

CH 2: Grimroost

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The main road that led to and from Grimroost had slowly eroded back into gravel and stone unearthed from the dust and sand. Prickly yucca, chaotic jumping cholla, golden barrels, and towering saguaro cactus scattered as far as the eye could see. The only hint of color from the desert floor was the brittlebush and the desert marigold which both had yellow flowers in bloom. Rolling on the wind were varying sizes of tumbleweeds littering the deserted hills.

The main street was lined with well-kept wooden structures with a variety of colors. The insects were busybodies that filled the streets with sound. A variety of carpenter and redwood ants were doing renovations to buildings. Most of the black and yellow ants were starting to filter back into town after a hard day's labor down in the mines. Grimroost was well known for its zinc and iron deposits in the Grimstone Mineshaft.

The buildings lined up neatly on either side of main street. The Church was the first building that went up in the town when Grimroost was first founded. Its old silver wood still holding up to this day; the golden water basin that had holy water hadn't even a spot of rust. The beauty running the praise was Miss Aysun. The most glorious cecropia silk moth; the designs on her wings could hypnotize any non-believer. Kind and open-minded, she didn't push faith on anyone, simply good tidings to thy neighbor.

At the barbershop, you could see a tall brunette praying mantis by the name of Defne. The lady never missed a beat with town gossip; though nosey, she knew when to keep her mouthparts shut. Deadly with a blade she was, best watch your tongue there and tip her extra nectar if you don't want to lose your head.

At the land claims office, an older western meadowhawk dragonfly routed the area. Elif as she goes by, often gets confused as a male till she speaks. Despite her age, she acts as young as the youngens that roll in. Having a keen eye for the land and landmarks, she is ever so thoughtful to extend a claw when others in town want to extend their land or make a new purchase.

The Golden Bank is owned and run by the keen Asli the brown recluse. Can't get a bad bill past her, and honestly, if you tried, she might sink her fangs into you. Best not tempt fate if you're doing business here. But the 8-legged woman is reliable and clever, she will tell you if it's a good investment or if it will be a pile of deuce.

At the Assay Office, a mole-cricket or scapteriscus by the name of Elmas can spot a fake diamond just by the smell. Though one would think with such bad eye-sight she couldn't tell a

cactus from fruit, but her nose knows no lies. But if you strike gold, you'll bet she wants her fair share. Well, maybe a little more.

The drug store and market are in the same building and run by Lady Sevda. Though the black widow is quiet at best, she is sophisticated in her own right. Lady has an apothecary and a remedy for any ailment. Some of the town children call her a witch. Many of us owe her a great deal of gratitude since she's treated so many patients of scarlet fever, yellow fever, diphtheria, smallpox, tuberculosis, and influenza that has claimed many along the westbound.

A westerner's most visited place would be the blacksmiths. Lady Ebrar is as skilled with a forge as a woman with a gun. No one in town had seen a desert ironclad beetle or *asbolus verrucosus* before she had come. We have certainly been lucky to have such a skilled smith that could make armor, blade, gun, or bullet. Don't get on her bad side or she'll knock your antenna off.

The Ant Hill Hotel is run by a large black ant family that takes care of the space. They even have the young ones taking care of housekeeping, when needed, while the wife works the mine and her husband watches the hotel.

The charter school is not too bustling with younglings these days, but the few that do attend are always distracted by the stables next door. The vicious horsefly headmaster Mrs. Sidika certainly will tell you her opinion if you wanna hear it or not. Not to mention she will disregard your idea of 'fact' false until proven otherwise.

The stables are run by a pair of siblings, Feriha and Fusun the twin horned dung beetle or *onthophagus taurus*. These rowdy two know their way around a reliable steed. Day trip or long haul, they have the isopod for you. Mainly common pill-bug or *armadillidium vulgare*, a few common rough woodlouse or *porcellio scaber*. Then there is my imported treasure, the shiro utsuri or the samurai soldier isopod. The white with black speckles of my steed show my current status.

That brings us to my building of ownership. My name is Melek, I am the current sheriff. Cattle rancher born and raised but a gunslinger in the army and there-after. I'm a tarantula hawk. I didn't want to be sheriff but, the acting one Nermin vanished. The investigation turned to many dead ends and no true lead. Maybe she had a run-in with a traveler and abandoned her post. It's unknown. I was appointed by town vote; I still don't know why they chose me but I'll do my damndest.

This brings me to my favorite part of the town. The saloon. Naz the ladybug runs and owns the Crabapple Cocktail Crib. That gal can serve up a mean drink in the beat of a wing if you ask for it. Not much of a social butterfly but she is kind to her patrons and workers alike. It's fine if you bug her because her right-hand Pinar, will be on you faster than a bee to pollen. Pinar is a carpenter ant but a feisty spitfire out looking for a fight. The only reason she is tame is because of Naz. I like to sit and sip my nectar while listening to the pianist playing. El Guapo the male

aphonopelma hentzi tarantula, certainly can handle a piano well despite missing a leg. The other men at the saloon were eyesores and almost a treat to look at.

This anthill culture is run by the female population. Females are the ones pulling the hard labor and the work as well as a majority of businesses. Men are essentially housewives and errand runners. Men are also the ones that are seen here at the saloon as entertainment and well, prostitution. Being that there is a mine here the carpenter ants and bullet ants have their hands full with most above-ground construction. We were fortuitous enough to employ outsiders seeing an opportunity. The crazy yellow ants or anoplolepis gracilipes came from across the sea seeking hope and freedom. They make quick work in the mines. After a long day of work, they make their way here.

I didn't choose this town but I suppose it chose me. At first, I wasn't looking forward to becoming the law, but since doing so, I have a sense of pride. I want to help these folks. See them succeed and happily live in this stilled desert town. The town may have been called Grimroost but we don't have to think of it as grim, right?

Nowadays, they have a name for just about everything. Doesn't matter what they call you. It's the deeds that make the bug. This may be my story but it's not about me. It's about them. My people. My friends. The ones I call in my town, family.

A great man once said 'The West - the very words go straight to that place of the heart where Americans feel the spirit of pride in their western heritage - the triumph of personal courage over any obstacle, whether nature or man.'

There certainly is a sense of pride and respect that comes from being a sheriff and protecting the people of this small town. But I still owe it to Lady Nermin to find out what happened to her.

Clamoring and cries along with gunshots came from outside in the main street. Melek was quick to her clawed feet and out the small twin swinging doors with her trusted rifle in hand. Her dark eyes beamed into the sandy streets and gun at her hip. Wings had raised upward ready to take flight if needed. "Who dares fire in main?"

When the dust cleared a behemoth of a scorpion was standing there. His lateral eyes twitching then locked on the blue-skinned tarantula hawk. With a chelicera full of something he spat on the ground a vile lump of saliva and tobacco before speaking gruffly, "You the one they call sheriff?"

"Who's asking." Her tone was harsh as the wind increased and brushed her blonde strands and a red bow in her hair back. Tanned jacket opened and the red neck sash threatened to push under her white blouse. The second set of arms was on her hips at her waist belts.

"Tch, blue skin ain't got nothing on a shelled sheriff. Little girl like you can't even raise such a weapon let alone aim the thing."

A smirk crossed her mandibles, "Are you sure bout that?"

"My name is Stevie. Yer old sheriff Nermin shot down my brother!"

"Nermin went missin weeks ago. Take it up with her."

The scorpion snapped his claws as his stinger whipped around his hip, "That was the trouble with explaining with words. If you explained with gunpowder, people listened."

"That a threat Stevie?" Melek looked relaxed but ready to raise her rifle if needed. Wasting a bullet on him would mean more money from her pocket to the blacksmith but then again, with the drawing crowd, she needed to show she could hold her own against an outsider.

"Heh, ya know girly. I like your sting. Sure. Let's settle this in three days. Sunset the third day. You produce Lady Nermin or we are going to have a gun-down here in your little grim town." The dark-skinned scorpion climbed upon a large red armored centipede as his claws pulled the antennae to control it from lashing out. It reared up its thick yellow legs and screeched as he kicked his claws into its side and scuttled away.

Dust lies in wake of where he had stood. The town's active bug population now eyed the blue tarantula hawk. Melek knew this was not going to be an easy task but her fellow insects were relying on her to make things right and protect them.

'Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway. These people need me. Cowboy or girl is a breed tougher than nails and strong as steel. So, it's time to get dirty.'

Gaze went around to those gathering around and she lifted her gun and set it over her shoulder, "Well, there are some things a woman can't just run away from. All my friends and neighbors, as your acting sheriff I will investigate further what happened to Nermin or so help me I'll stand up to that scorpion on the third day here in town."

'It's a hard life here. Very hard. What allows them to make it through each day? They believe. Believe it will get better. Believe against all odds that tomorrow will be better than today. People have to believe in something. Right now, they need to believe in me.'