

## Foreword

When I was a child, I always dreamed of running away. Not for any emotional reason, I didn't hate my parents or such; I just wanted to get away. I wanted to take a small pack of belongings, and set off down the road. I wanted to walk until I couldn't recognize my surroundings, till I was totally disengaged from the place that I had walked to. The feeling of the journey, of walking down a lonely road, with just a pack on your back, and a weapon on your side. That felt like an amazing thing to me. However, as the world we live in has been modernized and mostly conquered, the feeling of walking alone and in places totally unfamiliar and dangerous was almost impossible.

That was when I started to create Larcen's world.

The world he lives in, 2,000 years in the future is empty and sparsely populated, with the majority of the land taken back by nature. Only hardy and tough landmarks of the past remain, such as the long road that cuts through the middle United States, called The Long Tar. Larcen, the hero of this novel, walks down this road, wandering down the seemingly endless line of tar that stretches into the horizon. He is a dark clad wanderer, a living legend of the desert, told at bars and dinner tables. His life, his destiny, lies on the road. Writing this story, and with my dreams on walking and walking till I cannot recognize anything, that is what I hope to emulate in this novel, placing myself in Larcen's shoes through all of the heart break and the adventure, feeling what he feels, the character that I created. This is not only the journey that shapes the very fabric of one man's destiny, but the destiny of the entire world.

“A man hurt and destroyed inside, walks a road, whether real or not, that affects his entire life. Either he doesn't let go, letting the hurt rot inside of him until he falls apart through his travels, or he lets the hate and the bad feelings go, and moves on. This doesn't happen immediately, for it takes a long time, sometimes an entire lifetime to let go of the feelings of hate and anger towards something. That is why I call it a road, for they are traveling to the conclusion of what they end up doing with those emotions, affected on the way by the people we meet, and the places with travel past.”

-Beck Duston, 2013-

## **Introduction**

### **The End of the World**

**“War doesn't determine who is right, only who is left.”**

**-Bertrand Russel**

2013

Syria uses chemical weapons on revolutionists, breaking a worldwide agreement. International eyes narrow on Syria as America considers involvement. China and Middle Eastern countries warn against American involvement.

U.S. Tensions between Middle East and China rise.

Early 2015

Two black teenagers are gunned down in a case similar to The Treyvon Martin shooting. Killer is exonerated of charges, and a combination of a widely accused biased jury and poorly thought out Republican reaction comments instigate country wide riots. Court houses and republican centers are raided.

Late 2015

Westboro Baptist Church members picket at black teenager's burials, resulting in lynching of Westboro Churches. Westboro responds with lethal force, believing that the end of times has begun, taking out assault rifles and military grade weapons. Death tolls rise as military is called in when police force is taken out, resulting in a guerrilla warfare style fighting throughout the area. Worldwide attention is on the chaos in America.

China undertakes a secret operation, labeled “Black Flag”. North Korea becomes an ally of China under the agreement that it gains South Korea and all of its resources. China uses advanced technology to replace the leader of South Korea with a Chinese diplomat disguised as the original leader. Operation goes as planned and the Chinese diplomat uses influence and newly attained cooperation of North Korea to merge the two together in the Republic of Korea.

Early 2016

Chinese forces, taking advantage of the focus on the brutal events taking place in Topeka, Kansas, invade the western coast, taking whole cities hostage with the combination of hacking beyond the capabilities of anyone seen before on this planet, and a sheer force of ground forces. Implements operation Rose Thorn, hacking the atomic weapons across America, threatening country wide devastation if any attempt to mobilize the military is made. With the monitoring of radio, and other electronic communication, the Chinese have a tight grip on the infrastructure of the America

## Government.

In Europe, Middle Eastern countries have implemented a similar hostage program to prevent European involvement. Terrorists hold major population centers hostage with high powered atomic weapons, threatening the governments to detonate if any action is made to assist the U.S. While the United States is under attack, Europe is forced to be passive, even with some citizens clamoring for action. The world watches in horror as America is slowly over taken by the Chinese attackers, who are aided by Middle Eastern soldiers and Korean soldiers.

America desperately looks for a way to overwhelm the hacking done by the Chinese, wishing to regain control of weapons.

## Mid 2016

China uses top secret files hacked from American Government servers to placate the American population, claiming that they have come to “free” the people from a web of lies. Chinese start to broadcast top secret videos and audio incriminating the U.S government with evidence that shows multiple instances of lies, corruption, and covered up scandals. Broadcasts across the hacked television stations are widely watched, and some citizens join forces with the invading Chinese, fighting against their own country. Many of these files that are uploaded in the public domain alienate help that would have come from countries not threatened by terrorist nukes, causing American probable support to decline. Some countries request the nukes removed, as they have decided to support the invasion with resources by their own volition. Invading forces sweep across America, destroying government buildings and any possible resistance. As Chinese forces do not attack citizens who have joined their cause, many people join the invasion to avoid being killed.

American government puts best hackers and computer technicians on the job of removing Chinese from American servers.

## Early 2017

American hackers successfully are able to remove Chinese invaders from computer servers, and start up the launch of nuclear weapons at China. However, due to Chinese alterations, and response hacking, many bombs explode underground, decimating the eastern coast of America. Despite their best efforts however, around 2000 bombs are launched, some towards China, some to random locations due to errors from Chinese counter hacking in an effort to get the bombs to not destroy China, which additionally caused the number of bombs launched to be skewed. The world watches in horror as 2000 bombs launch into the air, the media reporting live until the reporters threw down equipment to go see their families. While the world braces for impact, families hugging, and crowds of people drinking, fucking, praying, and rioting widely, many areas of the U.S lie in ruin from the underground explosions of countless atomic weapons. While these weapons fly into the air, getting ready to rain down upon the earth, all of the cities being held hostage by atomic weapons are decimated, the terrorists starting the bombs up, panicking now that it appears that the end has come. Europe shakes with the explosions of its population centers being blown up in smoke, and America shakes with the explosion of atomic weapons on the western coast, decimating the population and any remaining soldiers. China launches its missiles, not caring at who gets nuked, panicking as the shadows of numerous atomic weapons approach their country.

The bombs drop silently as the world watches in horror.

With shaking that is felt across the world, an uncountable amount of nuclear bombs pummels the planet's surface, instantly vaporizing everything in the immediate vicinity of the explosion. Volcanoes erupt, earthquakes rip huge gaping holes through the ground, and the skies quickly become covered with black dust, blotting out the sun almost immediately. China is swiftly reduced to a whirlwind of fire and death, the cities leveled as bombs rain upon their soil. America is hit again by nukes, targeting cities not already demolished by the underground bomb detonations. Washington, New York, and random locations across the country are hit, razing the remaining population. Canada, Mexico, and

South America are also all hit by nukes, hitting both population centers and forest.

Europe is hit with countless American and Chinese nukes as well, England, Germany, Russia, France and Italy all having their capitals and cities demolished and countryside's reduced to scorched earth.

While the Middle East is only hit directly by two nukes, the surrounding blasts and fallout poison the population, killing them off despite their luck. American nukes hit The Republic of Korea as well,

enough to severely destroy the infrastructure and poison the crops. Australia and Japan are additionally hit by nukes, and have their capitals and outlying cities destroyed. Nations are no longer nations, no longer separated by lines and people. Everything is blackened and smoking, everyone now the same, dying as a race.

The world is on fire, the cities burning, the survivors choking on the radioactive ash that rains down.

Hope seems so far away, impossible to believe in.

But there is always hope.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Rise of the City of Metal**

2018-4373

History Unknown

4374

A small tribe of humans erects a settlement around a weapon smith, a man by the name of Gullen at a place where the sands meet the face of a rock cliff. He pioneers the invention of a weapon that can launch small pieces of metal at high velocity into enemies. He states that he came up with the invention himself, though his history of drunkenness and a small mental deficiency due to mutation creates a small amount of controversy. His original method of survival was standard hunting and trading of metal weapons wielded and mined from caves near house.

4375

Weapon is proved effective on multiple occasions to the new occupants, including a successful resistance against an attack by The Yazashi, a feared enemy in the wastes. The Yazashi were taken by surprise when their leader died in an explosion of light and sound, and sounded a complete retreat from the small village. Fear of these new weapons of light and sound result in fewer attacks by The Yazashi in that area, resulting in an influx of people into the small village. These new weapons are now commonly used among the townsfolk, not just for defense, but for everyday use in hunting and personal protection.

4376

Travelers across the sands talk about a town protected by weapons of fire and light, weapons that have caused a retreat of The Yazashi across the entirety of human lands. Carrying an almost supernatural fear for the weapons, the Yazashi stop their attacks on humans, seeing that they have become futile and at too great cost. An uneasy peace is forged, Yazashi now relying entirely on meat gained from livestock and remaining reserves of human flesh. Trading, while still on a small scale, has become better protected with these new weapons, and small caravans carrying them have spread across the sands. Dwellings and towns have started to sprout up, humans able to live in larger groups, and nomads settling down finally as they are now able to defend themselves. Every settlement across the sands has started attaining these weapons, trading in food, water, and resources.

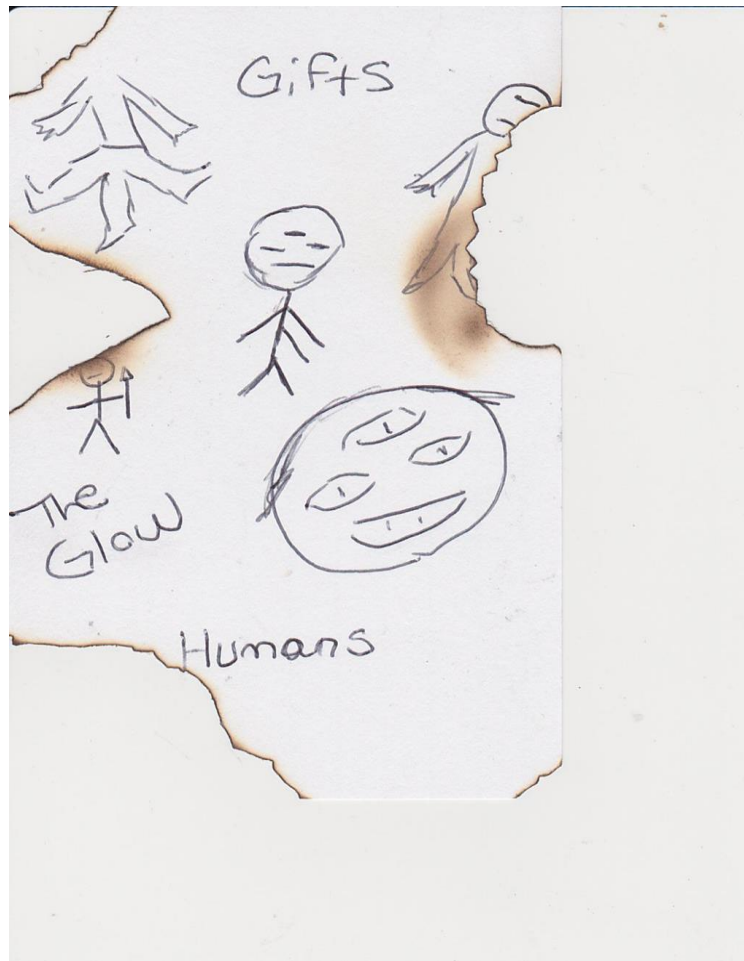
## The Yazashi



## The Lizard People

Intelligent beings of scales and claws and pointed teeth, banding together in organized tribes. This formidable beings used to hunt humans, though with the inception of their increased intelligence and organization, and with the inception of Wirelets, they have ceased attacks on humans for sustenance. Now they hold the southern lands as their home, gradually forming a cohesive government to rule over them all. Due to past transgressions, Yazashi live with racial tensions between them and humans, resulting in random violence on both sides. They reproduce similarly to humans, using sexual appendages in the same way, though Yazashi females lay the fertilized eggs from intercourse instead of holding them in their stomachs. It has been wondered whether humans could procreate with Yazashi, resulting in a hybrid, though racial tensions have prevented any possible attempts.

## Humans



## The Afflicted

Since the war, humans have subjected to the worst conditions that our world can possibly sustain, fighting each day for the right to even the smallest bite to eat, and drop of water. Over the two thousand years since the bombs fell, radiation, now called The Glow, and inbreeding have crippled the genetic structure of human DNA, resulting in a near constant stream of deformations. However, as always, humans adapted, and these changes have been accepted as “normal” in this new society. It is common, even attractive to have mutation, the beneficial effects of the glow seen as gifts from the gods of the air. These benefits are believed to be balanced by the adverse effects, the price humans must pay for receiving these gifts. While for centuries humans have lost all their knowledge of technology and sciences, in the last century human settlements have seen a growth in population and order with the introduction of “Wirelets”, basically the guns of this new society. Taking these new weapons, humans are able to establish the first major city, and fight back against the Yazashi, another intelligent species that used to hunt humans for sustenance in the past.

4448

The small gathering of houses has grown tenfold into a small city hugging the side of the cliff, turning it into a bustling mass of energy and business. Trade comes from all places among the sands, from The Pillars of Huertes, to Hold of Muradeth, places that had long remained isolated from the other gatherings of humanity.

The city itself has become a center for the trade of all kind, mostly centered on the production of Wirelets, the name given by the people who use them, shortened from the name "Weapons of fire and light". The Wirelets have changed much since their inception, redesigned to be smaller and shoot larger projectiles, at longer ranges.

The city itself has attained the name "The City of Metal", taken from its use of metal in the building of its structures. Since its start, people have started using more and more metal on walls and ceilings, mined from the caves into the rock wall behind the city, until the city itself has become a mass of structures and towers made of the dark yet shiny material. It stands as a beacon in the desert sands, the lights of its countless denizens bouncing off of the metal and lighting the city up, visible far into the distance.

4450

#### The Dust Storm of Angesze

In a rush of sand and small stone, a sand storm engulfed the metal city and its surrounding areas for 3 days and nights. People died, dwellings disappeared, and some towns deep in the sands were sunk under the ground, its people devoured by the monsters that lived there. When it ended, people of The City of Metal were amazed to see a strip of black, cracked material stretch into the distance, unveiled by the winds of the sandstorm. Some viewed it as a divine sign, while others proclaimed it as a sign of the end. Regardless, it intrigued people, and it was inspected, poked and prodded. The strip of material was found to lead right into the cliff side beside the city, and all the other way to places unknown, passing through established trade routes and near towns and dwellings. Despite its sudden appearance, many traders saw this as a possible advantage, trade routes were established along "The Long Tar" as the people called it, exploring it and using it as a way to find their way through the desert. With the tar uncovered, many people noticed that large mysterious animals of the desert retreated from its proximity. While smaller creatures like the Sand Crabs and Wuturos still occasionally attacked dwellings and small towns, very few attacks ever seemed to happen on the tar. Larger, less known about monsters such as the Krillan, and Sand Worms ceased to live near the long tar, resulting in an influx of its use. Hearing of these rumors, many people proclaimed that the tar was a gift from the beings of air, and it started to be used widely, both as a trade route, and as a road to the City of Metal.



Due to the advancement in personal protection and the huge influx of trading, some Yazashi tribes started inquiring about creating a treaty with the humans, wanting to collaborate to the growth of a new age of peace. The leader of the City of Metal, Hijak Lilliro, and the leaders of the three largest Yazashi tribes, Urugut, Mogtu, and Burlon, gathered in Urduru, a small town south of The City of Metal. Discussions went on for three days, in which the leaders contemplated the condition of the world they lived in, and what arrangements would be fair on both sides, to best create a lasting peace that would be honored by both parties. The Yazashi had been already having a troubles, as humans had been spreading faster than ever, with better protection and trade prospering. Wanting to have a peace between the species, Hijack Lilliro created a line of farmland for humans to stop at, splitting the area where humans and Yazashi could have conflicts. At the same time, the Yazashi agreed to cooperation with their people, in regards to trading and coexistence. No longer will humans and Yazashi fight over old blood. As a show of good faith, and in hope that it would cause a peaceful working relationship between some humans and Yazashi, as an example to the people, the land directly under the smooth mountains, plains that bordered the Yazashi homeland become neutral territory, where both species could farm and live together. The deal seemed perfect, with lines giving the Yazashi the southern lands, humans the center, and leaving the northern lands to whoever wanted them. The leaders officially accepted the human's offer, which gave both species full rights, divided the nations, and also allowed the Yazashi to live inside of the city, work, and trade freely inside human settlements, including The City of Metal. The agreement was called the Yazashi Trade Agreement, and was held up to all tribes and groups in the sands, governed by the three ruling tribes that agreed to it. While initially this seemed like the perfect solution, racism and bigotry drew lines between them, as Yazashi were treated as second class citizens and looked down by many in the human lands, these people unable to let go of the blood spilled in past conflict.

With the announcement of the land divides, and the allowance of free land in the north, many travelers, sick of living by the rules of others, traveled north in hope of carving out their own slice of land. However, these journeys quickly turned into bloodbaths as various predators and carnivorous beasts set upon them like old world piranhas. Seeing a staggering amount of disappearances, Hijak Lilliro announces the entire area must now be the new home for the creatures that used to be scattered across the wastes, forced north because of the mysterious appearance of The Long Tar. Though word travels slow, carried by Ragazza to the occupants of towns and settlements, it is quickly realized that the northern lands are extremely volatile and dangerous. The land, previously without a name, is now labeled the Nomands Lands, a place far away from the tar that is crawling with creatures of unknowable danger and ferociousness. Even the Yazashi, experts at surviving in areas crawling with dangerous wildlife, find the place to be too concentrated with predators to even try settling down in. Like the humans before them, some Yazashi did try, regardless, only to be devoured as well, never to be seen again. The lands now just lie there, empty save for the creatures that populate it. No one enters, no one leaves.  
A lonely sea of sand and blood.

## Ch. 2

### The Hermit

There was a man named Doc, a hermit, an outcast, a person who talked to no one, saw no one and lived far into the Nomand's lands. The Nomand's lands were forbidden and dangerous lands traversed only by a few, containing beasts and monsters only rivaled by a mans twisted nightmares. He farmed and hunted, surviving day to day under the harsh, yellow sun, alone. It was said by the few that knew him that he knew of many secrets of the lands, had mysterious powers of longevity, and consorted with mysterious and powerful Shamans of unknown power and purpose. The great Shaman of the Sands himself was said to have talked to him upon an occasion, trading both in goods and secrets through his years. He lived in a state of forced isolation, either unable or unwilling to leave the dangerous place that he called home. He is only known to the outside by his occasional journeys to the small town of Herdin, located very close to the edge of the Nomand's Lands, to trade in the multitudes of valuable and mysterious things that he found in the Sands, like Jardin skulls and multicolored crystals.

Doc stood about five feet eleven, sturdy and unmovable with his feet on the ground like a boulder. While strong and hard, like any rock eventually, he also was edging towards the age of crumbling, losing his touch in the ways of the wild, and the hunt. His face was rough and scratchy, his tight, greying scruff wrapped fully around his wise face, his eyes piercing but observant. The eye of a man who has seen too much, failed at much, and knows many things about the world around him.

For multiple reasons, curiosity, seeking knowledge, wanting to raid his house, some people sometimes attempted to sometimes travel to him, hearing tales about him from the town's people of Herdin. He knew, not because he saw them, but because he heard their screams and roars as the monsters of the Nomand's Lands found them, and killed them all.

For that time he stayed bunkered down in his hut, cloak covering his ears, trying to forget, trying to ignore. Even through all his attempts, he could still hear their screams, animals scurrying outside his ut as they made their way to feast upon these travelers. Many sleepless nights he had, woken up almost constantly by the screams of the dying. As it was, people quickly realized once again why they never travel through Nomand's Lands, and the attempts at reaching him stopped.

Seeing this as a reprieve, Doc made his way to Herdin, wishing to trade his goods with the people once again, his one break in his isolation.

The air was wrong.

Doc stopped at the borders of a small town, his nostrils flaring as he glanced around, his greyish blue eyes flashing suspiciously. Herdin it was, he remembered, that was the name of the town. Too long he had remained in isolation, so long that the world had escaped him. Names and places had fallen into disuse, than finally into the back of his mind, only called back when he looked through his collection of

maps. A town it was as well, though that was an airy compliment to this shallow offering of buildings. Two rows of sand dune houses, baked in the noonday sun until they stuck to the bone struts that supported them. A small general store stood in the middle, the only connection that these people had to the outside world. It a small fact that a caravan only came through once a month, and only stayed for two days before departing. No one else visited, no one came to settle any of the empty land. The town lay too close to the Nomand's lands for anyone to want to live here willingly. So it trudged on living with its remaining residents, slowly mucking around and farming the last bits of fertile land that surrounded it, rarely seeing any dangerous wildlife, despite its proximity to a land full of it. It was because of this that Doc even considered coming here, a break from his stay in the Nomand's lands. No one questioned his arrival, no one talked. He held no risk in revealing himself when no one left or came. He could also trade his goods for things that he couldn't make or hunt, something that he looked forward to constantly. Having a bit of Uruguru Ale was a rare treat indeed, something to sate his thirst and quiet the voices that whispered in his head.

The town however was still part of the maze of trade and word of mouth, something that Doc had overlooked, despite the preparation that he put forth before visiting. His goods, things that rarely were seen in the settled world, passed through caravan to caravan, eventually finding their way to someone who recognized their true value, riches attained from a land too dangerous to enter. Perhaps Doc was willingly ignorant, not thinking that it would attract attention. Perhaps he figured that it would think that someone was unable to track where the goods came from, that the memory of the caravan drivers would falter when questioned. Like the latter, that was also a misconception. And so the shadow passed over man and women, burning a path of questions that led the interested party from trade route to trade route, finally pointing directly at the small settlement of Herdin.

Now hypothetically, let's say that this already happened. He had traded a small red crystal found randomly on the ground, catching his eyes with its sparkling shine. A ruby, escaping his knowledge on exactly how valuable some people who price it. So Doc traded this ruby the last time he passed through Herdins bleached white sand houses, to a trader who looked at it with delight, even more so when Doc requested so little in return. And from there, the stone passed from hand to hand, its value celebrated by those who profited, until it, like most rich things, found its way to the richer part of the world.

It arrived at The City of Metal.

From there, I can't say. Perhaps it fell into a person's hands, and they saw more than just a quick sell, to take advantage of the low price it had received it for. Perhaps they wished to know where it had been found. Maybe there were more of its kind, just lying in someone's mud stained hut, unaware of the value that they held. Doc had drawn attention to himself, willingly or not, and now it was coming back to find him.

Unable to see anything wrong, though the air still sent the hairs in his nose afire, Doc made his way into the town. He walked confidently down the worn, rock hard ground, red dust puffing up and covering his boots. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see people looking at him through their windows, hiding in the sides, peeking around.

Something was definitely not right.

Doc slowed down slightly, his feet moving quietly against the ground as he continued walking. He was having all sorts of bad feelings about this town right now, rippling through his brain like an electric

shock. His mind rummaged through possibilities, trying to figure out what could be wrong. People inside houses, glancing at him as if they expected him to suddenly change because of an incoming variable, the dead quiet-

Ambush

Doc stopped, the sun blazing overhead, casting his shadow far ahead of him, pitch black. With a seconds considering, he realized that by stopping, he had probably just confirmed to whoever was trying to ambush him that he knew what was going on.

The suddenly with a flash of light, and a roaring smashing bang that crashed against his eardrums, the ground in front of Doc exploded.

With a upending of sand and rock, the quiet scene blew up with explosions and shouting. Yelling incoherently, Doc jumped back, running back lopsided as the ground spit up around him.

“ArGrhgaAGHAGHAHGAHGHAFKfkbklafakjsghHAGFHAGHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA A”, he screamed internally, unable to make any noise in the shock of the attack, his ears ringing from the fighting.

Launching himself backwards, his breath coming out in bursts, Doc dodged another shot which smashed into the dirt, blowing it up in his face. The surprise paralyzed his mind, the gunfire ripping holes in his preparation, unused to fighting against enemies that could shoot roaring bits of metal at him. Then, his mind felt the soothing darkness flood his consciousness, a dark robed figure stepping in the driver’s seat, placing him to the side carefully.

“Its ok mate, I got this from here.” the familiar sounding voice shouted to him, his mind slowly coming down from a near panic. Then, the shock wearing off entirely, his eyes narrowed and his breath deepened as his outward feelings and emotions took second place, the razor sharp thinking processes of a survivor taking over.

Grabbing a green vial from his bag, he double checked its color before throwing it behind him, sprinting through the town towards the way he came with new energy and direction. Hitting the ground, the vial suddenly turned red, and exploded into an extremely bright light, blinding his attackers, who were strategically positioned in the nooks and crannies of several buildings. With a heavy thump, one of the attackers fell from his perch on the roof of one of the dwellings, drawing screams from the residents inside as he fell, breaking his neck as he smashed head first into a protruding rock. Jumping over a pile of bricks, suddenly, a shot sliced through the air in front of Doc's face. Turning left while reaching into his pack, Doc ducked, dodging the addition shots fired from the rusty, dark colored rifle held by a bandit with three eyes, the third glaring intensely at Docs forehead. He fired the wirelet again, the bullets passing exactly where Doc's head was moments ago, smashing into the side of one of the houses. On one knee, Doc splashed the man's face with some clear liquid he pulled from a bottle in his bag, and kicked the man's feet out, knocking him over. Getting up, Doc sprinted passed the last of the dwellings, making it out of the town, the remaining bandits pounding the ground behind him, ignoring their injured comrades. Doc sprinted faster, the bandits falling behind and cursing loudly as he gained more ground. Even they could see where he was aiming to, the marker for The Nomand's lands laying ahead. Looking forward, Doc breathed a sigh of relief as the stack of bricks, a marker put up by Herdin to warn travelers that they are about to step into Nomand's Land, got closer, his sharp eyes able to see the cracks and grits of sand that covered them.

However, just as he got about five feet away, a blinding pain suddenly ripped through Doc's leg, causing him to fall onto the ground. Looking down at his leg, he wasn't surprised to see a bullet hole through his pants, blood already dripping down in a quickening flood. Pulling himself back, he leaned himself against the stack of bricks, seeing as the bandits nearly reached him. In ten seconds, they arrived at Doc's feet, panting and groaning, the sun evaporating the sweat quickly off their foreheads. For a half a minute they took a second to recover, the middle one holding its gun at him, ready to shoot him again if he tried anything. Finally recovered, the middle one bandit straightened up, pointing three pistols at him, using his third hand protruding out of his front right shoulder.

"You gave us a nasty bit of trouble, old man.", the bandit snarled, though apparently pleased at their success.

"Our bosses want you alive, so you should consider yourself lucky." he growled, his sharpened teeth showing under his brown, wrinkled lips.

Taking his pistol, he gestured for Doc to get up. Doc ignored it, appraising the bandit with the dark colored rifle, as if waiting for something.

"Our boss maybe wants you alive, but he didn't say unharmed." the third bandit continued, before smashing Doc in the face with the side of his pistol.

Stars twinkled on Doc's eyelids as he spiraled through the pain that erupted on his cheek, a dripping of his blood running down his face. Opening his eyes back up, and shaking his head, Doc smiled back, looking terrifyingly joyful.

"I would run friends, for you are all about to die." Doc said, his voice slightly bemused, finding it positively hilarious that only he could hear the heaviness in the air, and the silence in the land around them.

Looking at each other, the bandits gave each other looks of inward laughter.

"What the fuck are you talking about mate?" the three eyed bandit laughed, motioning with his gun again for Doc to get up.

Suddenly, the bandit's head *wasn't there*, the other bandits still laughing, even as blood spurted into the air, landing on them both.

"What the f-, is it raining?" the bandit with three arms said, touching the blood that landed on his shoulder.

Looking to their left, both the bandits suddenly jerked in surprise as the headless body fell to the ground.

"What the FUGGIN HAPPENED TO 'IM?!" they both said at the same time, backing up slightly.

A horrific screech suddenly sounded above them, followed by a stream of blood and bones that splattered onto the ground behind Doc.

"That is the sound of a Uriel, a razor fast hunter of skies, hunting two bandits that happened to

wander directly into its territory.” Doc stated coldly, wincing as his leg let out another wave of pain.

Looking at Doc in horror, the two bandits tried to run, pounding their feet into the sand as they headed towards the town.

With a sigh of relief, Doc watched calmly as the huge, silver colored beast flew down from the sky, zeroing in on the two bandits. It rammed into them both, slashing and biting them into oblivion as it grabbed them with its claws, carrying them back over Doc's head into the Nomand's Land.

With a surge, the dark that filled his mind partially left, replaced by a half of white light, the normal mix that he was used to. Dressing his wound with bandages and homemade alcohol, he limped back to his hut, expertly avoiding the many carnivorous creatures that roamed the land at night. That was the last time that Doc left Nomand's Land to trade with Herdin, his presence now an alarm bell to all mysterious figures wanting to capture him for reasons unknown. Again he was reminded on why he stayed in isolation.

As time passed, and probably as Doc had been hoping, the tale started to change. It lessened into a small side tale, twisted to the point that many people ceased to believe that he even existed. No longer did people attempt a journey through the Nomand's Lands to find him, screams of the dying no longer woke him from his sleep.

Once again, Doc fell back behind the curtain, known but unknown. Just a hermit isolated in a place no one else would live, away from the well-trodden sands of that other world of man.

### **Ch. 3**

#### **The Son of the Hermit**

Within all of this, one thing about Doc stayed the same, through both tale and reality. The lonely life that he lead. The tale, the description of this mysterious figure, left very little to talk in regards to any family, if he even had any interest in starting one. To be totally honest, Doc never wanted a family, finding the quiet of the Nomand's lands and the remoteness of his location, separate and hidden from other towns and traders to be perfect. Kept apart from the ramblings of a world anew, unfettered by the knowledge that he held.

However.

Fate had a radically different plan for him.

A cold and lonely night it was, a bright moon surrounded by an army of dark clouds, threatening to downpour on the dry, begging sand. A woman limped through the sand, grimacing as she held her intestines in her stomach, a grievous wound it is. She walked, looking for someone, anything that could help her, every resource she had used up, and broken. However, as fate would have it, a man was hunting that night, hunting the dangerous creatures of the Nomand's lands that he lived in. Doc shuffled through the sand, his right leg slightly stiff from the constant sedentary nature of hunting through a place where every noise and motion had an impact, where being silent as death was very literal. Looking from side to side, Doc saw her ahead, stopping in his tracks in surprise. Taken aback, Doc called out, not sure of what to make of her. Suddenly, behind her, a group of Wuturos running through the trembling sand took notice of her blood smell, and wounded gait. Ignoring the shadow of Doc in the distance with their anticipation, they tore after the women, howling with their glowing eyes leaving trails of red in the deepening night.

## The Wuturo



## The Glowing Eyes

Hunters of The Sands, these jet black, fur covered monstrosities make a habit of attacking caravans and settlements everywhere, making them a constant danger to all residents of these lands. Most remarkable about them is their glowing eyes, fiery red and trailing in the dark as they hunt, used as an intimidation factor when stalking prey. Hunting in packs, these creatures can be found all over The Sands, from the southern marshes, to the harsh, ragged northern lands. They came in all different shapes and sizes, depending on the environment that they made their home. While they are biologically similar to humans and Yazashi in regards to organs and such, they also sport two hearts, making them extremely hard to kill if you do not know what you are doing. Instead of ribs, they have a flexible plate that protects both hearts from any stabbing. The easiest way by this is to stab directly into the center of their chest, right between where the two hearts conjoin. This will slice directly into their heart cord, immediately killing them. Another way of putting these beasts down is to stab through the nostril into the brain cavity. Obviously this kills it by stabbing into its brain.



Tearing his eyes away from the approaching Wuturo, Doc ran towards the women, taking a spear off his back in preparation to fight. One of the Wuturos reached leaping distance, a cloud of dust puffing up as it tore itself off of the ground, jumping towards her while opening its mouth for a bite. Stopping and dropping to one knee, Doc exhaled, and stabbed into midair, catching the leaping Wuturo in its snout, the moonlight glancing off of its dark eyes before the spear tore its eye cords out, the sharp blade slicing into the beasts head, killing it mid snarl. With a fluid motion, Doc let go of the handle and kicked the spear up, smacking the second approaching Wuturo in the snout. Unarmed except for his currently preoccupied spear, which was doing its best to remain in the Wuturos corpse, Doc grabbed the hilt of the black sword on the women's back, expecting that she would understand why he had to borrow it when she woke up. Swirling around, his dark cloak flying up, Doc sliced into next Wuturos skull, a gout of blood spraying into the white sand. Rushing forward, a rush of sand flying away from his feet, he stabbed the rearing Wuturo in its sweet spot, the veins connecting its two hearts, immediately killing it. With that stab, the battle quieted, the Wuturos death noise echoing through the now silent sand.

Looking at him with dark, hungry eyes, the remaining members of the pack left them be, retreating back to find easier prey. Taking a breath, Doc looked at the sword that he was wielding, his eyes slowly adjusting to see it better. With a surprised outtake of breath, his eyes widened in shock as he recognized it, its shape and color bringing back memories and feelings that he had forced down, with the intention of never thinking about them again. With one motion, he slid the sword back into the holder on the woman's back, ignoring that for a moment as he examined her more closely. A women, a smoldering hole in her stomach, a dark black sword strapped tightly onto her back, and a small bundle cradled in her arms.

The women's eyes widened as she took in his face, recognizing him. With a deep, racking sigh, she started to cry a little, emotions overcoming her broken, weathered frame. "Doc.....please, he's dead, killed..." the women stammered, her voice fading off to a whisper as Doc leaned in close, trying to pick up any more words. Unable to hear anything but her soft, labored breathing, he looked at the large gaping hole in her stomach, staining her rough brown cloak with coppery blood. Doc stared with a mixture of interest and concern at her injuries, the hole not looking like anything that he had seen. The edges of the hole were singed, blackened yet seeping blood. The wound itself basically went all the way through, exposing her ribs and intestines to the elements. Looking back at her eyes, Doc tried to come to terms with the situation that he was in, realizing that despite his efforts, his fears were coming true. With a sure and strong movement of her arms, the women suddenly gave Doc the bundle in her arms, dropping her arms back to her sides. Speechless, Doc fumbled with the bundle for a second, before holding the child tightly in his arms, already hearing the murmurs of the baby stirring in its sleep.

"The child....the child is unfettered by the glow, and holds an unusually normal formation of limbs and features", Doc said in wonder, looking up and down at the child. While he was mostly right, he noticed

silently that the child had a much heavier bone structure, and its skin was much more durable than a usual child.

This baby.....had only the benefits of the mutation that took place with every birth, but without the balance of useless limbs, soft bones, the balancing factors to counter the gift from the glow.

With a low moan, the woman suddenly shuddered, her hands weaving around in the sand as she passed through waves of pain, her gaze fixed in the sky. "Hold on there", Doc said quietly, grabbing his satchel from his back, struggling to find a vial that would ease her death. With a trembling but firm hand, the woman placed her hands on his, and smiled softly, the sprinkling of rain from the clouds above causing her hair to glow in the moonlight. "Keep him safe." she whispered softly, looking with her strong eyes into his. Feeling her breath hitch, a dark stain suddenly broke through her already bloody bandages, and her head fell back. Taking a breath, knowing that it was her last, feeling the grips of the next life settle on her, the woman pulled Doc close, pressing her lips close to his ear. "His...his name is Larcen..." she exhaled. Letting go of the rest of her breath, her strength failed, and she fell back to the ground, already dead before her body once again lay still on the sand. Without a sound, the rain intensified, silently soaking them as a lone Wuturo howled in the background, the moon shining its last light on her rain dotted hair, illuminating her before the clouds covered it back up.

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After the conclusion of that late night meeting, after carrying the corpse and the child back to his hut, he placed the baby into his own bed to sleep, collapsing onto the spare sleeping mat that he had set up in the main room. He felt...overwhelmed, forcibly put into events that removed him from the isolation that he had put himself in. He could feel it in his bones that he was slowly becoming a part of something that he had never thought would include him, fate now directly steering his life into a predetermined course that he could not change. Despite a large cloud of exhaustion from the busy day that gently pressed down upon him, he found himself unable to pass into the realm of sleep, caught up with the thoughts of his busy mind, thinking of what he had let happen. With a grunt, Doc jumped up, smashing his fist into a strut of his hut in anger, shaking the hut and displacing the water that had gathered on top.

"Do not do this Doc."

"I am doing the right thing."

"He CAN'T STAY HERE DOC, HE CAN'T."

Doc yelled at himself, slamming his head against the bone strut, shaking the foundation for his home once more.

He was arguing with himself now, talking in two different voices, as if he was an entirely different person, his facial mannerisms and diction being used entirely different.

“You know what he is, what he will become.” he whispered to himself, leaning his bleeding forehead against the strut, blood dripping on his nose.

“You cannot allow that child to live, it is dangerous it will live and make the choice BUT MAKE THE WRONG CHOICE.”

“But what if the prophecy is wrong, what if it is not talking about this child?”

“This child is one of a billion; you damn well know that it is the one. It must die.”

“The child is of no threat, if the child is raised by me.”

“The child is every THREAT, if you let it live you will doom everyt~”

“This child is just a child, a being. It is the events that happen around it in the future that you are basing this off of.”

“You heard the prophecy, you heard of what the Sand Shaman said.”

“I did and my choice remains.”

“Then you are a fool.”

“I am fool, but I am not going to be a murderer.”

“You have murdered before, what makes this action different?”

“That was in the past, and I was dif~.”

“You still mourn them, those voices eternally trapped in our head. By killing him you can atone, save everyone.”

“I have left that part of me behind.”

“You need to rethink this, think of the CONSEQUENCES.”

“I am thinking of the consequences, and they can be AVOIDED.”

“You will fail, and you know it. The prophecy cannot be reversed or changed. It simply is.”

“Prophecy’s may be unchangeable, but if it gives a choice in the outcome...”

“It doesn't matter, you will fail. You will fail and you will watch in horror as the ash of the human race sprinkles down from the sky like old world snow, and war decimates the planet a second time. Only then, when you are crying from deep within your heart, and you have lost everything, responsible for this genocide, will someone come along and give you the sweet release of death. DO YOU HEAR ME YOU WILL FAIL.”

“.....”

“I cannot kill this child, its mother is dead because of~”

“YES YOU CAN, YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT IT COULD DO, THE DESTRUCTION THAT WILL OCCUR ONCE MORE.”

“I can raise him to make the right choice; I can raise him right, yes. I can raise him to value life.”

“But you will not know for sure.”

“.....”

“I cannot kill the child”

“....”

“Cannot, or will not?”

“I will raise him, regardless of my ability to kill him.”

With a shaking sigh, Doc stopped leaning against the pole, looking at his hands, as if there was blood painted on them, red and thick.

“That child.....that goddamn cursed child.” Doc murmured to himself, his voice returning to a peaceful medium, independent from the two that proceeded. He paced around his hut, thinking deeply about what had transpired last night, the Wuturo attack, the women.

From last night, where he lived alone, surviving day to day in the harsh Nomand's lands, he was now raising a child that had been whisked away from some deadly force, the child's caretaker killed in her effort to get him away. Doc found himself confronted by responsibilities that he had never wanted to have again, responsibilities that forced him to remember things that he had left behind, long ago. Things he had left behind in trade for the knowledge and that he now held, the company that he kept.

On top of that, was the prophecy? A snippet of knowledge given to him by a legend, someone who warned him of a dire future. Everything was hinging on a child, this child. The child would grow up, whether good or bad, and make a choice. Not just any run of the mill choice, but THE choice, and if he chooses the wrong one.

Doc would have to watch as his world erupts in death and fire.

## Ch. 4

### The Journey

With the coming of the day, a small sliver of sunlight leaked into Doc's hut, casting its golden glow all over the various objects he had haphazardly scattered on the floor and tables. The light crept along his storage shelf, rare, multicolored crystals blinking, skulls sullenly gleaming, and various other mysterious objects illuminated in the morning light. Falling off of the shelf edge, the light landed on Docs eyes, seeping through his eyelids, rousing him from his quiet slumber. Blinking twice, Doc shuddered and sat up, looking back and forth, confused for a moment on why he was sleeping on the floor when he had a perfectly good bed in the corner of his hut. Seeing a small bundle rising and falling on his bed, the events of last night suddenly flashing through his mind, Doc remembered what had transpired late last night, bringing both of his hands up to his face. With a grunt, Doc got off of the mat that he was attempting sleeping on, grabbed his cloak and travel pack, and sat down on his creaky bone chair, pulling on a new pair of trousers. Fully clothed, Doc left the hut, passing by the grave that he had dug last night to house the corpse of that women.

Even in the heat of the sun, the signs of the last nights rainstorm still stood strong, the normally rock hard dusty soil weakened and softened by the pounding rain, causing the plank that he had placed to signify her place of rest to lean slightly to the side. Glancing at it once more, Doc moved away from the grave. With a sigh, Doc turned, ready to start off.

Suddenly, Doc remembered again what he had failed to do last night, what he had chosen to delay. With apprehensive eyes, Doc looked back at his silent hut.

“Perhaps an animal will hear the child’s calls when it wakes up, and finish this cruel duty for Me.”, Doc muttered quietly to himself, looking away from his hut. Then, without a second glance, Doc started off, trying to ignore the wayward thoughts about the child, walking through the slowly heating sand to the corpses of the Wuturos that he had slain last night.

The walk was silent, save only for the shuffling of shifting sand.

The scene was still, quiet, echoing the violence and bloodshed from last night. The stark sun held no mysteries, bleaching everything in white. The Wuturo corpses stacked against each other, stab wounds apparent through the black blood that trailed from the slashes in ones snout and the others chest. The blood stood in contrast to the white sand, its dark, thick, black color sprayed across the entire scene. As expected, scavengers had already gotten to the corpse, one of the Wuturos belly ripped open, its entrails picked apart on the ground. A larger predator had gotten its fill as well, as one of the Wuturos was completely torn in two, the bottom half disappeared into the gullet of some

creature. Looking at the scene, Doc glanced around. Any kill this large wouldn't be empty for much longer, the breaks between scavengers and predators discovering this treasure trove getting shorter and shorter as more time passed.

With a quiet clap of the hands, Doc stepped forward, ready to work. Taking his machete, Doc sliced down into the thigh of the more intact one, ripping off a strip of meat.

The stripping of the corpse didn't take that long, and before Doc knew it, his rucksack was filled to the brim with slices of Wuturo, dark with its black blood, and ready to be cooked or dried. Doc hummed with satisfaction, his next week's meals covered with the meat attained from this kill. Ready to leave, Doc closed his rucksack, throwing it over his shoulder. Turning away from the corpse, a trail of dark red blood suddenly drew Doc's attention. "Red, human blood. Must be the women." Doc thought to himself. Slightly curious, Doc followed the trail between the dead Wuturos, the red blood as stark in the white sand as the thick black Wuturo blood.

The woman's blood.

Her blood.

With an inward sigh, Doc removed the mental block that he had on the women. He couldn't convince himself that he had never known the women any longer, now burdened with her son.

"Liz.....Liz was her name if I remember correctly." Doc murmured to himself, touching his forehead with the tip of his index finger. Of course he remembered correctly, for he had perfect memories of nearly every event that had taken place his life, instantly brought to mind with full picture and sound with a slight will of his brain. It was a small trick that he had attained over his years, perfecting the art of preserving his memories.

Suddenly, Doc found himself unable to stop walking, his eyes glued to the blood trail spread across the ground in front of him.

To Doc, in that moment, the blood spoke a story into his ears, one only a skilled tracker such as him could decipher. A story that kept him in a state of awe as he found himself following the blood trail, speaking to him on levels that only he could truly appreciate.

It was a story about survival.

A women with a grave wound walked through The Nomand's Land, holding a child one hand, holding her intestines in with the other, and a black sword strapped to her back.

The blood trailed for what seemed to be miles.

Over rock and hill.

Past dead carcasses of beasts, bullet holes through their heads.

Sometimes she fell to the ground, staying there for a second, undoubtedly experiencing unmentionable pain, probably weeping. Her blood spilling onto the ground as she trembled.

Wondering if she could get up.

But in the end, no matter what, she did, continuing onward to the conclusion that Doc knew.

“All for what?”

“This women had carried her child, with a hole in her stomach, for miles.”

“Why?”

“Why did she do this? For survival?”

“But she is dead.”

“For the child's survival. She went through the pain of death, burdened by a hole burned through her stomach, to save her child.”

“But the child is evil.”

“...”

“We do not know this for sure.”

Doc suddenly stopped in the middle of a patch of hard, cracked ground, looking down at his feet. Since he had started living here, out in the Nomand's Lands, the most dangerous place in all of the sands, Doc had done everything for survival.

From the beginning, finding himself struggling day to day, to the mild comfort that experience and knowledge brought him current days, he had grown to steadily appreciate the struggle for survival that everything goes through in this land. For him to even think of killing this child, even if it was destined to bring evil of great measure, suddenly brought a tinge of sickness to him.

This child was what Liz was ensuring to survive, ignoring her own life.

Survival of the fittest.



Her sacrifice, her emotions, this silent battle through one of the most dangerous places in existence, all to end with his weakness, his insecurity in regards to raising this child right.

“I AM AFRAID!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Doc yelled at himself inwardly, stomping his foot to the ground in anger.

“This child is a survivor, you know I have no right in taking its life.”

“The child has to die, you cannot let it live, even if it is a survivor.”

“You did terrible things as well, and moved on. We survived, and grew stronger. Give the same to this kid.”

“The child is the end to us.”

“I...but....I....”

With a sigh, Doc looked into the distance, following the blood stain with his eyes.

“See how far she walked, see the rest of her journey. I must find her beginning.” Doc whispered to himself.

With a huff, Doc started to walk again, making his way through the trail of blood, leading farther and farther to the edges of the Nomand's Land. He walked, stumbling and resistant at first, not wishing to see anymore, though his eyes dragged over every step she took, everything she had to overcome. In the end, he stopped resisting himself, and just walked, seeing everything, understanding, feeling.

Finally, Doc arrived at the place he had been expecting to find. But to his realization, it was merely only one of many steps she had taken to come here, to this place, to get shot.

And to find him.

With a deep breath, Doc looked at the sight before him, trying to understand what had happened.

## Ch. 5 The Ambush

The scene before Doc was a jumbled mess, a jigsaw puzzle begging to be put back together. A mystery full of clues with no clear answers in sight. One thing was clear.

She had been attacked.

A huge sinkhole dominated the scene, its slanted sides whispering as his movements caused tiny avalanches of sand to fall into the center. A ragazza lay torn to pieces on the ground, a little bit away from the sinkhole, its blood trailing along the ground to where it lay dead, its entrails ripped out of its body. Circling around the sink hole, Doc found a scattering of tracks. The tracks from behind the sink hole implied two more animals, possibly Wuturos. Someone had been following her.....been trailing her....NO

Someone had been chasing her.

Doc looked at the tracks, trying to piece together what had happened, who was pursuing her through the dark of night.

With a sigh, Doc closed his eyes, picturing the scene, painting the desperate flight in his head, taking in every detail, everything that he knew, trying to~

With a huff of breath, hands spurred the ragazza, air whipping through my hair, sand stinging my eyes. I look back at the pursuers, riding fast and low on their jet black Wuturos. I strain to see what they look like, who they are but I cannotFTPSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH....

Doc shivered, shaking the scene. He had it, what had happened. He just had to focus so he could figure it from the....

He was dead. Everyone was dead.

Liz spurred her steed faster, shuddering as it leapt over a small boulder. The night air whirling by as they flew fast over the craggy hard ground.

A hot, burning tear suddenly stung her cheek, feeling more like a brand or anything. Weakness, I must not show it. I have to be strong, I have to finish this.

I can cry after.

Suddenly, a triplet of bone arrows pierced the ground in front of her one after another, narrowly missing both her head, and the nerve stem of her steed. Whipping her head around, Liz exhaled the breath she was holding in surprise. A group of three riders were pursuing her, riding Wuturos, quietly

leaping over the rocks and swiftly traversing the hard, dry ground with speeds that frightened her.

### Ragazza



### The Steed

These reptilian creatures are the descendant of the iguana, mutated and evolved over the intense two thousand years after the war. Growing to enormous sizes, these gigantic lizards are actually more interested in eating insects and plants, rather than chasing down humans. Due to their extremely fast running speeds, and strong legs, these animals have been tamed for use as the modern day equivalent of a “pack mule”. Used for both caravans, racing down The Long Tar, and as a beast of war, these creatures are one of the most domesticated throughout the settled world. They are most noted for their ability to withstand long periods without water and food, and for their speedy bursts in speed activated at the rider’s discretion. They are also prized for their stamina, able to go days of motion without tiring. Though in our day, we see reptiles as emotionless and unfeeling, these guys are a stellar example of how the world has evolved, as loyalty and care of their master go hand in hand with a blazing intelligence. It is said that “If you are cruel to a Ragazza, fear for later years of revenge, as a Ragazza does not forget. If you are kind to a Ragazza, look forward to the years ahead, for it will

serve as your protector.”

Their padded feet, used to making as little sound as possible, puffed up bits of dust as they hit the ground, their claws cutting into the ground as they pushed faster and faster. The cloaked figures on the Wuturos silently appraised her, curved dark blades strapped to their backs, much like the one that was strapped to hers. Even at this distance, she felt the killers' intent rolling off of them, how eager they were to put those blades to good use.

They were going to catch up with her soon.

Turning back around, she spurred her steed even faster, almost past the stack of bricks that were used to mark the line between safer lands, and the fabled Nomand's Land. Death was almost certain, especially with the amount of noise she was making.

But she had no choice.

Perhaps with the possibility these assassins would let up, at least letting her die by her own hands.

But knowing her cargo, the stakes were too high, she knew that they would not let go,

They were not slowing, even as they neared.

With a huff of breath, hands spurred the ragazza, air whipping through my hair, sand stinging my eyes. I look back at the pursuers, riding fast and low on their jet black Wuturos. I strain to see what they look like, who they are, but in the low light of the setting sun, they resembled nothing more than shadows, pursuing me on dark steeds. Turning back forward, I pulled out my Wirelet, its long, sculpted metal shaft gleaming in the last rays of the dying sun, and pointed it backwards, firing into the shadows. With a flash of light, and a rush of flames, the bullet narrowly missed the one in middle one, the figure hardly even flinched.

“These are no regular bandits, they must be Crowley's men.” I whisper to myself, looking forward again, spurring my ragazza.

With a flash, an arrow sped past my cheek, stabbing into my ragazza's back as we ride faster, the bricks now only a hundred meters away. Two more smash into the ground in front of us, different arrows that thud into the ground, weighed in the front by gigantic, razor sharp teeth.

“Arrows tipped with sand crab teeth.....they are defiantly Crowley's men.” I curse silently to myself, my words lost in the wind.

With a tremendous intake of breath, my ragazza jumped, clearing the bricks by a good five feet, arrows zipping underneath us as he fly through the air, directly into the Nomand's Lands, a place even these men would not dare pursue me..

I hoped.

With a crash, the pursuers crashed through the brick stack, knocking the bricks all over the soft, sandy ground, lifting up a cloud of dust. The Wuturos snarled a little, nervous at being in lands such as these, dangerous and lethal. Regardless at whatever reservations that they had, they kept up their speed, running faster even, as if aware of what was about to transpire.

The riders were closer, I could feel the arrows narrowly missing my head, and either flying widely, or impaling themselves into my ragazza's back. Regardless, I rode harder and harder, a small tear leaking down my cheek as I clutched the bundle my arms a little tighter, feeling the rise and fall of his chest.

Memories of the journey.

A lonely night on the cragged ground.

The pain, the biting, the screaming.

The birth, afraid of being noticed.

Trying to cover up the scent of blood.

Slicing of the life cord.

The endless, and eternal pain.

Feelings of sorrow and regret for the life that I have placed him.

Tears for the death of one who would want to help.

Finally, one final push, a rush of water.

The weight lifted out of my belly.

The first, small cry, before a silent acceptance.

Wide eyes, appraising, judging, and accepting.

Love.

Holding him tightly, knowing that if I failed, he would die.

I would die.

The world would die.

B....

Luckily I had held him tightly enough, and landing on my back he is o~

Ahuhhuhfff AHHHHHH

With a roar beyond anything that I had ever experienced in my life, a wall rushed of the ground, engulfing the two riders, and slicing my ragazza in two. Sand rushed up, rocks flew everywhere, and I dropped my Wirelet in surprise. The wall ended in the sky, where crunching noises and blood rained down on my skin.

It was a sand worm, a huge....fugging.....sand worm.

With a puff, pores opened up around its sides, exhaling a greenish mist into the air around it, hitting me right in the face.

Too surprised and in pain to scream, I shuffle back, unable to tear my eyes off of the rumbling tower of flesh that feasting on my pursuers. I sneeze, expelling the mist that had entered my nose and mouth. Moving back, I find myself trembling with both pain and awe, mixing into a state of paralysis as this sight before me screeches into the air in dominance.

Suddenly, a loud howl drew my eyes away, the third and final rider running away, pursued by a cloud of Bezing, insects that lived in mutual symbiosis with sand worms. They could strip a corpse in one minute, though they preferred to feast on the remains of a sand worms meals, living in its mouth.

Such beauty, such balance with a creature so monstrous.

Even in death, everything meant something.

I shook my head, ridding me of these wayward thoughts.

I had a job to do, and very little time to do it.

Moving away as fast as I could, I got up, moaning deeply as the motion sent waves of pain through my stomach, or what was left of it.

I had to....

I had to walk

I had to continue.

Once I had gotten at a comfortable distance, I placed the bundle I was carrying on the ground, its eyes looking at me in the dark, as if observing what I was doing.

“By the gods this is going to hurt...”

Grabbing my clothes, I started ripping the fabric of my shirt.

Tearing strips off, I stopped, holding them over my stomach.

I took a deep breath.

In....and out....

Pain erupted from my wound as I did so, even breathing too much for it.

## The Sand Worm



## The Giant

Not much is known about these monoliths of The Nomand's Land. Carnivorous, definitely, intelligent, one could only guess, but the real mystery lies on the ways of movement through the sand and hard ground, and how the insects that live inside its mouth survive, as death is not just confined to being caught inside its maw. Just being near the Sand Worm when it erupts out of the ground could result in



your death, if you are unfortunate to be caught by a swarm of Bezing.

Biting down on the hilt of the black sword I held on my back, I...

Taking the strips of cloth, I wrapped them tightly around my stomach, screaming into the hilt as I did so, shaking.

"Cmon Liz... I...I...you are ok....I can do this.....It's just a walk, just a walk." I murmured to myself, trying to understand what I was attempting.

Nomand's Land.

By foot.

Bleeding out.

At night.

It was almost certain, having heard the stories about this fabled land. Even weathered warriors didn't dare set foot here, hell, even the Yazashi would never willingly come in here, as even they found it difficult to survive.

No one sane came here, it was death.

It was all death.

The creatures, the land.

Impossible to live in.

Except for one.

With a roaring of a creature beyond comprehension behind me, I took a couple shaky steps, holding my Wirelet in hand as I checked to see if the bandages held. Seeing as they were pretty damn sturdy, I started forward, my ears and eyes razor sharp with adrenaline from the fight a couple of minutes ago. I could hear everything, feel everything, the world around me moving as my vision threatened to waver.

The sand worm finally roared one last time, its call echoing through the air and ground, a roar of dominance and success, and withdrew into the sands, a large cloud of sand the only sign of its existence as it burrowed underground to different lands.

In that moment, as it burrowed, the sun passed below the horizon, plunging me in dark, endless dark.

At first I sat on the ground, crying into my hands, looking right and left, waiting to be attacked and mauled by some horrific beast from nightmare.

But as time passed, nothing happened, however long I waited, time was immeasurable. It could have been ten minutes, or ten hours. I couldn't tell.

Nothing attacked me.

Perhaps they just couldn't find me, the scent of that worm still strong on my clothes. Perhaps they were scared of its smell. The more I thought about this, comparing the stories in my head to my current situation, the surer I was about this. In the end I looked at my hands, my face wet with a mixture of dirt, tears, sweat and blood.

And I smiled slightly.

I can use this.

In the beginning, walking was hard. I felt every jolt, every jostle that the ground did to me. I cried out in pain, feeling the hole in my, the gaping wound in my middle bleed every time it moved, every time I did anything. I was overwhelmed by the red waves, washing over my mouth and face, threatening to drown me.

But I kept walking, fighting for each breath through these waves of pain, swimming in this red ocean.

The land battled against me, throwing obstacle after obstacle in my way. The ground caught me off balance with its shifts from soft sand to hard, cracked ground. Boulders stacked in my way, taking time to walk around. Creatures howled and hissed and screeched in the dark, flying and scratching and crawling against the ground. I could hear them, but I couldn't see them, the land around me alive with motion. Why they didn't attack me....I couldn't understand. Why would something like a smell convince them when sight told them otherwise? I was injured, bleeding, the scent of death around me. I was nothing more than a walking corpse, carrying a defenseless baby. They ignored me, making a circle of silence and motionlessness around me, watching as I walked by.

Hours passed, time passed.

I kept walking.

Some of these creatures flashed with light, their ends illuminating the air around me as they swirled around, touching each other and conjoining, the only light in the dark cloudy night that I was traveling. They danced in the night, drawing my eyes as I walked, painting the dark with their movements.

The air was a glow of lines and color, joining and separating as they moved with each other. I walked in utter silence, once again in awe. This was one of the most beautiful things that I had ever seen in my life. Moving my hand away from my bandage, I stretched it out, wanting to touch them, wanting to know if they were real. The light swirled around my hand, surrounding me as they danced and danced, air illuminated. They soared everywhere, graceful and slow, an unreal moment in this journey through pain and danger.

As time passed, hours blended into minutes, seconds stretched out for eternity. Sometimes I found myself on the ground, weeping as the light-bugs did their dance around my head, casting light on my head. I wept about everything, all of my sorrows, for the pain that I was feeling, the danger my child was in, and the burden I carried on my back.

The sword.

The dark weapon.

The vault.

Unsure on whether I could get back up, to continue. That I would just die right there, my stomach bleeding out into the thirsty ground.  
But I would always get back up.

Don.

As I was climbing over the corpse of a wild Wuturo, the mere thought of his name suddenly wrecked my mind, wiping the blur of pain that kept me in a state of unfeeling. I fell over, bandages wet with fresh blood, the baby in my bundle moving slightly as if he could hear my thoughts.

Dead.

Nothingness.

Failure.

Sorrow.

Blackness.

Thoughts now more concepts in my mine, scarcely able to comprehend anything, bleeding heavier

now as I made my way farther and farther through the lands, untouched by the majority of the creatures that made it their home. As the night wore on, many of the animals disappeared, the flurry of action dying down as I walked farther and farther. Eventually, even the fire bugs disappeared, moving somewhere into a different part of the Nomad's Land to continue their fiery dance.

I was alone in the dark, walking slower and slower.

I could feel my life ebbing, my life blood seeping out of the bandage that I had tightly wrapped around the hole in my stomach. The child slowly murmuring for food.

I was dying.

It didn't surprise me to be honest. I knew I had been dying this entire time, as my wound attested. This was a one way trip. I had nothing left holding me back in my body. But that being said, in a detached sort of way, I could feel my body slowing, my motions becoming stiff as I lost more blood. Regardless, I pushed on, feeling the pain come to me like waves, washing over my feet as I lay on the beach, originally overwhelming me, now just a part of living, accepting them, swimming in them. The red waves washed slower and slower though, the ocean drying up. The tide was being pulled in, the tide in my mind.

And that's when I heard his voice.

"Liz?"

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Choice**

With a snap, Doc came back to reality, standing dazed and feverish in front of his pale brown hut, sweat pouring over his face from the hammering sun overhead. Dust covers his shoes, etched deep into the creases and indents of the leather, cooked in over their years of use.

His thoughts lay skipping from the picture his imagination was painting from the tracks she made, the story that lay on the ground. Her trials still played through his mind, as if taunting him, reminding him of the duty that he was trying to complete.

Playing in his mind, the picture of a women who had gone through hell.

A woman who had gone through hell for her child.

A child that he was considering to kill.

“...the child of the prophecy”

Shaking his head in a vain attempt to ward off these thoughts, Doc shuddered and slowly dragged his feet over to the shallow grave that he had dug last night, his eyes heavy and dark like a gathering of pregnant rain clouds, about to pour down onto the parched earth. With a sigh, he fell to his knees before the grave, his knees digging into the now hardened ground, drained and dry of all water. Dust rose off the ground in a small cloud, disturbed by his les.

The ground was rained on again as the clouds broke, his eyes spilling tears down his face as he kneeled silently, looking at the plank of wood sticking out of the ground before him.

On the outside, he was stoic, silent as his cheeks and neck only showed little emotion. His arms by his sides, his legs, slowly buzzing with numbness as blood pumped through his body.

Staring at the plank with a fevered intensity, looking deep into the grain, observing the waves and deformities, yet at the same time, detached, as if a secondary mind had taken the reins for a little.

Slow dripping of round, shining tears down his face, before they evaporated off of his grey, straggly stubble.

All the while, his heart beat slowly rose in his chest, a sign of a greater struggle going on, unseen by anything physical on the outside.

A war raged in Docs mind, so intense, that it required all his attention just to keep on fighting.

Blood.

Sweat.

Tears.

Through the darkness of his conscious mind, his subconscious was alive with action, the miniscule and immeasurable gathering of calculations, random zips and zoodles of electricity, and organic strain making up the impossibly complex and advanced thing that a brain is.

The struggle occurring in there is almost impossible to understand conventionally from an outside viewer looking in, but for Doc, it seemed all too familiar.

Falling through the clouds of his subconscious, his inner mind, Doc watched as two armies clashed, bathed in a sea of red and white. The battlefield was a broken and cracked, darkness seeping from the fissures that gaped like wounds in the ground. The soldiers each unique yet the same, dark and haggard. They slashed at each other, terrible noises clashing and screeching through the air. Statements, scenes, feelings, emotions solidified in each of their hands, taking the shape of brutal weapons of war. Words and feelings and memories do feel physical in your own mind, as any child knows, allowing our dreams and memories to take on the resemblance of reality.

Thousands lie on the ground, soldiers made not of flesh and bone, but of a wavering unsubstantial flow and ebb of memory, familiar yet strange. Doc fell swiftly through the storm of clouds and smog, yet air did not flow by him to suggest any speed.

This event did not come to any surprise to him, as it was something that occurred often within his mind.

In order to cope with the lack of human contact over the years, Doc had split his mind in two, literally. One side represented the logical person within him, someone who looked ahead, thinking of what current events would do to the future.

But the fighting was never this intense.

The other side represented his conscious, the dreamer within him. It was hopeful, spontaneous, and carried all of his emotions.

Together these two made his mind up, collaborating to make tough decisions in consensus, two sides made up of many voices.

Usually they decided peacefully, shouting opinions and insults across the space of his mind in order to work out what they should do.

However, in situations such as this, where the choice was beyond his comprehension, and affected the whole of creation, the voices stopped talking.

And started a war.

That is where Doc stood now, in the midst of a great battle, the two sides of his minds clashing with memories and sounds and feelings and smells and sights and touch.

Bloodshed and darkness and light and stabbings.

Throwing ideas and accusations across, lethal and more brutal with each turn.

Doc looked down at his feet with a sigh, he could no more ignore the conflict now.

He was on the ground.

With a small sigh, Doc stepped downward, passed the dirt that lay on the ground, passed the figments and imaginings of his mind that constructed this world. His feet, unsoiled by the ground that he stood on, disappeared as he stepped down, giving him the appearance of someone who had both of his feet sliced cleanly off, without any trace of blood or gore. With a tired glance, his face starting to show the wrinkles that would come to dominate his face in coming years, Doc sighed. His eyes, exhausted and watery, as he observed momentarily the conflict that appeared to be shattering his mind. His eyes wandered, finally laying down on one soldier for a moment, tracing his movements through the withering mob. The man flickered in the violence, his body shape obtuse and ill fit for conflict, the reflection of someone remembered from long ago. In his hands he wielded a dagger, stained at the tip, its handle a swirling piece of leather wrapped around a hunk of stone, held close to his side. Before Doc could make out any details, a long blade whipped through the air and sliced him in half, the man falling to pieces as he silently yelled in agony. The violence then once again intensified, the blades falling and rising faster, the soldiers falling to pieces, the sky dark and obscured, and Doc turned away.

With a clanging of his feet tapping against rusty metal, echoing through an empty space, Doc passed through the ground, and found himself in a stuffy, metal staircase, stretching downwards into a large room, the floor that he could see lit evenly and quite clean of any memorable features. Not wasting any more time, he made his way down the stairs, and entered, taking in the familiar surroundings.

The room was quite large and exact in its measurements. Its sides were perfectly aligned with the walls painted a light brown. The ground was of two colors, and divided the room evenly. One side was made up of a smooth dark rock, perfectly carved and simply designed, doing an excellent job of being a floor. The other side was of a blinding white stone, so bright that it gave off a glow, but not hard to look directly, as if it existed by rules of its own that allowed people to view its splendor without ruining their eye sight. In front of Doc lay an enormous table, made of the same dark and white rock that defined the floor, the colors aligned with the colors of the floor, stretching from two stair cases that opened up on either side of the table, much like the one he had traveled down. Above the table was a thick, but crystal clear pane of glass, showing the battle that raged above, its noises obscured somehow by the mechanizations of the room. Stepping forward, Doc was not surprised to see two figures already seated at the table, one on the white side, dressed in white robes that matched the floor, and the other one dressed in dark black robes that blended in with the dark that surrounded it.

"You are late."

Both of the figures spoke at the same time, their voices merging into one.

They both looked at Doc, their eyes piercing and clones in color and shape, though each of them held different feelings in their gaze.

Also, they both looked exactly like Doc.

"I was held up, I had to follow the trail, read the story that was laid out for me in the ground before it disappeared forever." Doc replied, his voice reserved, but confident in the quiet space.

"Well let's get down to business, shall we? I think that we can all agree that this child presents a threat to all of existence." the dark robed Doc said, nodding to himself as he looks at both of them.

"That would be a definite, if we even completely understood the prophecy. We don't know for certain on whether the destruction is caused by the child's malicious actions, or just indirect result for his existence.", the white robed Doc rebutted, his voice mildly irritated, as if he had already stated this multiple times before.

"I simply not the point, we cannot let emotions get in the way of facts here. The child is a danger, regardless of if it is a result of his actions or not."

"Letting emotions in the way? I can see crystal clear. We are discussing the murder of a child. A danger or not, this is not something that we should consider lightly."

"If it's for a greater cause than what does it matter?"

"We can raise the child, we have both the knowledge and the resources to do so. We already know that he is a more than promising in the ways of survival. On top of that, we can raise him to be good, to care for his fellow man. He does not necessarily have to be destined for destruction."

The white robed Doc nodded to himself, as if the last point was unable to be countered, which of course it was.

"Again, IF the prophecy states it's going to happen, ITS GOING TO DAMN WELL HAPPEN.", the dark robed Doc yelled back, standing up and bringing his fist down on the table.

Through the clear glass above, the fighting intensified, blood spurting into the air, unheard screams of pain and agony shuddering through the faces above, white and black, red and brown. Vibrations shake the room they are talking in, a small stream of dust falling from the ceiling.

Through all this our Doc stood between the two robed figures, his eyes fixed on the glass above, saying nothing, doing nothing.

Standing up, the white robed Doc glared across the room, his brow wrinkling as he prepared a rebuttal.

"WE. ARE. NOT. MURDERERS. IF THERE IS ANY POSSIBLITY OF AVOIDING THE BLOOD THAT WILL SPILL OUR HANDS, THAN WE MUST TAKE IT.", he spat, spittle flying out of his contorted



mouth, spilling onto the stubble on his chin.

“DEATH IS WHAT THAT CHOICE WILL BRING US. WILL YOU BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LIVES OF BODIES THAT WILL COME IF WE LET THIS CHILD LIVE?”

“NO, YOU WILL, BECAUSE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BECAUSE YOU’RE FAILURE AS A TEACHER THAT HE HAD FULLFILLED THE PROPHECY IN THE FIRST PLACE.”

“HOW DARE YOU, YOU SENTIMENTAL, WEAK LIMBED CHILD.”

“A CHILD? AT LEAST I STILL HAVE A SPIRIT, YOU EMPTY, SPITTLE STAINED, PILE OF HUMAN REFUSE.”

A sharp crack echoed through the chamber as the glass window above them splintered, the battle above now staining the glass with blood and dirt. The screeching and shouting was now apparent through the thick walls, vibrating the table as the battle raged even harder. The walls started to cry silently, cracks climbing through the rock, voices of the past seeping through them into the previously secure safe room in his mind.

Through all this Doc stood still, looking through the glass in the top, watching the battle over head. He was watching a person in the wave of memories and emotions that dictated the fighting, a woman walking through it all, ignoring the conflict. She was quite familiar, holding a bundle in her arms, a sword on her back. A dark wound bled in her middle, covered by a bandage of shirt fabric, barely holding the bleeding back.

Her eyes, he remembered.

Her eyes had so much will.

“His mother died for him.”

Doc said quietly, his voice audible even through the mess of noises that flooded the room.

With surprised looks, both of the robes stopped yelling for a moment, looking at Doc.

“His mother walked miles and miles, with a hole in her stomach, to deliver that child to me.”

“In hopes that I would take it in.”

The robed figures open their mouths to talk, then close them, as if they had dismissed whatever comment that they were about to make as inadequate. The room was silent as it was in the beginning, the cracks in the walls fading, the glass ceiling cracks withdrawing back to their roots.

“Have you reached a consensus?” they both asked, their voices combined once again, looking at Doc with detached neutral emotions.

“I have, we are keeping the child.” Doc stated, each word enunciated clearly so that its meaning was completely understandable.

A moments silence permeated the space, before the dark robed Doc sighed, looking down at his hands.

"We will have to be careful, raising a child is not something to be taken lightly." he blurted out, not wanting to accept the words that came out of his mouth.

"We can split teachings, have me teach what we know of the world to him, while you teach him survival. That is what you are best at anyway, am I right?" white robed Doc said, looking down at his hands as well, not celebratory as expected, but thinking of the enormity of the decision that they had just decided on.

"Then it's decided, we will split the teachings between us, survival for the logic of my mind, and knowledge for the emotions."

Doc said this with finality, breathing an inward sigh of relief as he started to come back to himself, the scene fading to a mix of red and black.

Before he was gone completely though, the dark robed Doc said one last thing.

"This decision you made, you better live by it. For if you fail it will haunt you for the rest of your life."

Then his voice faded, and everything disappeared into silence.

Opening his eyes, Doc looked around, unsurprised to see that the sun was peaking over the horizon, its bloody red rays spilling across the ground like the sun was bleeding. Everything was starting back up, the night ending its dark reign over the land once again to forfeit to the light that shone into the day.

Groaning slightly at his cramped legs, shaking them out to get rid of the unpleasant buzzing numbness that populated them, Doc got up off his knees. Stumbling slightly, he walked stiffly over to his hut, where the child lay inside. Even through the half a day and night it had remained silent, its wide eyes drinking in all of the sights and sounds that covered his dwelling.

Seeing Doc, the baby gurgled quietly, its eyes fixated on him, wide but strangely old as well, as if the child had already known what had happened to his mother, and gotten over it. Doc sighed. Knowing death that was the first step towards surviving here, something he had learned well.

"Well then Larcen, let's see what you will become."

## **Chapter 7**

### **Coming of Age**

A dark shape flitted before Larcen's eyes, almost nonexistent to the naked eye in the sparse light of the moon, filtering through an inky dark cloud. Taking in a breath, he slid his fingers around the bone shaft spear that lay beside him, his stomach flat against the gritty ground. He is clad in a rough pair of Wuturo skin pants, with a light scaly shirt fashioned from the carcass of some long ago kill. A shadow of stubble lined his jaw, marking his passage into adulthood, highlighting his tanned, light brown face. His dark hair flooded from the top of his head, cascading down like a dark messy waterfall. His arms are taunt, every muscle in his body hardened with concentration as he prepares himself for a confrontation.

He is a predator of the night, a living embodiment of any beast of the Nomand's lands, dangerous and ready for a confrontation, his eyes bright with a fierce joy.

The night stands still, only slight rustling from the areas far away from him showing any sign of the dangerous predators that filled dark night that he was wading in. No motion still flickering before him, and he relaxes a bit, not wanting to cramp up in his whisper still position on the ground.

Suddenly, he found the shape again with his eyes, a small dot that rose above the rise in the ground, several tens of meters away.

With a silent roar, his eyes flashing in the leaking moonlight, his body shadowed and flowing, he pushes up, letting the spear roll off of his fingers in a brutal throw that is echoed by his entire body.

The spear disappears, only to reappear again 100 feet away, its pale shaft visible as it wiggles around; a groan of life exiting the beast that was hit by it reaching his sensitive ears.

With a silent rush of air, Larcen collapses back onto his stomach, the stoic form that stood silently now gone, its shadow erased in the moonlit night.

Time passes, marked only by Larcen's breaths, which he counts out loud in his head, watching and waiting for any sign of interest in the corpse. If anything noticed his kill, anything at all, it could ruin his entire hunt, and possibly end his life. In this world, mistakes meant lost limbs, deep wounds, and at their worst, death.

After two hundred breaths, slow and carefully taken, Larcen pushed himself back up to his feet, and made his way to the kill site, his feet making absolutely no noise, only the slight shifting of dirt to mark

his travel.

A large Wuturo lies shuddering on the ground, its dark black blood seeping from the spear wound in its eye socket. Not a sound is emitted from the body, the spear having quickly killed it through the damage to the brain. Now certain that it is safe to take action, Larcen withdraws a bone knife from his belt, and kneels down.

With sharp, practiced motions, Larcen disembowels the corpse, slicing off the edible bits of the large animal, dying his hands dark black with the fluids that seeped out. The process doesn't take that long, his efficient technique cutting away at the Wuturo corpse with surgical precision. Cutting away the last slice of red meat, Larcen put his knife away in his belt, and took out a small brown vial. Larcen liberally dripped the contents of the vial onto his hands before rubbing it all over his body. Reflexively he made a face, the liquid was a wall of smell, blasting him in the face with unmistakable scent of Uriel dung, pungent and smelling of death.

Despite having to deal with that horrid smell, Larcen emitted a sigh of relief. Having finally finished the ritual, he got up, shouldering the leather sack full of meat. Then, without any further sound, Larcen sprinted off into the night, the air swirling behind him, kicking up a puff of dust.

The night flashed by Larcen as he ran, the wind whooshing through his ears as his feet pressed against the ground, then lifting off, propelling him forward. His arm pump forward and back in front of him, a strong, sure motion that flexes and contracts his muscled forearms and back, a force of mass, blasting through the dark air.

A stomp, the sound of a large appendage hitting the ground enters his ears.

Without a sound, Larcen skids to a stop, and collapses to the ground. Laying quietly, he holds his breath, the whole maneuver done almost instantly.

A huge shape slouches across his path, a gigantic dark shape shadowed in the moon light, a low rumble emitting from the front. Its tail stretches many meters behind it, dragging in the sand. Larcen glances downward, his eyes widening. Razor sharp claws, as long as his forearm, scrape against the rocky dusted ground, carving deep rivets into the dirt. The air floods with the sounds of the animal's misty breaths, deafening in the almost constant silence that Larcen is used to. Larcen lies still, his body flat against the ground, waiting patiently for it to pass.

With a low moan, the beast stops in front of him, and stomps one of its legs. Blood flies off of a large gash in its side, cutting down to the bone. Contrary to his first glance, the beast was heavily injured, slouching because it couldn't move any faster, its left leg full of large, rounded holes, like bullet wounds. As a cloud passes away from the moon, light shines over the animal's skin, revealing a score of familiar looking wounds dotted all into its hide, covering almost its entire body. Moaning again, the beast pauses, taking a second to rest before continuing.

Suddenly, with a humongous rush of air, a large, silvery pair of claws latches onto its back, causing it to screech in agony. Larcen's eyes widened. A male Uriel was reclaiming its escaped prey, breaking free of the bindings that held it prisoner in its nest. It stood twice the size of the creature it was

grabbing onto, its large, silvery wings invisible in the night sky. Its elongated mouth was full of sharp, dagger like teeth, made to grab and rip. Not many humans had ever seen one up close. Even Doc, as experienced and well learned about the goings and comings of these lands had only seen a few. The reason being was that like most of the animals that made this land their home, it was extremely dangerous and could kill any human in an instant, given the chance. The scent that he wearing, to dissuade predators from pursuing him, would have no effect on a Uriel. Unlike humans, having some food take on the smell of its dung had no effect on whether it would eat it or not. Larcen thought back to what else he knew about them from his teachings. Apparently though, getting eaten on the spot by a Uriel was a blessing, compared to what happened if it took you back alive-

The Uriel interrupted his internal panicked review of its dangers with a screech, having placated its preys struggling's with a squeeze of its claws, breaking several bones in its back. Larcen pressed harder against the ground, his breath catching as he fervently wondered to himself if it had seen him. Luckily though, the Uriel was too busy occupied with reclaiming its prey, and with a spray of dust and sand, lifting up into the air, its mouth agape as it pressed back towards its nest.

After the Uriel had disappeared out of sight, Larcen got back up quickly. All types of creatures would be coming soon to investigate the blood, and he had little time to waste. Staying here was certain death. So with a small intake of breath, silently thanking the Uriel for its lack of perception, Larcen took off running.

The rest of the trip back was uneventful, having no more encounters with any smaller predators, the smaller wildlife repelled by the smell of Uriel dung that hanged heavily around his body. In the end, he arrived at the outskirts of the safe ground, making his way by a small pile of stones that marked its borders. Stopping for a second, he looked forward at his home, taking in the sight with relief in his heart. In the moonlight a small hill, sprouted out of the ground, stood out in his eyes. Ramshackle and lumpy, the baked sand that covered it helped it blend in almost perfectly with its surroundings, looking like nothing more than another rise in the ground. The only thing that marked this dwelling was a plank of wood that was sticking out of the ground beside it. Knowing the dangers of bringing attention to themselves in these land, he had asked Doc many times before what it was over the years, and received only redirections in conversation and random chores in return. As years passed, he gave up trying to understand, and just accepted it as a He panted slightly, sweat dripping down over the brownish stains left by the Uriel dung on his skin and clothes, he wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Approaching the doorway, Larcen ducked his head slightly, thinking of his fur cot and an escape into rest.

With surprise, he found himself on the ground, his head full of red from a lump on his forehead.

"You're late."

A figure stood in front of him, and even with a shadow over his face, Larcen could feel a grimace of annoyance on his face.

"Didn't I do everything like you said?" Larcen retorted, rubbing the sore spot on his forehead.

"If you did, I wouldn't be standing out here in the middle of the blurking night would I?" Doc countered, shaking his head.

With a sigh, Doc stepped forward out of the shadows, his face showing a mix of disappointed and

mildly bemused

Wondering what exactly he had failed to do, Larcen thought back to the details of the task.

“Ok so I got the meat.”

“Check”

“I did the concealment trial”

“Check”

“I got side tracked by a Uriel.”

“No excuses”

“...”

“And that's all?”

Looking confused, Larcen looked up at Doc, who held a hand out to help Larcen up.

Taking his hand, Larcen hefted himself up, looking a bit disgruntled.

“So what, pray I ask, warranted a knock in the head?”

Doc grinned, and poked him in the belly with his staff.

“You didn't use a sword.”

With a feeling of dread, Larcen suddenly remembered the details of the conversation that he had had with Doc before the hunt.

“Use a sword this time, remember the ritual, and you are hunting Wuturos.”

“Ok Doc”

“And do remember each detail; you don't want to screw up your first night isolation hunt.”

“I will remember.”

“Swooooooooooord.”

“Please leave Doc.”

Coming back to himself, Larcen moaned and grimaced, making an ugly face towards the ground.

Seeing Larcen's reaction, Doc chortled a little.

“Sure got you there didn’t I? Now you know what that means...”

Larcen internally smacked himself.

“You have to do the dishes AND the laundry.”

Larcen started to internally bludgeon himself.

“....for 3 months....!”

Having sufficiently bludgeoned himself internally with a blunt object, Larcen started to moan.

“Damn it damn it damn it”, Larcen muttered to himself.

“Oh comes off it my boy, while you did fail one small aspect of your first hunt with me slumbering, I see that you still managed to grab us some fine grub! Let’s have midnight feast in celebration!” Doc patted Larcen on the back, leading him inside.

The hut appeared to be suffering from the aftermath of a hurricane, skins and furs covering the ground, bone edged and hilted weapons hanging haphazardly from the far wall. In one corner was a large shell, its top opened revealing a mess of clothing. In the other corner was a black hole, leading to where their cots were, safe underneath an already secure dwelling. Clay pots hung up on a bone strut that crossed the ceiling, their insides filled with food stuffs preserved for later consumption. Behind a pile of sticks, a small fireplace was constructed, some metal cooking ware stacked inside among the ashes. In the middle of the hut was Docs pride and joy, a large part of a spine, erected with smoothed out rock on top to make a large table, used mainly for eating meals. The hut, while small and giving off the appearance of chaos, was meticulously organized, all of the things where they needed to be. While lacking much space for two grown men, it was rather comfortable, the skins covering the floor designed to make it soft and nice to walk on, while the skins hanging on the walls were from animals that had excellent heat regulation, due to their evolved hides. Access to water was unlimited, as in the room underneath the hut, they had a well dug that supplied them with clean, clear water.

It was home.

The only home Larcen had ever known.

Living in one of the most dangerous places in the world, hunkering down in a small fur covered bubble of dirt and bone.

With a teacher who taught him everything he could ever need to know, oddly comfortable with the isolation that he was living in.

With them both settled down in their seats, the food was cooked in the fireplace, and then distributed to them both.

The meal was quiet, Doc now silent and composed, an air of disappointment exhaling from his body.

"Next time you cannot make the same mistake. These conditions are for a reason, so that you are prepared for any eventuality. Understand?" Doc stated clearly, looking at Larcen with serious eyes.

"I will not make the same mishtake again, I promish", Larcen mushed out, his mouth full to the brim with food.

"You better not, else you be doing the laundry and dishes for the entirety of this year." Doc threatened, his voice slipping into a teasing and light hearted tone as the smell of the roasted meat warmed his nostrils.

The rest of the meal was a mess of stories and quiet laughter, as Doc recited old stories and toasted Larcen's almost success in his almost perfect hunt. Doc got quite drunk off of his home brewed concoction, made from distilled and fermented cactus juice, while Larcen contented himself with cold water, a blessing after the sweat and stress of the night. As time passed, the noise died down. It wasn't before long that they both sat quietly, thinking to themselves, both of them nursing their drinks. A silence lay thickened in the hut, broken only by the crackling of the fire.

After a bit, Doc turned his chair to Larcen, a creak breaking the layer of quiet.

"So...the hunt.....tell me this story Larcen." Doc said slowly, turning to face Larcen curiously, a small smile upon his lips.

Larcen turned to face Doc, mildly surprised.

"You are interested in my tale? You have lived here for so many years, seen so many things, why would you be interested in mine? I have nothing to tell that you do not already know!"

Doc looked at him curiously, before nodding, his chair squeaking underneath his bulky frame.

"Aye, that would be the truth. I have seen many things, experienced so much, but Larcen..." Doc trailed off, leaning forward, gesturing with his hands for Larcen to lean in as well.

Flickering lights caressed his face, enhancing and contrasting the wrinkles and stubble on his face. The age of his face didn't reach his eyes though, which were of a brilliant greyish blue, radiant and bright with life.

"I have seen, felt, smelt, and heard the world though this body, only this. I want to experience the world that you see through your own eyes, understand how you see things. That is why we listen to stories, to experience tales from another's eyes."

With that, he leaned back, placing one leg onto the other, regarding Larcen with an expectant gaze.

Larcen considered his memories, scrolling through his head passed images and thoughts and emotions and all of the wavering motions of his wandering mind. He thought back to the hunt, the feeling of sweat dripping down his face, the strong smell of dung, the blood pouring out of a



shuddering body. Finally finding a possible beginning, Larcen looked up, gazing into Docs piercing eyes, and started to talk.

“The ground it was loose, looser than the earth the surrounded our cabin. Sometimes it dusted even further into sand, huge areas covered in gigantic dunes of the rough sand. The dirt was irritating, constantly on my mind due to its insistence to keep sticking to my skin. I had to constantly correct my wayward thoughts though, for the night brought more predators than any other minute of the day. I saw a gigantic slithering monster erupt from the ground in a puff of dust, staying erect for a moment before snapping forward to bite something. A long howl echoed from the north, not Wuturo, but something else. It continued for a while before it was cut off, no doubt due to the fangs and claws and stingers of some other animal. I was scared at first, barely beyond the boundaries of our land, hiding a little too often, afraid of being found. You were not with me this time, I was totally alone and any mistake that I made would mean a instantly painful death.”

Larcen paused, taking a deep breath, having shared these thoughts on only the air that he had in his lungs at the time. Doc nodded slowly, thinking to himself as he tapped his fingers against themselves, starting with the pointer, tip tapping all the way to the pinky.

“My spear kept digging into my back, another small annoyance that threatened my life more than once. I almost stabbed myself at one time due to my own carelessness, the only reason it stopped from piercing my neck was because I had quick reflexes. Though I was nervous, listening and watching and carefully placing my movements, I still kept even breaths, one saving grace. I may have hunted in my mind like a shuddering mess, on the outside I kept composure, and was able to make my way to a possible target without bringing attention to myself. I don’t know why I was nervous, it confused me, baffled me to the core. When I hunt with you, I am calm, a sky before a storm. I am a shadow on the ground, unseen, unknown, to everything and everyone but you. When I was alone out there.....I felt revealed, on edge. Knowledge that came to me clearly seeped through the edges of my mind. I started second guessing myself....”

“It was only for a little, a small part of the hunt....but I felt weak, miniscule.”

Larcen looked down, his talking slowing and getting quieter as he continued. Doc stopped tapping his fingers, his eyes darkening. With a sharp crack, he smacked Larcen on the head, knocking him forward, his chair scraping roughly against the ground.

“That is not weakness. That is stupidity, Larcen. If you do not control it, it will control you.”

Doc’s voice was low and gravelly, his eyes burning like ice burgs, a cold serious passion, gazing into Larcen’s. A low burn of anger rippled through Larcen’s spine, tensing his back and tightening his fists slightly. He stared holes into the ground, still leaned forward with his head bowed, the blow to his pride hurting him like a sliver of wood stuck in one’s foot, irritating and demanding attention.

How dare he punch me, discipline me. I am 18 years old of this year, not just a whimpering student to have lessons beaten into. I am a hunter, a spear thrown into the brain cavity of a rearing Ragazza. It was one mistake. ONE mistake. ONE MISTAKE. ONE, FUCKING, MISTAKE.

The moment lasted where Larcen pictured himself punching Doc in the face, beating his face in. Then, the moment passed, and Larcen was left with a hollow mix of defeat and acceptance, and he leaned

back into his seat.

With that, Doc leaned back, motioning quietly with his hands for Larcen to continue.

“There was a moment when I thought I was going to die, right before I reached a silent zone, containing fewer predators. For a long while, a huge cloud of bezing swarmed over my head, pulling up dust and bits of stone. They were deafening, a huge wall of whirring buzzing and screeching bashing me in the face. I screamed up at them to stop, my voice lost in the noise. So I just hunkered down, curled up and hoped the dust and dirt and filth that I was covered in kept them from seeing me. Sometimes a single one would land, digging around in the dirt with its small little arms, covered in bristles. Bezing up close are curious creatures, full of energy and buzzing sounds. It’s the size of a Wuturo pup, heavily armored, with sharp claws and clear bespeckled wings. Eventually, the scout would fly back up into the main pack, the enterity of the mob of bugs swirling and chattering through the air. It worked in the end, the cloud of death moving on to different hunting grounds. They didn’t even see me, though I suppose if they had I would have been instantly killed.”

Taking a breath, Larcen looked up expectantly, not knowing the reaction to that.

Doc nodded once and clapped his hands once.

“That was good thinking, and an excellent show of patience. Any lesser being would have been found out. Good job.”

Larcen smiled at the praise, happy that he had done well for one part of the trial.

“From there it was simple, finding a lone Wuturo, killing it unseen, the cleansing ritual. My running flowed easily through my legs, without any tightening or cramps crippling me. I was like a shadow in the sand, invisible to all the animals that wandered the grounds. Even the adult Uriel that impeded my way took no notice of me, too busy trying to carry some fearsome beast back to its nest. From there...you know the rest...”

Larcen rushed the last bit out, looking hopefully up at Doc, who was still slowly tapping his fingers, unmoving. He wanted to be recognized, to be praised. His first time alone out there, among the beasts, just another piece of flesh waiting to be devoured.

Why won’t he understand? Why can’t he understand? I only forgot the weapon. I ONLY FORGOT THE WEAP-

Doc stopped tapping his fingers, and took a long draught from his leather pouch.

“It is late, and you have had a long trial. Get the dishes done and rest your mind. We have much work tomorrow.”

With that last remark of finality, he got up from his chair, and climbed down the ladder leading to the basement, placing his drinking pouch on the table as he passed by.

Larcen sighed.

Larcen went about his last tasks, putting away his hunting gear, hanging up his clothes, finished the dishes. When he was done, placing the last dry plate into its place with a sense of relief, he climbed downstairs, stepping down the ladder to the basement. The darkness was welcoming, cool, and all encompassing. Even with Larcen's razor sharp eye sight, he found it difficult to see much of anything. With a yawn, he collapsed on his hut, careful to avoid stubbing his toes on the well as he passed by.

As Larcen rolled over in his bed, Doc quietly breathing in and out across the room, Larcen thought about his home, thought about the creature that he had seen carried off by the Uriel. Was it traveling home, blood pouring out of it as it stomped through the moonlight? What if he had gotten carried off instead of that animal, the warmth on surrounding him, and his stomach full of meat at odds with these thoughts, trying to think of being without a home. Mostly, when he thought of that, he imagined life alone, without the man who treated him like a child. These imaginings were darkened by his fear of the unknown, lacking the support of this all knowing guardian. Would he be able to survive, truly? Casting aside these frightening thoughts, Larcen closed his eyes, and opened his ears. The gentle sounds of the water rippling up the well shaft, the familiar sounds of night filling his mind up to the brink. As he fell into the comfortable darkness, Larcen had one more thought seep through the thickness of his swirling mind.

The wooden plank, sticking out the ground, a swarm of horrible and unmentionable creatures that he had never seen before surrounding it, screeching biting and crying out, pushing against it. On the top of the plank was a length of the darkness itself, reflecting a small section of the moon that shined down sickly on it all. The chorus of the horde rumbled through his head like a chorus of the damned.

Then, without anything more, it all disappeared, and he fell asleep.

## Chapter 8

Aerlyn was afraid.

She looked down at the loaf of bread in her hands, still warm from the baker's ovens that she had snatched it from. For her, for anyone, carrying something like this was without effort. It was a weight soon forgotten as the person stuffed it into their mouth, swallowing piece after piece until it disappeared into their stomach.

For Aerlyn however, the bread held a weight beyond anything she ever carried. It pulled her down, dragging her soles into the ground as she walked. It made her feel heavy with shame. A milky shame that mixed with a low flame in her heart. Her fingers gripped tighter into the bread as she stood silently in the alley way near the bakery she had just escaped from. Her eyes fixed on the scene erupting in front of the store front.

“Well WHERE IS my BREAD?”

A red faced man was absolutely screaming into the baker's face, his arms flailing wildly around his head like a flag caught in the winds. He stood a solid 6 feet tall, towering above everyone. His face, red and sweaty, was babyish, twisted into angry and pouty expressions as he plowed his way through his belligerent one sided argument.

The baker was trying to stay calm, trembling as the harsh words passed through him. The trembling wasn't from fear, but from an anger that addressed everything and everyone around him. He was pissed at the world, at the cards he had been dealt, and at this pig yelling directly into his face.

“Sir, some pebbles have taken to stealing my bread, despite my attempts to stop them. Your bread was one of the items stolen.”

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME? YOU ARE A FUCKING IDIOT. I GUESS YOU CAN'T EXPECT MUCH FROM A TAIL DRAGGER.”

The yazashi baker flushed purple, his eyes slitting with barely concealed anger.

Aerlyn shuddered as the harsh words hit her ears.

This was her fault. She lived in among the pebble children in the lower streets for some time now. Without any place to call home, any source of income, many of them starved to death. The only way they could survive was to steal, and the only way to steal was to put people like this in the firing line. Food was scarce as it is, and taking some from another would only lead to other people getting hurt.

She looked down at the large loaf of bread in her hands, and sighed. She was out of hot water, allowed to live another day due to her willingness to throw others under the bus.

The children never saw that as a bad thing however. When you are hungry, you are hungry. Survival is doing whatever you can to live.

The man continued to yell at the yazashi, pushing his pointer finger, fat and bursting from his scaled fingerless gloves, into his chest.

“THIS IS THE LAST FAILURE THAT I WILL TOLERATE YOU FILTHY MONSTROSITY.”

There was a thud as the man shoved the baker against the wall of his bone and mud house, shattering some of the carefully crafted doodads that hung from the side. Distracted by the confrontation, both of the men failed to see a small child crawl beside the stand, her hand reaching up to grab a pastry stacked on top of the yazashis table.

Aerlyn’s eyes widened.

Fingering the edge of the pastry, trying to knock it into her hand, the yazashi child toppled a pitcher of nectar, which spilled its green liquid onto the man’s expensive clothes, silencing his tirade against the baker.

Silence was paramount, and the world appeared the stand still as both of the parties took in the implications of what had just happened.

## Chapter 8

Sweat poured down Larcen's face as he pushed himself off the ground once again, his hands burning against the sun scorched ground.

Above him, seated on a stool, Doc watched Larcen silently, a small drop of sweat dripping down the side of his face, rolling down his grizzled face.

Doc never exaggerated or forgot his promises, and just like he had said yesterday, Larcen was going to have an exhausting and drawn out day in the sun.

It was high morning, the sun, almost reaching its peak in the sky, arching along the great blue underbelly of the air mother.

"Huh"

With a strained exhale of breath, Larcen pushed himself off the ground again,

