



chapter 1 : new forever



chapter : 1

— new forever —

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Dusk ascends impatiently, emerging as a bloody stain from behind the jagged teeth of a distant horizon. The darkness spreads upward into the sickly blue-green of a wounded sky to surround a dying sun, pushing inch by dogged inch in its conquest of the light.

Lonely and wounded, the dimming sun retreats reluctantly toward the horizon, bleeding sharp purple shadows across the cracked auburn of an endless desert, revealing weather-beaten edges of a four-lane highway in its wake. Abandoned to the elements long ago, the road is little more than a barren path of layered dust and harsh sand, cutting far and away into the blistered landscape of this tortured wasteland. It is distinguishable from the landscape only by its flatness; a void of natural texture traceable to the eye but invisible for all else. It routes through fallen rock and over crumbling dirt, winding past obelisks of stone and straight on into the heart of the growing darkness now fully present at the horizon. A span of the road's length is enclosed on both sides by eroded embankments of hard-packed red clay wrinkled by ancient rains, though the air is dusty and arid and offers no hope of new moisture.

The cracked clay ridges, the deep brown sandstone littering the vista, the stubborn vegetation — all begging for relief that does not ever come. Though as the sun sinks slowly into the ground, the victory of nightfall begins to transform the unbearable temperatures of day into the frigid snap of an opposite misery.

A tiny beetle-like creature emerges from a crack in the road, drawn out by the invitation of shadow, and it scuttles instinctively toward the edges of where the blistering concrete meets the rivulets of clay wall. Though in a brisk flash of feathers, a desert *ayer* plucks the creature off the ground and with a jerk of its head the beetle is gone.

The *ayer* lands a few paces from the beetle's home and judders its head looking for signs of new meals. After a moment of prodding the flying creature notices a beetle-sized shadow begin to flicker against the concrete and thus turns excitedly to investigate. The *ayer* gives chase to the trembling shape bouncing along its haphazard course but stops upon witness of several new flickering shadows scattering in each direction. One of the beetle-sized morsels bumps into its foot and the *ayer* pecks at it without hesitation. *Just a stone*. He drops it, confused by these false feasts as they scurry to and fro. With several more attempts the *ayer* catches and releases pebble after pebble, unable to eat this frustrating prey.

Without warning a thunderous beast explodes forth from behind a bend, pouncing upon

the collection of pebbles and scattering them into every direction. The ayer scarcely produces a single flap of its wings before the motorcycle is already long passed, and the ayer instead just sits, staring — first at the shrinking shape of this odd creature, and then back to the ground where it pursues the still-dancing pebbles hoping that one of them will now in fact be a beetle.

The ayer plucks and disposes of several failed attempts when another unexpected explosion of motorcycles violently overtakes the roadway, speeding past in three pairs. The ayer has had too much excitement, and instead returns to its high rocky perch far above the roadway, back where the world makes sense.

The three pairs of motorcycles give chase to the first with coordinated, lethal precision. Wordlessly, the driver on the left of the last pair falls behind, allowing his mate to take the lead and the two align, one behind the other. The driver of the trailing cycle reaches forward with his left hand and presses several buttons on his instrument panel activating and deactivating several unmarked lights.

Of the six cyclists, all but one is encased in full-body, metal-grey battle gear with tightly laced, black, calf-height riot boots and full-fingered padded gloves. They are extremely well protected and inconceivably hot in the still-lingering desert sun. Their heads are likewise entirely enclosed by identical rust-colored helmets shaped like hexagonal ‘cubes’ with curious facets and non-specific edges. The corners of each plane are angled to deflect wind or perhaps a physical blow, and near the back of the cranium, a lateral, ridge-like protrusion juts behind and away from the head like a singular ear, creating an unusual elongated shape. The front of the helmet similarly thrusts outward, emulating the snout of a non-specific face with a vent where the mouth likely hides. Above the mechanical muzzle gleams a solid black visor spanning the full width of the face in a panoramic view, but revealing nothing within. An ominous black surface, the highly reflective veneer is impenetrable for light and is unsettling to gaze upon. They are all of them dusted in a coat of reddish powder and sand from many miles of desert travel.

Among these figures remains the mysterious sixth of the rear, whom does not appear much like others at all. He is indeed masculine and large, in some ways like the others, but unlike his team, his flesh is exposed and wears no head covering, shirt or jacket. A straw-like collection of sandy-brown fibers whip chaotically to the wind’s amusement atop his head, which is shaved down to the flesh along the sides. He sits on the motorcycle as the others do, but with two much larger legs however clad in the same combat-ready pants and heavy jack-boots as the five proceeding figures — his only clothing — and he commands the handlebars with two mighty arms. His hands are also unprotected; gnarly and clawed with bloodied knuckles and slash marks that travel up to his biceps and into his shoulders. His bare-chested skin is scaly and chiefly a deep moss-grey with a dirty wheat-yellow patch that runs down his neck and over the full length of his chest and abdomen. Everywhere, he is covered in fresh wounds of all varieties: scratches, cuts, bruises and at least one apparent gun shot or puncture near his left shoulder that weeps alarmingly. Along his back are two parallel rows of bony scutes that trail from just above his enormous scapulae down the length and disappearing into the waist of his pants to re-emerge through a custom opening in his uniform atop a wide, thick tail as long as the creature is tall. The appendage sticks straight out from behind the motorcycle like a rigid limb of a tree, unbent by wind or momentum. The shape of the grey creature’s head is similar to the manufactured design of his colleagues’ helmets, though he wears no covering of his own. His face, strikingly unfriendly, features the long, chiseled snout of something ancient. His mouth is closed, but the pointed blades of teeth

are still evident, sticking out along the outer edges of his long muzzle. His purses his yellow-white eyes into furrows deeply creased with an irritated focus, and with no ears to speak of his hair whips unimpeded in the strong wind. He peers back up from the instrument panel of his motorcycle with razor-thin slits of his irises, fixated on his prey and an unmistakable lust for battle.

Some distance ahead of the pack, a forlorn pair of riders sit atop a lone motorcycle that sputters along at a disappointing pace. This motorcycle is older, and its maintenance questionable. It has performed dutifully for its guests thus far, but it doesn't have much more to give and it certainly cannot compare to the state-of-the-art machines that follow. The riders guess at this, and they despair.

The driver is similar in appearance to the shirtless grey creature in pursuit though smaller in frame than he, and at least two heads shorter. The texture of his skin appears rough and ashy, absorbing the light and masking the contours of his amorphous build. Unprotected brown-green skin hints at a dappling of fine scales and plates that form a system of organic armor. Slightly longer sandy brown strands of rigid fiber flap in unison against his temples as if made of sturdy cord. And he too exhibits a thick tail that is shorter than that of the Grey's, instead equivalent to the full length of perhaps his arm but with the same pointed scutes. Above that, high on his back, is the hard carapace of a protective shell. As wide as his shoulders, the covering protects his full width and originates near the deltoids resolving just above the iliac crest of his low-middle back. It is an irregular oval shape with angry, bony ridges along the perimeter that come to larger points near the base, with three parallel rows of tiny sail-like fins tracing its dome. Combined with a dark green-black color, the shape is altogether foreboding, reflecting less light even than his thirsty skin.

The Brown creature is definitely something akin to the Grey behind him; almost the same, but with features altogether distinctive. Though the skin of the Brown is thick and rugged, it is as equally abused by battle. Where the Grey displays only a handful of well-placed battle marks, the smaller Brown's skin is tortured. Long stripes of fresh blood stream along his slender, muscular arms originating from several deep gashes and slices. The blood flies away from the wound with the gusts of open-air travel and splatters against the sides of his shell, atomizing in the wind. Along his chest is a plastron; several overlapping ochre plates of fluted bone cover his abdomen providing the illusion of armor, and it has clearly been used as such recently. Both the plastron and the carapace exhibit deep craters of several high impacts. Like the depressions caused by a meteorite crashed into a planet's surface, displaced bone and flesh form high-impact rings around bloody pits oozing small but steady streams of blood. Over his left breast, directly above his heart, two similar attacks have cracked a chunk of the plastron away. Like a fingernail ripped from its base, the flesh below is traumatized and sensitive, deep pink and raw but not quite bleeding. He must be in tremendous pain, though his reptilian face does not convey it. The shape of his face is smooth, sharp and dragon-like; featureless apart for the steep angles near his jawline and eye sockets. The snout protrudes forward into a soft triangle with chiseled planes forming a hard-edged cone, like a cylindrical rod shaved to a near point. With his mouth closed, you cannot entirely determine its location save for a slender line along the jaw concluding at the front into a sharp beak. He does little more than wince as the wind and blooming darkness trouble his vision. His wind-whipped eyes are watering to the point of near-blindness, but he grips and flexes the handle bars, stealing everything he can get out of the motorcycle.

Behind him, scared and hysterical, sits his involuntary passenger clawing deep into his shoulders. Similar in size to the leather-clad drivers in pursuit, she lacks the presence of both the Brown or the Grey and is in fact so scared she has withered into the smallest position possible on the back of the motorcycle's already tiny seat. Her limbs are long and lean, and rather than scales or greenish skin, her unprotected flesh features instead an earthy, golden fur that fades in color to a burnt-umber near her clenched paw-like hands, upon which are five black pads for each digit and a larger black pad on each palm. By comparison, she is quite petite and young, though it is hard to tell her age in the classic sense. Her form is naturally feminine with slightly rounded hips, a lithe frame, and small breasts, yet carries an awkwardness in proportion that suggests adolescence. Her long and auburn hair tumbles madly in the wind, made worse by the constant panning of her head. With her eyes shut tight, she grimaces in fear and anxiety. Her face matches the attractive awkwardness of her body, where soft curves of an adult brow run shallow into the stumpy muzzle of a child. A soft black nose sucks air manically above pursed dark lips, and long whiskers press firmly against the plump mounds of her mouth in the wind. Her electric blue eyes flash open for a fleeting moment only to be hidden again by charcoal lashes as the motorcycle skips frighteningly across cracks and hollows in the road. She projects her pointed ears up defiantly through her hair, and the wind is so fierce against them that it is clearly an act of forceful will that she keeps them so erect — no doubt in paranoid surveillance of the cyclists in pursuit.

She wears a simple, white, short-sleeved cotton shirt that is featureless except for the stains of red dust and the printed black mark over her left breast. Eight conjoined ovals set into three rows stacked vertically — three dots, then two, then three more.

As the motorcycle rips through the last moments of dusk, the cooling winds tug and push against them both, threatening to rip the loose-fitting cloth from her body. Both she and Brown wear pants made of dark denim and black leather boots. Like the shirt however, her boots are far too big. She holds onto the driver's shoulders with paralyzing desperation. Her clawed hands hook into the soft tissue between the driver's neck and his shell, yet he does not protest. Snaked uncomfortably around her is a long golden-brown furred tail with a dark brown tip as thick as her arm and as long as her leg. She contorts it tightly around herself trying to keep as much of her body as possible within the imagined bubble of safety that is the space precisely defined by her seat.

The pair ride along listening only to the uneasy rumble of the failing motorcycle and the blasting wind that hides all else. The girl can hear more than that, however. She can hear the growing roars of the motorcycles behind them. She can even count their number. She hears six distinctly same-but-different engines racing ever so slightly out of sync with each other. She can hear the rubber tires of the twelve wheels *squelching* and tearing against the concrete. She can hear the stones and pebbles under their wheels *plinking* and *klunking* far into the road behind them. She can hear the occasional *spluts* of the driver's blood breaking against his shell. She can hear the sounds of ayers chirping somewhere out in the distance chasing beetles. She can hear her heart thundering.

She wishes she was an ayer.

She wishes for safety.

She wishes to be anywhere but here.

Earlier today, the far-off blanket of nightfall held such promise. Everything was going more or less as it was meant to. At least, as well as their shoddy plan would allow. But then, the unexpected. Resistance from their own kind, *from their own friends*. And now they are caught in a new battle no one was prepared to wage.

So much chaos. She thinks. I'm so scared.

They need to forget. To move on. But this stolen motorcycle cannot flee fast enough. They need more time. They need more distance. *To get away. To hide. From all that chases.*

Their pursuers gain quickly. The Brown knows the battle will be upon them soon. But his passenger is not a fighter. The girl with the Red hair is too young. And he's still too weak from the last fight.

This will end badly, he thinks.

The girl with the red hair claws deeper into his shoulders in fear. In anger. In anticipation.

It won't be long now.

"They're gaining on us *they're gaining on us THE'YRE GAINING ON US!*" Red shrieks with obvious terror that chokes her words. Her voice is thin but the timbre high and scratchy due to equal parts of anxiety and screaming wind. She spins her head back and forth between the road ahead and the motorcyclists behind them, and notices how the separation between the two shrinks with each observation.

"I know!" Brown belts out in response, not masking his own concern or anger. His raspy voice also strangled by the wind.

"Can't you go any *faster?!?*" She pleads, hoping that maybe he will do something miraculous.

"Too heavy!" he guesses. "There's nothing!"

"You've got to do *something!* Do you even know *what you're doing?!?*" She provokes desperately.

"I'm trying!" he coughs. The fast-moving wind screams down his unprotected nostrils and mouth each time he speaks.

"Try harder! *They're four breaths away!*"

The Grey creature at the rear of the pursuing gang presses a radio transmitter to his reptilian lips and growls into it with hatred on his breath. Squeezing the button, he hails his comrades.

"In four seconds..." he begins in a dark acerbic voice, crackling over the short frequency. *Three... Two...* "We're here. End this!"

With that, all five of the proceeding figures before him reach to their legs, un-holster their side-arms, and take aim. The two figures in front crack off several shots, which echo

deafeningly off of the clay walls that surround the whole of them, making it impossible for Brown or Red to tell from where the sound originates. In a fright, Brown looks up, tracing the sound of the gunshots to the ledges far above, knowing that to be an unlikely source. Seeing nothing, he twists the throttle harder, but the motorcycle has nothing left to give. Not entirely knowing what he's doing, he downshifts accidentally and the motorcycle revolts like a bucking horse, nearly toppling the girl. He quickly corrects, but the gaffe costs several moments of freedom, closing the gap all the more. The girl shouts in protest.

"Faster, *faster*, *FASTER!*" demands the girl with the red hair.

"Shut up, *shut up*, *SHUT UP!*" the driver replies with solid-voiced conviction.

The motorcycle rounds another bend in the road and suddenly the clay-dirt walls are gone. The desert road opens to expose a vast landscape of carved sandstone mountains with burnt orange valleys, layered in dark browns, pinks and blood-reds. Startled eyes lift from the endless desert floor in dense clouds of speckled brown-black. The setting sun has nearly extinguished itself deep into the horizon behind them, and the midnight purples and indigos of shadow paint the landscape in magnificent, eerie strokes. Beyond that, a starry sky unlike anything either of them have ever seen. A swirling soup of thick black and plum punctured by millions of tiny white-blue dots — like grains of sand caught in a high breeze — frozen in a swirl against the night sky. Together they witness this tapestry, interpreting its symbols very differently.

As their motorcycle crests a small hill and launches into the air, the moment seems to expand into a lifetime.

As they glide air borne, Red receives hope. She perceives the enormity of the world as if for the first time, having had no idea it was this wide or beautiful. Even now, *especially now*, in the midst of perilous danger, she understands. So many places yet to take in and explore. So many experiences unfulfilled. She needs more time.

The motorcycle crashes back to the pavement with a bone-compressing scrape of sparks and dust and Brown recovers with regretful rage. He sees the enormity of the world as he knew he'd find it, having told so many it would be wide and beautiful. But they did not listen. Even now, *especially now*, in the midst of perilous danger, he laments. So many places he will never get to see. So many experiences he will miss out on. He should have planned his time better. They should have listened sooner.

The cyclists behind have closed the gap substantially and in so doing have re-aligned their formation. The road has opened up enough to allow four of them to ride abreast, and they each take aim. In turn, they crack out several shots when they can, aiming at him, at her, at the tires, at whatever they feel will give them the opportunity they need. Aiming is tricky in the dark, on a bumpy road, with one hand. The second cyclist from the left releases three rapid-fire shots, and the third creates a scream. Blood trails behind the leading bike and the girl topples forward, clawing deeper into Brown's flesh, her blood splattering onto several of the motorcyclist's windscreens and visors. Her left arm is badly wounded, shot through, and the bullet ricocheted into the driver's shell forming another lesser crater.

Brown's despair manifests into a host of desperate strategies. He's come so far and now stands at the precipice of inevitable failure. The cruelty of this irony crushes him. Anger

and frustration bubble up as a dark fantasy full of spiteful rage and violent self-sacrifice. He decides that if their chances become too slim, then he will make the following moments as chaotic as possible. Even if it means throwing himself into the fire.

Brown unlatches the girl's paw which is now hooked sharply into his rib cage. He places it on the throttle of the handlebars and instructs her to hold firm.

"Hold on tight!" he commands, "*Really tight!* I'm going to spin around!" he warns. "Ready?!"

After a brief moment of silence she nods several times in very quick succession but not opening her eyes.

Still sitting in front, Brown swings his left arm around to the way back, grabbing onto the right edge of the bike's seat, behind the girl. Then with his right arm, he grabs the left side.

"On 'three', lean far to the right and scoot forward! Understand?" He instructs.

No response.

"*Understand?!*" he repeats. Red nods again in quick succession, her eyes still tightly closed.

"One ... Two ..."

She clenches.

"*Three!*" he shouts, kicking his right leg over the front of the bike simultaneously pulling himself into a side-long spin over the left side of the cycle. The girl's eyes shoot open and she ducks, pulling herself forward awkwardly onto the seat leaning far to the right. Her weight is not nearly enough to counter-balance his thrust and the bike nearly topples over. In a bizarre and dangerous gamble of grace unexpected in a creature of his build, Brown manages to successfully trade spots with the girl, pushing her further onto the seat. His shifting weight swings momentum back to the right and helps correct the bike's tilt. Control is now in Red's very unsteady paws. She is in horrendous pain and not fully able to open her eyes; and without Brown shielding the wind, her new role as driver is much harsher. She manages to keep the bike on pace for now, though it will be a very short window.

Brown is now the passenger, facing backward on the bike, glaring at the cyclists behind him who discharge several more shots that strike the concrete and muffler near the rear wheel. Brown fantasizes about jumping off of the bike; he could probably land on one of the closest pursuers, maybe steal their motorcycle or knock a few of them down. It would be a very painful and risky scheme, but he no longer cares. For now he reaches to the front of his pants and withdraws a handgun that he had tucked in the waist-belt. He has no idea if the weapon is even loaded, having found it in the compartment of the motorcycle upon its theft. He knows to flick the locking button on its side as he's observed before, and in finding the trigger he can only get his forefinger into the tight guard surrounding the mechanism; the hole is too tight.

With a brief spin of his head, he screams back to the girl, "What's your name?!" yelling

over the cacophony of motorcycle engines. He fires off three defensive shots in utter failure, each going wildly into the night air. This is harder than he thought.

“Look out!” the closest cyclists warns aloud, “He’s armed!”

“Wha-*WHAT?*” Comes the girl’s pained and bitter response, shaking the motorcycle with the distraction.

“*Your name!*” Brown repeats, firing another failed attempt that strikes only the pavement.

The four motorcycles fan apart slightly, spreading their mass.

“Turnt—” the girl with the red hair manages, hitting a bump in the road just then jolting the bike fiercely and forcing her jaws to clench with a fright. She instinctively thrusts her injured arm forward from her lap to the handle bar to catch the swerving bike, but causes such intense pain that she feels as though shot a second time. She mewls loudly with the torment and winces to push out new tears.

“*Turnteyl?!*” He completes in ignorance of her suffering.

“Y-Yeah...”

“Are you okay?” He interrupts self-importantly. “Where were you hit?”

“No!” she screams. “Yes!” She howls. “Muh-My arm!” Her words shake out like pebbles, spoken mostly through clenched teeth and pressed lips. The wound is bad.

Concerned, and overtaken with a new problem, Brown glances back quickly but cannot make out much. After another review of the pursuers, he glances back to Turnteyl a second time for a better look and catches sight of her arm. *Rot*, he grieves. “Can you hold the bike?”

“N-NO!” She protests. “Ah’ can’t feel my— s’much pain! Take it back! Please!”

“We’ll get out of this — I promise!” he lies. And with that, he unleashes a melee of bullets at the cyclists. Three, four more shots, and then a *clik, clik, clik*. He manages to waste every opportunity on the ground or into the air despite his best efforts. Through sheer misfortune, one cyclist falls when a bullet grazes the side of his helmet cracking off a chunk. The near-direct hit startles the cyclist and he overcorrects his bike. In a horrible flip, the bike tumbles end-over-end throwing the rider into the road and the Grey creature who rides immediately behind can only run him over.

Brown, still facing backward, looks on aghast and can’t tell if the impact was an accident or intentional. But his gun is empty, and he knows what that brings next. With their defenses gone, he resorts to his desperation. He turns to the girl, and stuffs the gun into the back of her pants, the pain of her arm masking her surprise.

“You know where we’re headed,” Brown states, “... right?” he confirms.

After a moment of silence, Turnteyl answers with a ginger “no?” And with that, Brown leaps from the bike. “Look to the roadside!” He directs.

The motorcycle immediately scoots forward with renewed momentum, relieved of Brown's heavy weight. Unprepared, Turnteyl's speed increases tremendously, giving a start to the girl who was not anticipating the burst, but leaving the pursuing cyclists blessedly behind.

Brown scarcely lands on both feet, falling into a rolling tumble that fills the space between his landing and the cyclists with a *thumpa-karak-thumpa-karak-thumpa-karak*. He stands, dizzy, with fresh scrapes and bruises and charges the pursuers. With one of the four cyclists felled, the three remaining on the frontline crash down on Brown like a metal wave. The first and third cyclist on the outer edges pay him no attention and continue past in hunt of the girl. The middle cyclist attempts to hook a bewildered Brown as he passes with his arm but misses, speeding off instead to trail behind the others. As the fourth cyclist approaches with Grey in tow, Brown measures his moment carefully.

The blinding glow of the headlights against the near-black sky create a milky aura that makes judging distances impossible. Though Brown detects a slight change in the trajectory of the front bike as it barrels down upon him, swerving slightly to his right. In response, Brown strafes to the left with his arm crooked and catches the cyclist below the helmet immediately in the neck. The cyclist's broken body falls in-place to the ground as his bike ghost-rides off into the side of the road. The impact nearly takes Brown's arm off and he spins in place absorbing the momentum.

Immediately, Grey is upon him, and for this there is no plan. All Brown can do is hope for an unlikely advantage. In a stolen sidelong glance, he watches the two bikers that ignored him diminish into the horizon in pursuit of Turnteyl. He was expecting them to ignore her, and he's ashamed in himself that they didn't.

She has no chance.

Before turning back to Grey, he manages to see also that the third biker has looped back toward him and is re-approaching from the other direction. Brown is caught between the seasoned fury of Grey and the unknown skill of Grey's soldier. Regardless of skill, they're both armed which is the primary concern. *Two down*, Brown thinks *but four to go*, and two of those are now far away.

When he looks back finally at Grey's oncoming headlight, he attempts the same hooked arm clothesline that ensnared the previous biker, but Grey is not so easily beaten. With spots in his vision, Brown instead becomes a victim of the same maneuver. Grey's arm is like a solid tree trunk when it smashes at high velocity straight into the smaller creature's midsection. The sudden blow carries Brown a good distance down the road before he is released and sent into a tumbling lateral spin along the concrete and ultimately into the dust of the roadside.

He does not get up.

Grey rolls to the wayside and parks his bike with a slow and confident trundle, taking his time in cutting off the engine. His partner returns completely, rolling up to be alongside the much larger Grey. Sitting there in silence apart from the idling low purr of his motorcycle, the air is still and quiet. It is only them now. The helmeted cyclist stares at Brown but makes no obvious gestures, his hands still resting on the handlebars, his feet planted firmly on the concrete. His helmeted head completely unreadable and

expressionless. Like a pair of black specters against the dark sky, both figures loom in silent, shared thought.

After a long moment, the partner turns his gaze slowly from the collapsed form of Brown to Grey on his right, and then back to Brown. With that, Grey sighs deeply, filling his lungs and then exhaling slowly. Even his breath sounds like a growl.

Grey finally stands from his bike seat and lifts his leg over the bike, setting the kickstand down with a heavy kick. His dragon-like tail snakes silently behind him and comes to rest in a slight curl just before touching the ground. He does not acknowledge his partner, but simultaneously appears assured that he will do whatever is commanded. For now, Grey has resumed control.

The helmeted figure once more looks upon Grey, checks his watch, and then grows outwardly impatient but makes no motion to assist or remove his helmet. Grey, deliberately ignorant of his partner's disdain, responds by digging into the compartment of his motorcycle to pull out a package of cigarettes and a lighter. He chooses one from the box, sticks it into the crook of his long snout, flicks the lighter, and puffs his vice into life.

"Sir, I—" begins his partner.

"*SIT*," Grey hisses, pointing a savage finger without even virtue of a sidelong glance. The lesser figure slowly sits.

An awkward silence.

After three puffs of his cigarette, Grey places the package back into the vehicle compartment, turns slowly, and takes his first movements towards his fallen foe who has remained motionless this short while. He approaches the slumped form of Brown with a half-dozen heavy-booted intentional steps that *scrunch* and *tish* the gravel as he walks. When he is within arm's reach he bends down and sits on his ankles with his long tail curling slightly around him, resting on the ground for added balance. Even when doubled-over, Grey is nearly larger than his standing colleague. With gun in hand, he uses it to brush the hair out of Brown's face and utters a *tsk, tsk*. He observes blood and saliva leaking from his open mouth and reptilian nostrils, and his eyes are half open but unfocused. Grey holds his hand near Brown's open mouth, testing for breath. After counting to twenty in his mind, he places two fingers instead on his carotid artery, pressing hard into his neck and again waits. After another count of twenty he smiles wryly. *There you are*, he thinks. Again using the gun, he raps three times on Brown's forehead near his temple, noticing no movement in his eyes.

"*Shell-back, Shell-back, Shell-back*," he taunts in a long deliberate delivery, stringing each coarse syllable into a full breath apiece. He puffs again on his cigarette, blowing the smoke into the open air above his head.

"Well, here we are," he muses with discernable agitation in his voice.

S'celbak doesn't move.

"You've gotten us into some hot mess, haven't you?" inquires Grey, his words low and mostly inaudible to his partner whom remains steadfast at the road's edge, four lanes

away. Grey's tone, though dark and raspy, is almost friendly in his address.

Still nothing.

"I am so tired," Grey continues, his voice becoming more audible, poking the gun barrel into S'celbak's temple, "and so hungry," he pokes again harder, "and so ... *rotting*... *ANNOYED*," punctuating each word with a firmer and more aggressive thrust to his rival's head, "I want to just ... *squeeze this rotting trigger so badly*..." he threatens through clenched teeth, pushing S'celbak's head firmly into the dirt with the barrel of the gun.

With that, his partner quickly stands in apparent concern and Grey immediately points to him furiously and growls, "SI'DOWN."

His partner slowly returns to his sitting position, but protests quietly.

"We have orders, ...*sir*. Very *specific* orders..."

The hesitation before "sir" is not lost on the angry grey behemoth.

Grey immediately stands and points the gun at the helmeted figure who in turn throws his hands up. "Don't you *dare*!" Grey threatens, his cigarette falling to the ground. "Orders!" he mocks. "Don't you *ever* rottin' talk to me about '*orders*'!" And then he returns to S'celbak pressing the gun harder into his neck in frustration. "D'ya hear that, Shell? 'Orders!' *We* — have — *orders*. I would absolutely *hate* to violate '*the orders*'!"

With both hands, he forces S'celbak onto his domed back forcing his head to dangle backward comically. Grey retrieves his cigarette and pops it way back onto his reptilian lips. He stands up fully and his tail slowly sways side to side once before resting in a stationary curl.

"You look absolutely ridiculous," he says, sneering down at his beaten opponent, and turns away.

"You," Grey commands with a sudden pivot to his helmeted partner who jumps from his bike with a start, and begins to walk over. "Scan 'im," Grey directs. "Call it in."

The biker walks over tentatively, slowing his pace as he nears, and kneels into the gravel on the far side of S'celbak, furthest from the road. He pulls from a pouch at his side an alcohol pad and a flashlight. With a quick twist of the flashlight's cap, he activates a tiny ultraviolet light and scans it over S'celbak's arm. Near the bicep he finds the invisible tattoo he was looking for, glowing bright white, composed of odd lines and squares. He pulls back the outer layer of his jacket on his right arm revealing a device strapped to his wrist like a watch. He presses it to the ultraviolet mark on S'celbak's skin and after a brief moment it chirps once. Then twice more. After another moment the 'watch' produces a long whine signaling completion. He turns the device over and reads the screen.

```
SUB:  fi00027
NAM:  [undefined]
AKA:  "shellback"
SPE:  homo novus; macrochelys temminckii
KIN:  tera
CMN:  alligator_snapping_turtle
```

```
DOB: [undefined]
BAT: 1992.06.22_18:55:53
WAR: mult.refract.see_file.
DOS# [undefined]
TER: [undefined]
FTU: [undefined]
...
[Error 810: disconnection]\
[Error 404: disconnection]\
[Error 520: disconnection]\
```

“He’s been scanned,” he says with a new depth of irritation in his voice, pressing several buttons on the watch’s side. “Nothing. There’s *nothing* on this guy,” he says, slapping the unit hard. “And now I’ve lost signal... Christ, he’s old. *Original*.”

Grey does not respond. He walks back to his motorcycle puffing on his cigarette.

“What are we going to do about Millan and Rove?” the partner asks with extreme concern, turning off the light and tucking it back into his pouch.

“No idea,” Grey responds lowly, clearly upset. “I have no *rottin*’ idea.” He drags a long puff and turns away. “They shouldn’t have shot the girl,” he says quietly into the ground.

Silent and unsatisfied, the kneeling cyclist then tears open the alcohol pad and removes the cloth swatch within. “Cutter and Booth?” he continues.

“They’re on their own ... for now. I’m sure they’ve already caught up with the girl. She was in rough shape. Shouldn’t be too much trouble.” His words seem full of genuine concern, which are a stark departure from the past few moments. His partner wonders for whom the concern was intended.

“You *ran him over*, S’carpto’ott,” his partner says in a low voice, swabbing S’celbak’s left deltoid, high above the now-invisible tattoo.

“Don’t you think I *know that?!* ” the *krokody* roars. His words are higher pitched, less growled, and full of anxiety that hint at previous conversations. He paces faster back and forth, taking long drags on his cigarette. “He fell right in front of me. I couldn’t avoid ‘im.”

Another long silence with another long puff.

His partner watches the device attached to his arm and continues to wait. “I can’t get a signal out here. We’re too far. I don’t know his dosage or any of his stats.”

“Try again,” S’carpto’ott says.

“I’ve been trying. Over and over. We’re too far,” he says, growing frustrated, “we were too far *twenty rotten miles* ago.”

“Is he scanned then, or not?” S’carpto’ott quips back.

“Yes, he’s *scanned*, but the data is still on the BAM* — we’re not picking up any signals this far out, *and I don’t know his dosage*,” he repeats, clearly annoyed.

(**Biological Asset Management*)

“So... who’s coming to collect?” The krokody says, pacing back over to the far side of the road.

“No one. I’ll try again from my bike’s transponder...its got a stronger signal. But we can’t wait; not in his condition. I’m going to have to wing it. What’s *your* dosage?”

S’carpto’ott snaps his head back to his partner with a vile and angry expression.

“*None of your rotten business, Ritter,*” he jeers, incensed, his voice another horrifying growl.

“Is it *higher or lower* than 3.4 cc’s?” his partner presses undeterred.

“You rottin’ piece of —” S’carpto’ott vexes, but is interrupted.

“—If I give a mammal-type more than 3.5, they go into cardiac arrest. If I give a reptile-type less than needed, they’ll seize. There are only four reptiles with us, and you’re all different. You’re bigger than him but it will provide the range I need. *I need to know.*”

The krokody closes his mouth but still bares his teeth with a dark scowl. After a moment he takes the cigarette out of his mouth and pitches it angrily aside from waist level, the smoldering ash carving an amber arc through the night air.

“7.8,” the krokody hisses under his breath.

“Holy *Christ,*” his partner exclaims, “I don’t have that much and you’re way out of norms.” He quickly tucks the first vial back into his pack and retrieves an alternative. “I’m going to have to improvise. I’m putting him out.”

“He’s *already* ‘out’,” S’carpto’ott says, his previous tone of concern evaporating into sarcasm.

“I need him steady, I need him passive. He’s in really bad shape. I’ve gotta stabilize his system and get him back to the center for proper dosing and treatment,” he dictates with a growing note of condescension in his voice.

“Fine, Ritter. Whatever,” S’carpto’ott quips, starting his motorcycle again with a single long rev of the engine. “Just lock the rotter up before he tries something else.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Ritter predicts. “Based on his pupils he’s got a concussion and could be slipping into a coma without his meds. He may not even walk again after that hit to his back — shell or not.”

S’carpto’ott ignores the critique and deflects. “Just secure him,” he warns. “He’s a *tera*,... a snapper,” he adds, revving his bike. “He snaps. And one of us needs to re-connect with Cutter and Booth. I guess that’s me, then?”

Ritter does not immediately respond. The tension and power struggle between the two is becoming awkward and difficult to navigate.

With another swipe of cloth along S’celbak’s flesh, the partner pulls a syringe from his pack, sticks it quickly into the second vial, and pulls back on the plunger. Placing the vial

back into his pack, he flicks the needle three times and releases some of the fluid into the air. With a quick stab he plunges it hilt-deep into S'celbak's scaly flesh, and the resistance slightly bends the thin needle. With his thumb on the plunger he begins to apply pressure.

"Fine. Yes," the partner concedes, looking up in delayed response. "I'll be okay here. He'll be under for at least eight —"

Then, suddenly and rapidly, S'celbak strikes the kneeling cyclist's chest with an open right hand sending him sailing backward, unprepared. S'celbak pulls out the needle, rolls over onto his foe and with his free hand rips the helmet off preparing to jab the needle into his neck. Ritter screams in protest and tries to claw at S'celbak as the needle thrusts downward, but S'celbak stops just shy of his neck in utter horror. The wild-eyed creature staring up at him is like nothing he ever imagined and takes him completely off guard. Through the irregular light of the motorcycle's glare, he meets first its tiny, sunken brown eyes spread wide with terror, and ovular ears, stuck to the side of his head in a queer lateral arrangement. The figure flails its arms between them, trying to fight S'celbak off and making it difficult to see his face in detail. Through the assault, S'celbak determines his flesh to be a blotchy red-brown with short fur sprouting in uneven patches around the perimeter of its square-ish head, but cannot make out his kind.

Almost immediately after knocking the Kyper over, the krokody began running back at his foe; with heavy footsteps crushing the gravel in long, quick strides. S'celbak panics and sticks the needle into the creature's neck and plunges its contents fully. Ritter moans as the chemical burns its way into his bloodstream, and the krokody arrives too late to save him, not that he was entirely trying. He leaps at S'celbak full force, pushing him away. Ritter manages to pull the needle out, but the syringe is empty when he looks at it. He tosses it to the side, placing a hand to the puncture and rolls onto his front trying to stand. In a wobble, he manages to erect himself and he stumbles toward his motorcycle, falling to his knees once along the way. He hurriedly digs through his bike's storage compartment finally locating another vial but as he brings it up to his face to read it, the letterforms become blurry and he struggles to maintain consciousness. The vial tumbles from his weak fingers and falls to the concrete with a rebounding *clink-clinkclink*. His eyes roll back and he crumples forward, hitting his head on the bike before coming to rest on the concrete. The krokody and tera meanwhile have locked into hand-to-hand combat, rolling down the embankment and out of the illumination of the motorcycle's headlight, into the night's shadows away from the road.

S'celbak and the krokody wrestle over dusty mounds of dried brush and small cacti, crashing together into a monolith of stacked boulders. Both land in different positions, facing opposite poles, and S'carpto'ott still manages to get the tera into a headlock, though the angle is bizarre and his grip poor. S'celbak brings a knee up to meet S'carpto'ott's head but misses. S'carpto'ott dodges and exchanges his grip from around S'celbak's head for a stronger grip around his leg, pinning S'celbak in a very awkward position. Had S'carpto'ott been calmer, this could have been his winning move but in his rage and long-lost temper, he instead picks the tera off of the ground by his leg and throws him into the monolith, causing dust and sand to shake free from the cracks. The tera smashes into the stones shell-first, which absorbs much of the impact but still hurts tremendously. He crumples to the rocky floor once more with enough time and energy to return himself to a position of all-fours before S'carpto'ott begins his second assault. S'celbak rolls back into a squat, sitting on his feet. His strength dwindles; some of the cyclist's drug made it into his system and he feels sluggish. His view of S'carpto'ott,

backlit by a very faint glow of the distant motorcycle, has doubled with vertigo. S'carpto'ott's dark skin absorbs the moonlight almost fully, and the blue-black glow of the night sky is not enough to provide sufficient contrast. S'celbak wobbles a bit in place, trying to stand. He gets as far as a half-crouch before he hears S'carpto'ott engage his sidearm.

S'celbak stops, still in a crouch, and slowly places his hands up. He returns begrudgingly to a kneeling position, keeping his hands palm forward beside his temples. He can't see S'carpto'ott very well anyway so he just looks to the ground and closes his eyes, waiting.

S'carpto'ott points his weapon at S'celbak's head and takes several long breaths, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

"I told you ... this was never going to work," S'carpto'ott wheezes, wiping his mouth with his free hand.

"What *ROT* is that?!" S'celbak screams, gesturing at the collapsed shape of the cyclist in the road.

"They're not the enemy, S'celbak."

"*Of course they are! And what aren't you telling me?! What do you know?*" the tera snarls, his words spewing out with anxiety.

"He's *not* your enemy, *S'celbak*," S'carpto'ott sneers in response. "You did this to yourself! You did all of this to yourself! You're wrong, here. You've been so wrapped up in the conspiracies you can't see straight. What you've done is never going to work out. You've doomed hundreds."

"Yes," the tera says with a sarcastic proud grin, his head still pointed down, eyes closed.

"Yes?" S'carpto'ott asks with curiosity.

"Yes," S'celbak repeats. "And yet here we are," he concludes, spreading his arms a little wider as if to present the backdrop of their environment as evidence.

"What rot is *that* supposed to mean? This is *not* free! *Or safe!* We aren't ready!" S'carpto'ott disputes, waving the gun in small circles at nothing in particular. "Just because you and I can survive for a while in the Blight does not mean the rest of them can! What about the girl? Do you even know who she is?"

"She would have been *fine* if your Kypers hadn't *SHOT HER!*" S'celbak screams.

"NO ONE is *fine* out here! You wanted out and now we're out! Here we are! And now what? *Hope?* Is that the final plan? Is that where we got after *eight cycles* of planning? *Hope for the best?*"

"*The Blight*," S'celbak sneers with sarcasm. "I don't fear the Blight. It's controlled my life long enough. And the longer our planning took, the more confidence and kin we lost. We had to force it," S'celbak states, looking up to a much blurrier view of S'carpto'ott. His vision worsens.

“There was *a reason* we lost confidence, S’celbak. The reason *was you!*” S’carpto’ott lowers his gun to a slight angle, his arm still locked straight. “You were sounding more and more like that insane *laserta*, Reyzorklaw, with is evil plans and violence! You lost your rotten mind! *Everyone knew* this was dangerous! *Everyone knew* the idea was bad! We have *no idea* what’s out here still, or how bad the Blight really is!... The expedition crew, the science away-teams, even the bloody IMPAK... We created all of them *with you!* To conduct research and find a cure! Why do you think I signed up in the first place? *Like you were supposed to do.* We did all of this so that we could go home!”

“You’re an idiot if you believe that,” S’celbak taunts. “If anything they made those programs to *appease* us, not help. You’re just a dancing fool for the Kyper’s entertainment. It doesn’t take *twelve cycles* to find ruins barely three miles away.”

“Ruins? *What ruins?*” S’carpto’ott implores.

“Ha! See? You don’t know anything and yet you’re lecturing me on the Kyper’s honesty! They’re liars, *S’carpto’ott*, ... You know nothing about what they’re doing yet you follow them blindly!”

“*What ruins?*” S’carpto’ott repeats. The whole damn planet is ruins! And what? You found some gossip about a dead city and somehow that means the Kypers are lying? If anything it *proves* their concerns! Almost *ALL* of the kin came from some dead city somewhere!”

“No,” S’celbak protests with a hint of secrecy. “*The ruins.* Where it all started.”

S’carpto’ott rolls his eyes so hard they almost make noise. “You’re a rotten blighter. A total, rotten, *blighter*. Is that where you think you’re going?”

“I’m not telling you anything about *where I’m going*,” S’celbak dismisses.

“You don’t have to. I helped build the rotten map... and what a mistake *that* was.”

S’celbak stifles a curt laugh and smiles.

“You changed the route I suspect,” S’carpto’ott guesses. “Well you’ll be starving in days or rotten to the bone in a cycle. I’m half tempted to let you try. It’s better than bringing you back to corrupt the kin with your backward idiocy.”

“I would rather rot in the sands of the Blight than live a pointless life inside those walls for one more cycle!” S’celbak declares. “You’ve been working with the Kypers *too long*, friend! You’re not connected with the kin anymore! *I’m* not the backward one!”

“The Kypers *are* kin, you arrogant rotter,” S’carpto’ott defends with a snarl.

“*What is that thing, S’carpto’ott?!*” He screams, pointing to the Kyper in the road. “What is that? You’re saying that’s *kin*?”

“It’s the bloody *Blight*, you rotten idiot!” The krokody howls, his finger pressing down firmer on the trigger. It takes his entire will to prevent a full squeeze. “You know this!”

How much proof do you need!?”

“THERE. IS. NO. BLIGHT!” S’celbak attests. “This whole thing has been a giant plot and you know it full well!” S’celbak claims with seething distaste.

S’carpto’ott’s face contorts into a mass of wrinkles and furrows. “No Blight? *No Blight?*” He mocks, pacing furiously back and forth with his gaze and gun focused keenly at S’celbak’s head. “Are you completely insane? *I’ve spent three full cycles* burying the dead!” He taps on his chest with the gun barrel. “I’ve seen the Rotten up close. I’ve seen their faces and breathed in their death! I’ve seen the countless kitts stretched along the dunes of the northern borders!”

S’celbak stirs as if attempting to stand but S’carpto’ott shoots the ground beside his knee as a warning, spraying sand and rock up into the tera’s face. S’celbak winces but remains convicted in his anger though is unable to speak before the krokody cuts him off again.

“I thought you were just stubborn before, but *now* I see you’re worse than Reyzorklaw. A pair of insane rotters destined to kills us all over *an idea*. The Kypers shoulda left you where they found you. I regret ever knowing you.”

No sooner had the words come out of S’carpto’ott’s mouth that an explosion turns the night into day for a brief moment, pushing S’carpto’ott forward mostly from alarm, and S’celbak to cross his arms in front of his face. Small pebbles and sand rain down on them both in uneven waves. S’carpto’ott looks first to S’celbak finding that his shocked and bewildered expression matches his own, and so he spins in place to run up the small hill toward the roaring flames on the road.

As he crests the mound, S’carpto’ott narrows his eyes to the bright light and raises his free arm to block the intensity of the heat from burning his eyes. He holds his tail straight back with the expectation to run, and points the gun wildly while surveying the scene. Walking a few steps onto the road, he clearly sees that both motorcycles were destroyed in the explosion, though cannot fathom what caused the discharge. The flaming wreckage is complete in its destruction, leaving a large black sphere of scorched earth and brush. All of the nearby shrubs and tinder are ablaze, and he notices pieces of metal embedded in the ground and dirt walls nearest the epicenter.

He lowers his arms a few degrees to better see the area when another smaller explosion swiftly blasts upward, erupting as one of the fuel tanks bursts, startling S’carpto’ott to turn his head quickly to the left. A shower of sparks and molten material pelt his face and chest, and he pats quickly at the burning shrapnel. He faces the far side of the road opposite the explosion and there he finds his partner, still unconscious, draped along the ground. S’carpto’ott takes several quick steps toward him fearing the worst but something catches his eye mid-stride and he turns back to the face the fire. Through the flames he sees the shape then of a figure, loosely draped in fabric and hooded entirely in burlap or felt. It stands there motionless, looking down at the flames.

“Hey!” The krokody booms, pointing his gun at the shadowy felon. The figure looks up, and S’carpto’ott sees two golden orbs reflecting the firelight. The orbs blink.

“Stay right there!” S’carpto’ott commands, making his gun visible for the foe. The figure doesn’t move as S’carpto’ott strides hurriedly forward again toward the flame, keeping the gun steadied on the shapeless form. The flames are too intense to see through and

S'carpto'ott's eyes water with the heat, feeling his scaly skin dry out like dead leaves the closer he approaches. A third explosion rockets upward when the second gas tank ignites, creating a blinding ball of light and flame, knocking S'carpto'ott back and hazing his vision. S'carpto'ott's vision returns just in time to dodge the projectile tank as it lands beside him, crashing loudly with a skid of sparks and debris. He spins his attention back to the cloaked figure but finds it has gone.

"Hey! *HEY!*" He screams, shooting several times through the fire and into the unseen edges of the road. He dashes around to the other side of the flames but finds nothing except a small collection of footprints in the soft dust encompassing the same ten-foot diameter of the roadside. But just those. No tracks approaching, and none leaving.

"How?—" the krokody questions, aloud.

He perceives then the stones that litter the landscape and pieces the tactic together. *The figure is using the stones to prevent leaving footprints. Clever.* S'carpto'ott thinks. He continues to review the scene, using his gun as a pointer and runs out into the most logical direction of the escape, toward the heart of the desert and away from the road, aiming himself at the closest stack of boulders. He surveys the entire panorama of the road and desert-scape, squinting into the distance to watch the horizon, but his eyes are not keen enough for this low light, even with the brilliant moon, and there are too many long shadows on the plain to pick out a single shape. The boulders stand in isolation and he finds them lonely and undisturbed. *Where did he go?* The krokody contemplates, irritated and on high-alert. He listens to the winds but hears only the crackle of his destroyed transportation, fretting now about the course of his next steps.

He returns to the ball of flame, still crackling and popping. The motorcycles sizzle and melt, casting dark plumes of burning rubber, plastic and cloth into the air. S'carpto'ott sees the remnants of his cigarette package lying near the periphery, charred and black. He sighs.

A pattern in the road dust intrigues him, scraped through the dirt not far from the cigarette container. A set of misshapen bare footprints, clawed, travelling in parallel with two, long continuous drag marks. S'carpto'ott follows the scar with his eyes to his partner's feet. From that spot, the clawed footprints return alone to the motorcycles. *To set the blaze.* S'carpto'ott considers this. His partner seems to be unharmed and, as S'carpto'ott hesitantly checks his exposed carotid, finds him alive and still breathing. He's never touched a Kyper's flesh before. *It's feeble and soft from a lifetime of being trapped in a suit,* S'carpto'ott believes, making a disgusted face and wiping his fingers on his pants.

Checking his partner's pulse suddenly reminds him of S'celbak and with a sudden jaunt of concern S'carpto'ott runs back to where he left the tera, knowing full well he will not be there. Returning to the monolith, he sees where S'celbak smashed into the rock, and he sees the disturbed sand from their scuffle. He sees small pools of blood, which have soaked into the sand, and thus now he can barely smell. S'carpto'ott squints hopelessly to the horizon trying to pick out any tell-tale shapes of a figure in motion but again uncovers nothing.

"ROT!" He shouts into the open air, frustrated with himself and embarrassed at his failures.

The night has become much cooler than the day, and the temperature has dropped by many degrees. He can feel his muscles tightening with cold and hunger, and he remains uncovered to the elements. He will sit near the fire for a bit to regain his energy, and await the return of Booth and Cutter.

Before he turns away, he notices another set of footprints, booted, travelling away from the scene of the scuffle in roughly the same direction as the road. They are wobbly and irregularly spaced, and undoubtedly S'celbak's.

They will make it easier to follow him, in the new sun, when there is warmth. S'carpto'ott thinks. We need the sun. He can't have gone far.

Rotten fool.

S'carpto'ott stumbles back up the road, feeling his strength sapping quickly and his consciousness waning. He finds two sun-dried logs along the desert floor and drags them along in each hand. He barely manages to pull them to the roadside, dropping them at last atop the flaming wreckage. The light dampens for a few moments while the fire identifies the new material and, in finding it acceptable, engulfs it. The baked desert timber catches quickly, pushing the flames higher and the light brighter. With his final moments of remaining strength, S'carpto'ott returns to his partner and grabs him by a leg, dragging him as he did the log back across the road to the fire and drops him along the ground crudely. S'carpto'ott drops into a cross-legged squat near his partner and stares off into the direction of the mysterious figure once more, hoping for movement, anger brewing across his face and temples. His head pounds.

After a moment, he sighs in defeat and leans over to his partner, lingering over his head to scrutinize his appearance. Indeed, nothing about the Kyper's appearance is comfortable. It's borderline grotesque, though S'carpto'ott shakes his head in shame and looks away. *No one asks for the Blight*, he thinks to himself. *Poor blighter.*

Though as he meditates, he opens the Kyper's hip pouch and pulls out a wrapped ration, peeling it open as hurriedly as he can with shaking fingers. He lays down on the concrete closest to the fire and removes the chewy food from its foil. Cleaving off a piece from something he could easily swallow whole, he takes the food in slowly and enjoys the heat from the inferno beside him.

Though he fights it, sleep quickly steals him away.

A distance up the road, S'celbak stands behind another rocky monolith, squinting through pain, through drowsiness, through cold, through fear, and through drug. Pure adrenaline keeps him standing. He watches the road where he observed S'carpto'ott lay down, relieved at last with a fleeting sense of ease that he is finally free. *S'carpto'ott and the Kypers will be too busy to follow.* The relief is quickly washed away by dizziness and a growing concern for Turnteyl, his kin, and for the return of the other cyclists, *Cutter and Booth*, S'celbak recalls with a disgusted curl of his lip.

Cutter.

He pulls away from his view of the distant fire and staggers uneasily, struggling to remain balanced.

What happened to the Kypers? He thinks, worried. *Is that really the Blight?*

The vision of the Kyper's twisted face burns in his mind.

For the first time in a long time, he now doubts. S'carpto'ott is many things to S'celbak, but never a liar. *Eager to believe, perhaps. But never a liar.* The tera feels his heart beat slower despite his growing anxiety. *Could I be wrong? ... Rot, I don't feel well.*

S'celbak turns away from the road and, shaking, notices the numbness in his hands and face. He clenches his hands open and closed a few times and wobbles his head in an attempt to shake off the effects of the drug. But his vision tunnels inward from the outside edges until at last the world slips away.

"Oh, rot," he says with a quiver, passing out upon the rocky desert floor and his whole world fades to black.

The moon arcs slowly across the sky marking a span of lost time, and the desert winds begin to pick up with renewed ferocity.

S'celbak's body rests in a heap upon the ground like a pile of dropped clothing, bent in uncomfortable and odd angles in a patch of bright moonlight. What at first moves above him like an oncoming dark cloud reveals arms and legs as an amorphous shadow repels downward from the tall stone monument closest to S'celbak's body. The form moves slowly until it is upon him, descending stealthily from the monolith without a sound. The figure, draped in tattered dark cloth, presses its hand to the tera's neck exactly as S'carpto'ott had done, inspecting for signs of life. With a concerned cock of its head, the figure places a full palm across S'celbak's snout and waits. After a moment, the figure appears satisfied and pulls from its robes a length of rope, binding S'celbak across the wrists, his ankles and snout.

The sound of engines begins to emanate from along the road causing the figure to stand to attention quickly, surveying the landscape in a wide view. Speechless, it looks then to the tops of the neighboring monuments, its face cast upward at the sky reflecting the moon brightly in its orange eyes. The figure sniffs at the air, and then returns to the floor of the desert, grabbing the legs of the unconscious tera. In silence, a second figure appears to take up S'celbak's arms, and then a third to hoist his torso. The three robed figures share S'celbak's weight for a moment until the largest of the three assumes the task for its own, tossing the tera limply over its shoulder.

The two smaller figures follow behind the larger whom moves quickly toward the closest rock formation, springing between stones to avoid leaving prints. The smaller figures unfurl a wide brush made of torn fabric and sage grass to drag across the disturbed areas of S'celbak's tracks, obscuring them into nothingness as far back as they dared before the engine noises gather too near. With the rumble fast approaching, the pair rejoin their larger companion and together disappear between its cracks into the darkness, carrying S'celbak away.

Above them, watching with stoic silence, stands a solitary figure, wrapped in the same dark cloth atop a stone pillar, hidden in the long shadows cast down by the neighboring stacks of rock. It lingers for a moment to watch the trio retreat into the stony enclave, then turns to gaze upon the flickering ball of firelight in the short distance, assessing. When the engines at last threaten to emerge from the opposite direction, the figure turns slowly away from them, unfurling its slender tail from beneath its robes. Its burning orange eyes, mollified, blink with satisfaction and then slip back into the darkness and is gone.