinks we might hold some of it for good; the Enclave might rebuild the wall around one of the inner courtyards and pretend we don't exist."

"That'd be something," Nima chuckled. "They haven't done that since – what is Nayef doing close enough to have *any* opinion? I specifically said ..."

Rayan fidgeted. "We needed people at the front. Even that Mx. Bell from the radio moved up. Not all the way, but inside."

Nima gulped another mouthful of tea and growled. "Great. I know where we're headed as soon as it's dark again."

At dark, they were on their way. Rayan had a truck nearby, charging all day through solar panels overhead. (Nearly every rooftop had them, whatever the state of the building itself – there was no obvious indication which were actually still in use. The drones took potshots at them every so often, but that wasn't one of their main concerns.)

"Go north along the coast," Nima indicated once they got going. Rayan looked over at them for a moment, but then adjusted her course. They entered Gaza through the Rafah Arch, a replica of a gate once standing in Jenin (which was now deep inside the Jerusalem Enclave); Nima reached out the truck window to touch the smooth stone with her fingertips as they passed.

When they got close, Rayan looked over at Nima again. "You're sure you don't want to go to the warehouse, get a little rest before you jump back in?"

"We can get to the front with the truck?" They'd seen Rayan sending texts along the way, and she nodded reluctantly. "I'm fine," Nima replied, "get me back in there."

The truck was nearly silent pulling in, particularly with the constant background of bots clashing not too far off, which is how Nima found their brother leaning in a doorframe flirting with another resistance fighter. "No, a ballad is a different thing altogether," he crooned, leaning in to fill the young man's gaze. "I brought my oud, if you'd like a demonstration ..."

Nima waited to be right behind him. "Sounds like more of a distraction, Nayef. Maybe you should let this boy get back to his duty." The young man was already scampering away. "And you, little sib, can go home where you belong." Nima tugged at the back of his collar, dragging him along towards the truck.

Nayef twisted in a pirouette and escaped their grasp. "I'm always where I belong. Would *you* like to hear the ballad? Maybe it'd wipe that sour look off your face." He hugged Nima spontaneously. "I'm glad you're back. It's no fun without you here."

Nima frowned. "You looked like you were having fun. Anyway, fun isn't the point." They started walking, and Nayef fell into step keeping pace. "What did I miss here?"

"I'm sure you already interrogated Rayan, poor thing," Nayef replied, deftly guiding their path in a new direction. "It's been okay, we're holding ground. I think they're building a new wall, which would be amusing. Can't wait to break through *that* one."

"You didn't break through the first one. You're supposed to be at the warehouse, charming your friends from the other factions. That's what you do." Nima looked around, distracted. "Where are we going? Have we secured this far inside?"

Nayef grinned. "It's a first. There's something I wanted to show you ... at least, I *think* there's something. You'll have to confirm, I wasn't around in the olden days." He led them to a small, overgrown courtyard and gestured broadly. "Not in the best of shape, but if this is where I think it is ..."

"What are you going on about?" Nima grumbled. "And what's this supposed to be, it's all weeds and shadows ..." They trailed off as Nayef pulled out a flashlight and played the beam across the area, highlighting a fountain, a broken window, a brickwork arch over a doorway. As it hit them, Nima gasped, and without realizing it leaned against their brother for balance.

"It's the right place, isn't it?" he said, covering their hand with his. "I thought I had it right, you've told me enough stories about where you walked, where you sat, where you hid from Security when they passed through ..." Nima took a step or two forward, slowly, as he kept talking. "It doesn't look like they've used it for years, there were crates of food in the back, all spoiled of course, forbid they go to someone who needs them --"

"Shut up for a minute," Nima cut him off. They took another few steps, trying to look in every direction at once, letting it all sink in. "This was the store," they said, listening to each word as if telling themselves it was true. "That window is where I sold sandwiches, that bench is where I read in the evenings. That's

where *Khaal* Mahmoud would call us inside.” They turned around in a circle, then sat on the edge of the fountain, running their fingertips over the stone.

Nayef stood beside them and grinned. “I knew this was it. You’re welcome, big sib.”

Nima looked up and, after a moment, smiled in return. “Thank you, Nayef. It’s ... you can’t ... I guess you *do* know what it means. Thank you.” After a few moments, Nima spoke again, quietly: “We drove back through Rafah.” Nayef’s hand found theirs and squeezed; they both had grandparents who’d died in the camps during the twenties.

They lingered there in silence, lost in stories, in memory, in the depths of generational sorrow. Finally, Nima looked up, taking it all in again. “We should ... get back,” they said with a sigh, “If we’re going to hold any of this.”

Nayef wrapped his arm around their shoulders as they started walking, and laughed suddenly. “What?” Nima said, thrown off by the sudden emotional shift.

Nayef laughed again. “I’m just used to you pulling away the minute I try to hug you. You’ve changed, Nima. You’ve *changed*.”

He laughed again, and they chuckled a little as well. “Don’t get used to it.”

As they kept walking, Nima looked up at the moon, shining near-full in the sky. It seemed so far from their struggle – even the NAC seemed so far now that they’d made it home. They still weren’t sure if there was hope in those distant places ... but there was hope here to be reclaimed. Nima put their arm around Nayef’s waist and leaned in against him as they walked through the streets of Jerusalem.

[END NOTES]

Thank you for listening to Phases: a Moonbase Theta, Out short story anthology. Written by D.J. Sylvis. Read by Serena Rahhal. Produced and edited by Cass McPhee. Our theme music is Star, by Ramp - check them out at Ramp dash Music dot net. Our cover art is by Peter Chiykowski.

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And, as always, keep watching the moon.