

Dust

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The Threshold

Year 8:

The sky was clear and blue but there was a bad wind. A south wind. And a south wind was a bad wind his mother told him. Chanta-Ton was one of the larger border cities. It had a low wall, short enough for the three friends to climb over. The buildings were paper made from prairie grass with a few plaster or brick houses for the more wealthy inhabitants. The town followed the hills slope.

Rei-Jin studied the horizon. A mile off, the uneven plains tipped up like a wave to the south. The earthen mounds were man made walls that acted as their border. The gold prairie grass faded purple as it rose on the hills. A few puffy clouds meandered across the sky. None of the clouds threatened rain, but it would come soon enough.

The three boys strided away from the town. Their faces were tipped scarlet from the chilled air but all had slung their jackets slung over an arm or shoulder. Dusk forced day further and further away.

Chanta-Ton had been Rei-Jin's home since he was five. He had lived in two other cities before that. Each had been breached. In each he had left behind family members. Rei-Jin and his mom moved northward after his older brother Jinson died. The border pursued them, like the creeping of water swelling in the tide or like a shadow; a dark cloak that no matter how he tried to shrug off, it clung to his shoulders and dragged behind. But Rei-Jin had never been to the border, never faced it head on.

He readjusted his jacket and sprinted to catch up to Milono and his younger brother Omi. The three tried to joke the first few minutes, but soon were silent. The older kids had posed the greatest ultimatum. Go to the border, or admit they were scared. Omi suggested they wait an hour outside the town wall then go back. Milono had other ideas.

“I’ll get a rock from the border wall and throw it in their stupid faces,” he said.

“What if they tell on us for getting so close?” Omi voiced.

“I’ll beat them up if they do.” Milono picked up his pace, not at all worried that the twelve year olds were two years his senior. Milono was built solid, used to hard labor at his father’s shop. He had a wonky grin and stumbled in his words when he got too excited. But every movement was made with surety. Like a hammer to the anvil what he did, he did, and did it with every ounce of power in his body and total force of will in his soul.

Like all naturally born border folk, Milono and Omi had tight dark curls and swarthy complexions. Omi was ‘stocky’ according to his mother. ‘Fat’ according to his brother. Omi looked like a stunted fleshy ball compared to Milono.

Rei-Jin aimed his spear cannon. The contraption passed his elbow almost swallowing his arm. The device was welded on metal plates and mounted on a leather arm brace. The brace had several clasps that could be tightened to fit even Rei-Jin’s arm.

With backlander heritage, Rei-Jin was the shortest of the threesome, causing him to be mistaken as two years younger than he actually was. His hair was black, feathery and straight, and his skin was creamy like sandstone.

He squeezed his palm and the spearhead shot off into the harmless grass.

“Rei, lemme see your cannon,” Milono said and thrust out his hand. “It’s my turn.”

Rei-Jin made a dash for where the spearhead had landed. “First to get the spear gets the turn!” He pumped his legs but Milono, who was older, pulled past him. Milono held the spearhead aloft. Rei-Jin conceded with a huff and pulled the clasps loose.

Milono tightened the device around his forearm. “What should I shoot at?”

“That rock that looks like your fat head,” Omi pointed.

“I’ll shoot *your* fat head!” Milono raised the spear cannon. Omi yelped and dove to the ground. The other boys laughed.

“That thing’s real!” Omi hollered.

Milono fixed his gaze on a tree about fifty feet away. The low branches hung to the ground like the arms of an ape. Milono aimed high and the spearhead shot into the air. The three boys watched it arc up then down towards the target. It fell short by a few paces.

Rei-Jin and Omi raced after it, legs whipping through the grass. They clawed through the weeds, but it was Rei-Jin who gave the triumphant, “Got it!”

Omi pouted and stomped a foot. “I didn’t have a turn yet”

“Whine less and run more,” Milono said and handed the spear cannon back to Rei-Jin.

“Shouldn’t we go back?” Omi said.

“The worst the bordermen will do is send us home,” Milono said.

“It’s not the bordermen I’m scared of,” Omi mumbled.

Hands came out and grabbed Omi from behind. “Is it me?” a voice said.

Milono and Rei-Jin yelled and jumped back. Omi squeaked once. His knees buckled and he slid to the ground limp.

The girl collapsed against the tree with laughter.

“Eila,” Omi hollered and jumped up. “That’s not funny!”

“Omi nearly peed his pants,” Milono snickered.

Omi’s chin thrust out. “You’re the one who screamed like a little girl,” he shot back.

“That wasn’t me. It was Rei.”

“Was not,” Rei-Jin said.

Eila straightened and planted a fist on her hip. “What a bunch of brave bordermen,” she

cackled. Eila was Rei-Jin's next door neighbor and the biggest tattletale in the whole world. If Rei-Jin's mom found out he had been that close to the border, she would make sure he couldn't sit down for a month.

"What are you doing here?" Rei-Jin demanded.

The girl's face screwed up. Eila's slanted blue eyes gave him the shivers whenever she glared at him. And that was all she ever seemed to do. No one Rei-Jin knew had blue eyes, not even Eila's mother. "I'm not a wuss like some boys," she said. "I always come here."

"To cry?" he shot back. She turned her head to hide her face.

"Good thing I wasn't a real zombie," she said. "You were too busy trying to hide behind Milono to shoot me. You'd be dead." Eila was also the most annoying girl he ever knew.

"What you crying about anyways?" Rei-Jin leered. "Your mom whoop you again?" Milono hissed at him to shut up. Eila slid down next to the tree and pulled her knees up to her chin. "My mom whoops me," Rei-Jin went on. "Only I don't cry."

"She whoops you all the time," Milono said. "Your rear's so numb you wouldn't notice a zombie bite you in the butt."

Rei-Jin shrugged the comment off. "Can we go already?"

"Never said I wanted you here," Eila snapped.

"I wasn't talking to you," Rei-Jin said.

But Milono didn't move. He scuffed a toe against a root and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Why you out here all by yourself?" he asked her.

"Cuz she doesn't have any friends," Rei-Jin mumbled. Eila pursed her lips and her eyes pivoted to glower at him.

"Are you ... sad?" Milono ventured.

“No,” she said. She turned into the wind so it blew her hair out of her face. “I’m just - Rainy season’s almost here.” Rei-Jin scoffed, but when Milono and Omi were silent, he turned and squinted at the border.

“It’s okay. We’ve been through winter before,” Milono said.

“All the bordermen are scared,” she said. “They said we won’t last another rain.”

“If any zombies cross the line, I’ll blow their heads off,” Rei-Jin boasted.

Milono crouched next to her. “I’m scared too. But there’s more than enough bordermen. Talikai’s a good captain.”

“Zombies go after the kids first. Everyone knows they do.” She sniffed and pressed her chin to her knees. Rei-Jin gagged.

Milono picked at the grass. “Is this about your birthday?” She wiped her eyes. “Come on, Eila. I made it past nine. I’ll be eleven next spring. It’s just a stupid myth.”

“I’m not scared of turning nine,” Rei-Jin said. “No zombie’s got me yet and I’m not gonna let them.”

“Me neither,” Milono said. “And nothing’s going to happen to you either, Eila.”

“Something’s gonna get us if we stay out here,” Omi said. “Let’s go back, guys. It’s creepy being so close.”

“No way,” Rei-Jin protested. He thought of the boys waiting for them in town. “We’re going all the way to the border.”

Milono stood and held out a hand to help Eila up. “Let’s go back.”

Rei-Jin jerked a thumb at the town. “Milono, you heard those guys.”

Eila accepted his hand and pulled herself up. “Thanks, Milono.” They let their hands linger a bit longer than Rei-Jin liked. The three turned their back on the border and headed for

town.

Rei-Jin made a face. Now the three of them would be picked on for weeks because they didn't brave the border. "Stupid Cryla with her stupid crying and-"

She spun around and socked him in the chest. "Shut up, bug eyes!"

"Ow!" Rei-Jin's face screwed up.

She leaned forward and sneered, "Thought you didn't cry when you got whooped."

Rei-Jin swung a fist in retaliation. Milono shoved him back. "Knock it off."

"Can we just go?" Omi sighed.

"How can you take her side?" Rei-Jin said to Milono.

"You own him?" Eila challenged.

"Guys!" Omi yelled. The argument broke and they followed Omi's finger. He pointed to the border. On the ridge, a shimmer echoed up from the ground like heat on a summer day. Then thick vapors curled up and the smoke turned black. Rei-Jin fingered his spear cannon Omi huddled closer to him. "You know what that means?" Omi said.

"Shut up," Milono said.

"They're burning one. Should it be that close? It looks like it ... it got through. One got through and-"

"Shut up," his brother said again. "They killed it, didn't they?"

"But it's so close." Omi trailed off. Rei-Jin didn't speak. He stared at the fumes. He thought he could make out the men moving around the pyre.

"Let's go," Eila said. They all turned and bolted back to the town. Rei-Jin felt his heart in his ears, pounding in time with his feet. He thought about the argument with the older boys, that if it had been a bit shorter, Milono, Omi and him would have nearly been to the fire. That if

they hadn't stopped to talk to Eila, they might have been there when it happened. And he couldn't get Omi's voice out of his head. It hammered with his feet, pulsed with every breath, until it echoed in his head.

So close.

No matter how safe they thought the border made them, it was only a noose. Shrinking towards them, tighter and tighter, like a hand securing its grip.

It was so close.

The school house was square shaped. Square rooms, mats, doors and windows. Even the teacher Lo-Ban was blocklike. His shoulders were cut straight away from his neck. Lo-Ban was a nervous man with a bald patch and a strain in his voice that gave him a stutter and made everything he said sound like a question. Rei-Jin slipped off his shoes when he entered the building and sat by Omi.

"Where's Milono?" Rei-Jin asked.

"Dad needed him," Omi said. "A whole bunch of bordermen came in yesterday. They need repairs."

"Bordermen? Why are they here?"

"The captain's here to check the border."

"They at the inn?" Rei-Jin asked.

"Who?"

"The bordermen," Rei-Jin said.

"I guess. They always stay there, don't they?"

“Do you think we could meet them?”

“Can’t. Have to help dad after school.” Omi shrugged. “Maybe Eila can take you. Her mom works there.”

Rei-Jin glanced around. Most of the mats were empty. It was common knowledge that rainy season meant an increase of zombie activity. Parents more superstitious about the rain preferred to keep their children safely at home. Those who had shown up, Rei-Jin included, stared blankly at the front of the room as the teacher began the lecture. Even Eila, the normal star pupil leaned back on her hands and watched out the window as rain dripped off the eaves.

Lo-Ban’s voice waddled on about the math problem as he scribbled on the board. Rei-Jin’s eyes trailed to the side wall where the map of the peninsula was tacked. The map showed the lands south that had been lost, then trailed off into ‘uncharted’ territory in the far south. A thin dotted line showed where the old border had been. It was named after Captain Ocuta'o who had established it almost three hundred years before. A newer border named after the current captain rubbed close to where their town was marked.

“Any questions?” Lo-Ban asked the class.

Rei-Jin raised his hand. “What’s on the other side of Ocuta'o’s line?”

The teacher stared at him. Omi started out of a daydream. “Very cute,” Lo-Ban said with narrowed eyes. “Are there any questions on the *equation*?” He jabbed the book with a finger.

“Don’t you know?” Rei-Jin challenged.

Lo-Ban took a deep breath making his nostrils flare out like tent flaps. “There are cities that were lost in the first decades of the zombies raids.” He sensed the children's interest peak. “And there are stories of monsters,” he went on. “Strange species.”

“Like dragons?” Eila asked.

“Stranger than that. Creatures that thrive in the west forest. Werewolves and trolls. All dangerous.”

“Were we at war with them too?” One boy asked.

“I don’t think so,” the teacher said. “At that time we were a great nation. They hid away in their forests.”

“Why don’t we have a map of all those cities?” Rei-Jin asked.

Lo-Ban drummed his sausage fingers against the book cover and ignored the question. He turned back to the board and scrawled a more difficult problem.

Rei-Jin crossed his arms. “Bet he doesn’t know,” he muttered. “He’s not even a borderman.”

“They have a stuffed troll at the tavern,” Omi said. “It has a huge nose like a pig and these big horns in its face.”

“They’re called tusks,” Eila corrected.

“Shut up,” Rei-Jin hissed at her. “We weren’t talking to you.” Lo-Ban cleared his throat and the three faced forward.

The cobbled street chirped with rain. A farmer led two goats on a twine rope in from pasture and a few people went about their errands before dinner. The back streets were always deserted compared to Trade Street where Rei-Jin lived. The buildings here were crowded, packed wall to wall and no more than one or two stories high. The plastering was mostly brown and dull since the buildings didn’t contain shops. Windows and doors were closed against the

chill and nothing was in the street save the dead weeds.

Rei-Jin crested the hill. The tavern had a tiered roof, sloped and towering. It was four levels, the tallest building in Chanta-Ton. The foundation was from cut stone, heavy and gray. The walls were wood and reinforced with metal bands for security. The inn was the stronghold of the town, large enough to shelter everyone, and easy to defend. It perched at the crest of a hill. The electric lights were cased in mesh bars to protect them and the generator was kept in the basement. Rei-Jin's mom told him every house had had electricity until the seven year raid when Ocuta'o's line had been broken. Generators and power lines were the first things the zombies went for.

The tavern didn't just serve as a fortress. It was the meeting hall for important councils, a dance hall for festivals, and a pub for the bordermen on leave. The inn's annex also served as a small hospital, maintained by the herb garden surrounding it.

Rei-Jin spotted Eila outside with a book in her lap. He approached and took care to stomp in a puddle so her shoes got wet from the water.

Her lip curled. "What are you doing here?"

"Milono and Omi are working."

"Go bother someone else," she said.

Rei-Jin scowled at her. She kept her eyes on her book and curled a lock of hair around her finger. Eila's hair seemed to glow red when the sun hit it a certain way. It fell almost to her waist. Her skin was lighter than even his. He knew her mom Iripora was a backlander and thought her dad must have been too.

Rei-Jin shoved his hands in his pockets. "What you reading?" he asked.

"Why do you care?"

“Just asking.”

“Biology. It’s about plants,” she dumbed down.

He nodded to try and show interest. “It any good?”

“If it wasn’t would I be reading it?”

Rei-Jin clenched his jaw and breathed out through his nose. “I heard there’s lots of bordermen in town.” She didn’t answer. “I heard Talikai’s here.”

“How else would it be an inspection?” she snapped back. She glanced up at him. “So that’s what you want.” He shrugged innocently. “Captain Talikai’s too busy to talk to you. So forget it.”

“Did you see him?”

“I talked to him all day yesterday,” she bragged. “Told me all about his travels to other towns and the backlands.”

“You could introduce me,” he suggested. “Since you know him and all.” She ignored him. “Please!” he whined and dragged out the syllable in a long sob.

Her eyes squeezed shut. “Fine,” she hissed. “Just shut up already.” She snapped her book shut and hugged it to her chest. She glared up at him with those gray blue eyes. “If you weren’t Milono’s friend I’d bust your nose in.” She hopped up and stalked inside.

Eila led the way to the main hall where the ceiling reached far above them to terra cotta tile. Rows of tables lined the floor. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the harsh electric light. The white light made him forget about the perpetual dusk outside that shrouded the day with storm clouds. Here it was almost sunny. The air was cluttered with boisterous conversations and laughing. Eila’s mom and a few other servers wove between the tables to bring meals and drinks to the bordermen.

Eila craned her neck and swept the room with her gaze. “Don’t see him. Might not be in yet.” Rei-Jin scanned the faces though he wouldn’t recognize the captain even if he did see him.

He followed Eila to a vacant spot by the furnace in the center of the room. She buried herself in her fancy biology while Rei-Jin propped his chin on his fist and took in the scene. He had been to the inn a few times to drop off clothing his mom did for travelers, but he had never seen so many bordermen before.

The bordermen’s clothes were obscured by leather armor, and a few had yet to take off the heavier gear from their patrols. Most dumped their knapsacks behind them on the floor. Bedding, mess kits, weapons, and other supplies were tied to the packs. From what he could see, each had at least two knives at his belt. In case a zombie got close, he reasoned. Rei-Jin had once asked his mom for a knife. She laughed him out of the house and told him to find some sense while he was out there.

By the fire, vacant stools filled as musicians finished their break and picked up their instruments. The band consisted of three men, one plucking away at a guitar and the other harping on a wooden flute. The last member had a staff and simply thumped it against the ground for rhythm as he sang.

They started on a song called The Blue Lady. Rei-Jin’s mom used to sing it to him and Jinson almost every night. He remembered the smooth tone of her voice and the steady pulse of the notes. The song was about a girl who cried because the sun was gone. In the later verses she lost her family, but at last found peace in the blue sky with them. The singers eyes closed and his chin tipped up to let out the chorus to the second verse.

Where've they gone?

My loved ones

Vanished in the night

Washed away

In the rain

By nights unkindly bite

The singer's voice sounded like it would break as he mimicked the Blue Lady's call. Rei-Jin had never noticed how sad it was.

Eila nudged Rei-Jin and the two stood. "I think I see him," she said over the din. She walked up to a table where two bordermen unloaded their gear. Eila greeted the more slender of the two men. Talikai was smaller than Rei-Jin had imagined. His shoulders were broad after the manner of the borderfolk, but he was slight compared to the other bordermen. He had shaved his head but left a black beard that framed a square mouth and full lips. His slanted eyes seemed to scowl down at them.

"Eila-Ra," Talikai said in a voice as gentle as a purr. "What are you doing in a rough place like this?"

"I'm waiting for my mom to get done." She rolled her eyes and jerked a thumb at Rei-Jin. "And this boy wanted to meet you." Rei-Jin felt his chest puff out as the captain glanced at him. "He wants to talk to you about zombies," she said with a shrug and plopped down on the mat to read her book.

Talikai and his friend Gioki ordered their food and sat down. The captain had to review a

few papers as other bordermen saw him and shuffled forward with their reports. Only when the meal arrived did Rei-Jin muster up the courage to speak.

“You ever see a zombie?” Rei-Jin asked.

Eila almost gagged. “Well duh,” she muttered.

“Not zombies. Shells,” Talikai said.

Gioki snorted. “Here we go.”

“What’s a shell?” Rei-Jin asked.

“A shell’s what’s after us,” Talikai said. “Zombies aren’t real.”

“But dead people turn into zombies,” Rei-Jin said.

Talikai tore off a piece of bread to dip in the soup. “They don’t turn humans into one of them.” He laughed. “Won’t find any part of us left.”

“I heard if you got bitten you transform,” Eila spoke up. “Like some disease.”

“That’s just fable,” Talikai said. “You get caught by a shell, you won’t live long.”

“But people see zombies,” Eila said. “People they knew who disappeared.”

“That’s why they’re called shells,” he said. “A shell gets a human and takes on their form. But it’s not who you knew before. The face is just a mask.”

“They can look like anyone?” she said.

“Anyone they’ve eaten -” he winced. “Killed,” he amended.

“It’s not all untrue,” Talikai’s friend cut in. “Shells, zombies. Same thing. They’re both undead.” Talikai scoffed into his mug but Gioki went on. “Shells know stuff they ain’t got a right to know. You’ve heard the stories.”

“Give it a rest,” Talikai sighed.

“What stories?” Rei-Jin asked him.

Gioki turned to him. “Shells know things about you. Your past. I knew a borderman, wasn’t dull either. His daughter vanished in a raid. Two days later, she shows up. Of course he suspected, but the zombie goes on calling him by name and reminding him of all the things they did together, how he always brought her presents from the backlands. He’s so overjoyed to see she’s survived and runs up to hug her.” The man snapped his fingers. “Bit through his neck in a heartbeat.” Eila grimaced.

“Every borderman brings gifts from the backlands,” Talikai said. “So of course the shell knew that. But it doesn’t mean they’re undead.”

“And what about the other stuff?” Gioki tapped his chest. “Happened to me. Swear by the dust,” he said. “Another borderman asked about my kids by name and how they were doing. He was a zombie.” He held up his hands when Talikai shot him a glare. “A shell,” he said and rolled his eyes.

“No such thing as a zombie and never saw anything to convince me otherwise,” Talikai grumbled. “Dead is dead. They’re just masks.”

“What do you do if someone you knew is a shell?” Rei-Jin asked.

“Then you better hope you’re smarter,” Gioki said. “And kill it before it kills you.”

“But how?” Rei-Jin said. “If they really know things the vanished did, how can you tell the difference?”

“The way they talk. How they act,” Talikai said. “A bad shell will be off.”

“And if it’s a good copy?” Rei-Jin asked.

Before the captain could answer, a group of four bordermen marched into the hall. They had just come in from outside where the rain had started up again. Water slid off their leather coats and pooled around their feet. They spied Talikai and maneuvered to the table.

“Talikai,” one borderman said. “There’s a problem with point 34.”

“34?”

“Yes, sir. Been raining for ten days straight and the line between 33 and 34 hasn’t been managed for eight months. I think we need to do a rite.”

“Is there something wrong with the border?” Eila asked Talikai.

“We’ll take care of it,” he said. Talikai and Gioki grabbed a few more mouthfuls before they shouldered their gear.

“It’s too wet to do a rite,” Talikai said. “Dust won’t sink in.”

“That’s why I’m here, sir,” the borderman went on. “We’re getting increased sightings.”

Gioki cursed. “They must feel it’s weak-” The group moved off and the conversation became too distant for Rei-Jin to pick up. Eila’s mother worked late so she stayed at the inn.

“Wake up!”

Rei-Jin coughed. His throat and nose itched from smoke. His brain sloshed with sleep. His mom jerked him out of bed. She dragged him towards the door. He stumbled in the strange light.

“What’s happening? What - My spear cannon-”

“Leave it, kid!” she hurried.

“Nagi? Rei-Jin!” a voice shouted. His mom wrestled open the stubborn frame and yanked him into the night. Their housemates the candlemakers huddled on the street.

“They’re out,” the father said.

“We have to get to the inn!” cried the mother.

Rei-Jin's eyes wheeled across the scene. The warning bell hammered, calling them to the tavern. The baby cried. Smoke. Fire painted it red. People shouted. Sprinted. They clutched belongings in their arms. A few blankets held hastily collected items. Rei-Jin, his mom, and the family of candlemakers joined the frantic flight. His mom gripped his arm. Bodies pressed in on all sides. He stumbled. Fell. Was almost lost. She jerked him up and forward. Then panic erupted. People jostled and ran the other way, their calls circled like crows.

"They're in front," came the yell. "They're in front!"

"Go back!" the father ordered. "Back to the house." There was cold and heat and noise and bodies and Rei-Jin's bare feet against the hard cobbled ground, pounding, shooting pain up his shins to echo in his knees, and shoes trampled his feet and hands reached for him as though people were swimming, trying to tear past him and he tripped over belongings that people dropped so they could sprint faster but his mom kept him moving.

Something leapt on the roof, jumping from building to building like a shadow. From the snapping glow of the fires, he saw flashes of humanoid features. Face. Nose. Eyes. But never enough to let him see completely. The silhouette was joined by others. The figures gradually pulled past the retreating horde. Then they plunged.

Like soap to oil, the crowd scattered. Every alleyway, every building - burning or not - was an escape. They were close to home now. He thought of his spear cannon. It was their only protection. The group drew to a stop. He could see fire lighting the familiar window. Their house burned.

"Where do we go?" the mother asked. Rei-Jin wrenched his arm free and dashed through the stream of people.

"Kid!" his mom called behind him.

“Rei-Jin, come back!” the candlemaker shouted.

He burst through the door before he could think twice. Smoke curled from the air. Fire clawed at the rafters and consumed the paper and cloth walls. It jumped like a beast to every surface, crawling up cut patterns and hanging clothes, creeping like a stain over the woven mats. Wax dripped down like rain from the candles hanging above. He scrambled through his belongings until his hand found the metal weapon. It was still cold.

His mom was at the door calling for him. He pressed the cannon to his chest and turned to her. Flames ate through the ancient rafters and the ceiling collapsed. The beams missed him but the flames kicked up. He wheeled backwards as hot soot bit his face. The back wall gave way under his body. He sprawled over the wreckage and blacked out.

Smoke tortured Rei-Jin out of sleep, tugging him into waking. Some of the wreckage from the house had fallen on him as well as a thick blanket of ash. He coughed and crawled free. His skin was singed. The back street was wet and dark. A haunting mist reflected back the dying fires. Shadows jumped up against the glowing haze, the shapes of people, large, distorted. They hunted for survivors.

His hands fumbled in the dark and fingered the thick straps to the spear cannon. Rei-Jin worked the device over his arm like he had done hundreds of times before. He coaxed the buckles tight and double checked the spearhead. He had one shot, but it was better than nothing.

He faced the direction of the tavern. The warning bell was silent. A noise tickled his ear and made his skin prickle. He spun and raised his arm. There was someone standing there. The figure was familiar. He dropped the weapon to his side.

“Mom!”

She almost sobbed. “I was looking for you everywhere.” She limped forward. “Hurry. We have to get away.” Her nightgown was stained with something dark. She had tried to wrap it around her leg.

He reached a hand towards her. “You’re hurt-”

“I’m okay, sweetie. I’ll be fine. Take my hand. Hurry, Rei-Jin. We can’t stay out here.”

He felt a sick sensation trickle down his back. His palms grew sweaty against the grip to the cannon. “There’s something wrong with you,” he said.

“It’s okay, honey. I’ll be okay. We just need to get to the inn. My leg,” she groaned. “Help me, Rei-Jin. Take my hand.” She held out her palm. Rei-Jin stared at it. A crash. He jumped and spun around. A figure darted between the burning houses. “Hurry!” his mom whispered. Rei-Jin swallowed and slipped his hand into hers. She pulled him forward and leaned on him.

“Shouldn’t we take the back road?” he said as she limped towards Trade Street.

“This way’s faster. We just need to get out of here.”

Walking down Trade Street was like going through a nightmare. Wood creaked, expanding in the fires and settling into ash. Wind hissed through the bony cages of the houses. He breathed in short bursts. His mom hung on his shoulder, her weight increasing as they drew closer to the tavern. Shadows flit between the buildings. He stared around him with wide eyes at everything that so much as twitched and hugged his cannon to his chest.

Their breaths escaped in silver mists and lingered briefly before their mouths. His feet, now numb, stumbled over broken cobblestone and items dropped from fugitives. Food tied in a napkin, a roll of clothes, a straw doll.

His foot hit something warm. He jerked back and clung to his mom. It was someone trampled by the crowd.

“Don’t look,” she told him. “Just keep moving.” She stepped over it.

A perpetual chill rolled along his spine and with every step, the sensation went deeper until it carved into his bone. They labored up the hill. Almost there. The tavern was dark and for a moment his stomach plunged into his feet. Then he realized the windows were boarded up.

“We made it,” his mom gasped and her arms tightened to pull him into a hug. “We’re safe.”

The closer Rei-Jin and his mom got to the tavern, the harder his heart hammered against his chest. He stared sideways at her. Her onyx hair which was so often pleated in a braid or pinned in a bun hung loose to her shoulders. He couldn’t make out much of her face, only her eyes. They glared into the night as though keeping the shells back with the force of her gaze.

He heard footsteps, shifting fabric from bodies, breathing. But whenever he turned to look the noise stopped. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “Just stay close to me.”

At last they reached the side entrance. His mom pounded on the door. A narrow grate a few feet above them slid open.

“Who’s there?” the watch called. Rei-Jin peered at the dark face. It was Milono’s dad Ke’emo.

“It’s me. Nagi,” his mom said. “Open the gate, please.”

“Hold on,” Ke’emo called. “I have to get a borderman to test you.” His face retreated.

“Don’t go,” she called. “I have Rei-Jin with me.” Ke’emo came back to the grate. She pulled Rei-Jin into the light and drew her arms around him. “Let us in.” She fingered his face. “We ran all the way here. Please, let us in! They could be right behind us. Please!” she

sobbed.

“Rei?” Ke'emo peered through the dark. He turned and gestured. “Open it!”

The deadbolts slid back and the gate opened. Rei-Jin's mom tightened her grip on his arm and they stumbled into the entryway.

“Rei!” Ke'emo pulled the boy into hug. “I saw your house -”

“I'm okay,” he said. “I have to tell you-”

“And Nagi. Thank the dust.” Ke'emo took her arm to support her. “Are you alright?”

“I'll be fine once I see a doctor,” she said. “I'm hurt badly.”

“I'm sorry. You have to be tested,” he said. “Wait here. It'll only be a moment.” Ke'emo hurried to the main gate. Rei-Jin's mouth opened to call after him. But Ke'emo was already around the corner. Rei-Jin took a breath. The bordermen would come. They would come. Rei-Jin's mom edged towards the hallway that led into the compound.

“My leg,” she gasped. “Come on, Rei-Jin.”

“Ke'emo told us to stay here.”

“I need a doctor.” Her face contorted. He glanced at the single guard, a swarthy youth who worked at the post office.

“But-” Rei-Jin's mind spun for an excuse. The bordermen would come. He glanced into his mother's face. She was pale, pale from weakness, blood loss, or maybe something else. Her eyes were soft. He wanted to wrap himself in their warmth. He tore his gaze away.

“Help me to the infirmary,” she said. He didn't move to obey. Sweat clustered under his arms and across his chest. “Rei-Jin,” she said more firmly. His skin crawled under her grip. He took a breath and flexed his fingers over the grip to his spear cannon. He shrugged off her hand and backed away from her. She stumbled under her own weight. She gasped and clutched her

wound. "Help me," she said.

Rei-Jin backed up. "You're not my mom,"

"What are you saying, Rei-Jin? Honey, it's me. You're just scared."

"I knew you weren't. It's a trick to get inside the fort. I saw them following us. You're ... she's a zombie," he told the guard. The youth stared at the two confused.

"Stop this," his mom said. "You know me."

"My mom never called me Rei-Jin," he said. "She didn't even name me. She just called me kid."

The smile stayed suspended, uncertain and frozen. The young guard's eyes were as large as egg yolks. His fingers twitched and he reached to sling the rifle from his shoulder. Before he could lift the weapon, Rei-Jin's mom acted. She was so precise that Rei-Jin could only watch the events as they proceeded. She grabbed the nozzle of the rifle. Forced it to the ceiling. She secured the youth's chin with a hand and twisted. There was a soft pop. He slid to the floor.

She rose to her feet, stretching up, looming taller than she had ever been and faced Rei-Jin. He took another step back. "You are very clever for your age," she said. "You pretended not to know," she nodded. "So I would lead you safely through." Her smile was soft. "Clever. But you should have run for help."

He stared up at her. Her eyes were dark chestnut and warm. He knew he should be scared, but he felt safe staring into them. Rei-Jin shook his head. It was a shell. His foot shifted forward. He lifted his arm and squeezed his palm. The spring to his spear cannon groaned. His mom's shell stumbled back from the force. The dull spearhead sunk three inches into its chest. It stared down at it surprised.

"I don't need help," Rei-Jin's voice wavered.

Dark scarlet poured from the wound. His mom's shell fell to one knee, hand groping at the object. "That hurt!"

"And I'm not scared of you," he said.

"You tricked me." It sounded surprised, almost offended. Its fingers, long and tapered like a spider's legs, searched at the wound then pulled the spearhead free with a squelching sound. It let the metal spearhead thud to the floor. "Nice try," it said. "You have to hit my heart, Rei-Jin." He turned to run but it leapt in front of him, too fast for his eye to follow. His mom's shell grinned and grabbed his front. "I look forward to sipping the courage from your bones."

"Let go!" His mom's shell forced him down and pinned him. It knelt on his stomach. It snagged his thrashing arm and licked its lips.

"Just go to sleep," she whispered. "Close your eyes."

He squeezed his eyes shut. He felt her hot breath over his skin. His arm twinged. He peered through squinting lids and saw his mom's face shift like a nightmare. The dark hair receded to its scalp then boiled out again, this time a sickly gold. The smooth skin flushed pale as sky. Its teeth were pure ivory, pointed and curved. Its jaw drew around his arm and pressed into his flesh.

Rei-Jin snapped into action at the pain. He pulled, thrashing, but the shell's fingers were iron bands. He screamed and flailed at it with his free arm. The heavy spear cannon struck it in the throat. The shell gagged and jerked back.

"Rei-Jin!"

Ke'emo roared like a bear and charged down the hallway. The shell glanced up, blood dripping from its chin. It was smiling. Ke'emo swung at it with his hammer, still

running. Years beating at iron and tin and now it would smash in the shell's skull. The shell sprang away at the last second. Ke'emo couldn't stop the hammer's fall. Rei-Jin rolled to the side. The mallet's head sunk into the ground where he had lain.

"You just won't die," the shell laughed. It looked like his mom again, slanted eyes brimming with a smile. Shouts carried to them from down the hall. The shell backed against the wall. Its eyes darted towards the approaching bordermen. Ke'emo hefted his hammer. The shell fingered the hole in its chest. Its eyes seemed to lap at Rei-Jin. Ke'emo pulled the boy behind him. "Can't wait to see what you're like when you're older, Rei-Jin," the shell said. It started to scale the wall. Its fingernails found some claim on the smooth surface and it skittered up like a lizard. Chin on its shoulder, it kept watching him. "Full of surprises." Ke'emo pushed Rei-Jin back and braced for impact should it spring down at them. It ripped at the roof, tearing tiles and disappeared through the hole as the bordermen ran up.

Ke'emo spun to him. "Are you alright?" His calloused hands searched him and pulled his arm out. The bordermen kept their guns up until Ke'emo gave the safe word. Even then, they watched Rei-Jin wearily.

"You let a shell in," one accused.

Ke'emo's arm pulled Rei-Jin into a protective hold. His arms were warm and strong. Rei-Jin leaned into them and tried to stop trembling. "I know him," Ke'emo defended.

"We still have to test him," the borderman said.

"I'll prove he's not," Ke'emo said and turned to Rei-Jin. "What's your brother's name?"

"He vanished," Rei-Jin answered.

"I know. But what was his name?"

"Jinson."

“That’s true,” Ke’emo said to the bordermen. “Satisfied now?” The bordermen holstered their weapons and turned to the matter of mending the hole in the roof. Ke’emo asked one, “He’s not in danger of ... That thing bit him.”

“He’s fine,” the borderman said. “He won’t turn.” He ordered Ke’emo back to his post at the side entrance and directed Rei-Jin off as well. Before Ke’emo let Rei-Jin go, he pulled him in for a hug. It was brief, but tight. “Glad you’re safe,” he said into the boy’s hair.

When he entered the infirmary, he felt a mix of horror and relief. Faces spun past him that Rei-Jin knew, assurance that they had survived. But there was so much pain. Eyes echoed loss and destruction. One woman stared blankly at her knees while someone hugged her. She had a stub for an arm wrapped in sterile white cloth. Black ash served as twisted masks to the faces. At the wall, several knelt at an old man’s bed. They rocked on their knees over their grandfather’s body. Tears streaked through the grime and their faces melted.

Rei-Jin was shoved in a line. The man in front of him held a rag against his head. Blood clumped dark and sticky at his hairline. E’olani was the medic who saw Rei-Jin. She was the town’s herbalist and owner of the inn. She was a stout woman used to dragging drunks to their beds and throwing them out if they caused too much trouble. But she was also a skilled medic and treated anything from headaches to broken bones. A few rows down, Eila and her mother were helping treat other patients.

“What’s the problem?” E’olani asked. Her voice was hollow, numb with her focus; care for the wound then move on to the next patient. He showed her the wound. “Been bleeding long?” she asked.

“No,” he answered.

E’olani handed him a piece of gauze. “Let it bleed a few more minutes to clean itself

out. Then press this against it until it stops.” Her hand directed him away. “Where’s your mom? Need her in surgery.”

“She vanished,” he said.

“I see. Come back once it stops and I’ll finish you up.” She moved to the next person.

Rei-Jin wandered down the aisle of bodies. Some lay on blankets, most on the naked floorboards. He paused here or there. No one looked at him. They sunk into individual hells. One man shook his head over and over as though someone were asking him a question. He didn’t even flinch as a woman on his left let out a wail and fell backwards. She called for someone’s name.

Rei-Jin swallowed non-stop. He circled the room. He knew if he sat down, something bad would happen. It hovered over him like a wall. It pressed down on him every time he paused long enough to think.

His mom pulling him from bed. Holding his hand. Kneeling on his stomach.

Down one row Omi sat cross legged, facing the wall. Rei-Jin dodged towards his friend.

“Omi, you’re okay!” he called out. Omi stared at the floor. Several burns were slathered in yellow paste and a hand was wrapped in gauze. He didn’t move. For a second, Rei-Jin wondered if he had died sitting up. “Omi?”

Omi only responded when Rei-Jin touched his arm. His friend’s eyes were bloodshot, making his retinas jump out like yellow disks. His face was blank, too worn out to show emotion, like a rag that’d been washed too many times so the color turned gray.

“Milono vanished,” Omi whispered.

Year 11:

Rei-Jin looked like his brother. Or that’s what his mom once told him. Rei-Jin couldn’t remember Jinson’s face. When he tried, Rei-Jin only saw a blank oval with a black shag of hair

falling across the forehead. The body and clothes could have been any boy. Jinson was taller than him, and that's all he could remember.

Jinson died when Rei-Jin was five years old. Everyone said that he vanished. But Rei-Jin didn't like that word. It was too impermanent. Jinson was dead.

Rei-Jin stared at the tiled ceiling. Sky gray with morning worked its way through the shingles cracks. Next to him, Omi snored. Welinu was already up. She hummed as she poked at the stove to coax the coals back to life.

It had been three years that day. Three years since Welinu and Ke'emo had become his new mom and dad. Three years he'd been sleeping in his dead friend's spot in the bed. The day had loomed all week. Even after all this time, the empty was there. That was what reminded him the most. Not the objects. Not Milono's coat that Omi wore like a talisman. Not Rei-Jin's crescent scar on his arm from the shell's bite or the smell of beeswax that always reminded him of his mother. It was the holes they tried to fill. Rei-Jin took the empty place in the bed. The empty chair. The vacant hammer. The chores. And Welinu kissed him and smoothed back his hair and called him dear and scolded him when he tried to get away with something. Even Ke'emo, who barely spoke to Rei-Jin directly before tried to press Rei-Jin into the role of his lost son. He taught Rei-Jin how to treat metal and shape it. But what Rei-Jin was best at was sketching patterns for tin and helping Welinu patch clothes. In fact, Welinu came to him with questions on sewing.

The first anniversary had been the worse. Omi wouldn't talk to anyone the whole day. Ke'emo shod every horse in Chanta-Ton it seemed and came to bed late. Welinu was alarmingly cheerful and talked too loud and too much. Rei-Jin tried to stay out of their way. He was just another reminder.

The second year was less of a strain. Omi tried to get Rei-Jin to talk about his brother Jinson. Rei-Jin lied and said he didn't remember when Jinson died.

Rei-Jin was determined to forget what this day marked. For the third anniversary of Milono and his mother's death, he wasn't going to school. Talikai and the main force of bordermen were in town. Chanta-Ton and Guia were the two remaining border towns holding the line. In the course of the last three years, three southern towns had fallen. Talikai was determined to hold the line and was traveling between the Southwestern town of Guia and Chanta-Ton to fortify them against the shell. Rei-Jin would go with them to patrol the border around the town.

He slid out of his covers. Warmth from the bed was swept away by cold. He sat next to the stove and pulled his knees to his chest. Welinu smiled at him. "Morning." She brushed the tangles from his hair and kissed his forehead. Even after the loss of her son, Welinu had come to love him so fast. His mom had never kissed him. Once, before Jinson had died, Rei-Jin had laid down on one of the piles of cloth to rest. His mom thought he was sleeping and stroked his hair while she stared out the window.

Rei-Jin smiled at Welinu and helped her prepare breakfast by making the tea. He opened the tin and inhaled the sweet scent of the faded chamomile leaves. As he pressed the herb into the tea holder, Rei-Jin thought about the other changes over the years. In the aftermath of the raid, people tried to scrape their lives together. Some moved north and abandoned the border town. Most of the families that stayed were older. Whispers between Ke'emo and Welinu filled the night above Rei-Jin's head. When she thought he and Omi were asleep, Welinu would say, "The town is dead. It's not safe here."

"Here we have work," Ke'emo said. "Our shop, a living. People need us here."

“And what about the boys?” she said. “They need a place to raise their own families. There’s no one here their age.” They paused as Omi shifted in his sleep and rolled over.

“Our family is here,” Ke'emo went on. “Our friends. Backlands aren’t any safer. They get more rain.” He sighed. “This is the only life we know.”

“Then maybe there is a better life that you don’t know about,” she said.

Rei-Jin ladled water into the kettle and hung it over the fire. Welinu started on the porridge and shook Omi awake. He rolled like an ox to his feet, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Now twelve, Omi looked like he a stretched piece of dough. His arms and legs looked mismatched to his body. He still carried his childhood pudg, his limbs solid and log-like, but most had migrated to his shoulders to fill them out so he looked more square than round. He leaned on the table with his eyes closed so that Rei-Jin though he had fallen back asleep.

Rei-Jin went out back to tell Ke'emo breakfast was ready. Rei-Jin found him in the shop working a dagger against a polishing stone.

“Welinu said it’s time to eat,” Rei-Jin said.

“Come here a sec. I want to show you something.” Rei-Jin moved closer and Ke'emo set the dagger aside. He retrieved Rei-Jin’s spear cannon from a shelf. The metal glowed like polished silver.

“Oh wow,” Rei-Jin breathed. He had noticed the cannon went missing a week ago. He assumed it was because Welinu and Ke'emo didn’t want him going on patrol.

“That’s not the best part,” Ke'emo said and strapped it to his forearm. On him, the device fit perfectly, covering only the upper half of his arm. Rei-Jin followed him outside. Ke'emo aimed at a log that he had set up previously to demonstrate. Ke'emo squinted at the target then

squeezed his palm. The spearhead shot out smooth, the spring hardly making a sound besides the faint click. But there was something new. A steel wire trailed after the spearhead. When the spearhead burrowed into the wood, Ke'emo squeezed the handle again. The cable whipped back, dragging the block of wood a few feet.

“Whoa!” Rei-Jin shouted. “How’d you do that?”

“Took me awhile to fix it up. It was Omi’s idea. But this is how it’s supposed to be. It’s a backland tool,” he explained. He bent and worked the spearhead free from the log, then wound the wire into the chamber. “They used it for hunting. They climbed up a tree and waited for animals to come underneath.” He passed the device to Rei-Jin. “The cable’s so the animal doesn’t try and run.”

Rei-Jin turned the device to examine the upgrade. The scratches had been erased, with what Rei-Jin knew must have been days of precision work. “It’s great,” he said. “Thanks, Ke'emo.” The man nodded and patted him once on the back.

When two went back into the house, Omi held a hot cup of tea against his head as though tending a headache. At least he looked more awake. When Omi saw the cannon, he smiled. “You like it?”

Rei-Jin rubbed at the metal. “It’s awesome.”

“Saw it in a backland catalog. Dad did all the work though.”

“I’ll take it on patrol today,” Rei-Jin said. For a second, the activity in the house hiccupped and Rei-Jin tried to swallow the words. Welinu and Ke'emo exchanged glances then pretended they hadn’t. Omi glanced at his parents then downed the tea in one gulp.

Welinu placed the steaming porridge on the table and situated it just so between the bowls. “What about school?” she said Rei-Jin.

“Captain Talikai said I could go with him,” Rei-Jin explained.

Welinu looked to Ke'emo again. This time her husband responded, “He’s a young man now.”

Welinu said nothing, but her eyes said, *This discussion isn’t over.*

After scarfing down breakfast, Rei-Jin packed his bag before Ke'emo and Omi left the house for the shop. It was best Welinu didn’t catch him by himself. He told them he’d be back after dark and left for the tavern. Rei-Jin waited out front for Talikai and Gioki. It wasn’t the first time Rei-Jin had volunteered to help the bordermen. But as the winter rains approached, they needed more hands and subsequently, Rei-Jin missed more school and was absent from the shop.

Talikai and Gioki greeted him, stamping their feet against the morning chill. They exchanged safe words to use when they were separated. Gioki’s was lilac. Talikai’s was rice pudding. Then they loaded Rei-Jin with their extra supplies. Rei-Jin felt like his spine would crumple under the strain, but kept pace with them as they headed out of town.

Rei-Jin had spent the previous years haunting the inn. Whenever he could convince a borderman, he’d practice shooting targets in the back garden. He was still best with his spear cannon, but was a fair shot with the crossbow and air rifle. When Eila wasn’t helping to clean the rooms, she’d challenge him to a shooting match. She usually won, but lately they kept getting the same scores.

They hiked across the twisted grass, their boots and knees turning dark from the dew. Rei-Jin knew the area well enough. He could remember playing in those fields. Now it was forbidden. Only bordermen were allowed to venture that far.

Since last year, Rei-Jin did small tasks like bring the men water or wood, or run

messages. His only equipment was his spear cannon. Bordermen got their supplies including armor, camping gear, and weapons as part of their initiation. For Rei-Jin, all of that was too expensive.

The walk to the border took a little under an hour. They passed clusters of blackened ground and stacks of wood. In the chalky ash, glints of white bone shone to the sky. They crested the steep mound and dropped their cargo at its top. A wall made from valley stones and masoned together with mud stood as tall as Talikai. To look over, borderman would climb up the narrow steps that acted as a watchout point.

They walked along the wall until they came to a small camp. A ring of stones encircled a modest fire. Two bordermen waited to be relieved of duty. They tightened the straps to their packs and slung them over their shoulders. Talikai exchanged safe words with them and the two gave a brief report of border activity. That done, they saluted and trudged down the slope back to town, minds already on a hot meal and a dry bed.

As Talikai and Gioki organized their supplies, Rei-Jin asked “What do you need me to do?” He hoped that they would take him to strengthen the line, a process in which they would use the precious dust to protect them from the shell.

“We need to check the stations,” Gioki said. Rei-Jin’s shoulders slumped. Grunt work. “It’ll keep you fit,” he laughed when he saw Rei-Jin’s face. “We need all the way to point twenty. If you enter sector D you’ve gone too far.” Rei-Jin rolled his eyes. Sector D was where the town Guia was. It was a full day’s travel. He settled a canteen over his shoulder and faced west.

It was six miles to point twenty. The points were about 1000 feet apart but only every other station was manned. He did a quick calculation to come up with fifteen stations he had to

check up on. If he hurried, he'd be back in time for lunch.

The sun crested the hills behind him. Rei-Jin stopped his jog and faced the red light. Warmth blossomed across his face and heated his chest and legs. There was only a small space between the horizon and the dark clouds above. It was the only light they'd have all day. Clouds pressed together, overlapping and building. He thought he could smell rain.

When he reached the first station, he could smell the greasy remnants of breakfast. The borderman on the wall came down to meet him.

Rei-Jin saluted with the code word and sign. "Need an update for Talikai."

The borderman nodded and flipped open the report book. "Two thirds a keg. One sighting. No encounters. One injury. Huron sprained his ankle."

Huron, who was slouched at the fire sat up straight. "Talikai don't need to know that!" he protested. "Leave that out of the report, kid."

"He tripped over his own rifle," his friend went on. "Be sure to remember that part. It's important." Huron chucked a clod of dirt at his friend. Rei-Jin recited the list to himself then jogged past, leaving Huron grumbling and his friend holding a stitch in his side.

As he went from station to station, Rei-Jin noticed that many of them were getting low on kegs of dust. Rei-Jin had learned a little about dust from overhearing conversations at the inn. He knew it was poisonous to shell. The bordermen laced their daggers and crossbow bolts with it to be more effective. But he also knew there were special ways that it could be used so the shell couldn't cross the border. To do that, you had to be trained. A borderman had to be ranked a doctor or higher to have precise knowledge of the rite and most of the bordermen Rei-Jin talked to were ranked Chiji.

Everyone in town knew the bordermen had their rites with magic words to hold off the

shell. And they knew that rain somehow undid the magic. Rainy season had become a time of apprehension ever since the raid three years ago. When Rei-Jin got the chance to talk to a doctor and asked about the rite, they explained in pieces, never telling him exactly.

It was almost noon when Rei-Jin returned. Talikai and Gioki were talking to a third borderman. Rei-Jin recited the report to Talikai. Talikai made note and said to the newcomer. "Lo-Ban, this here's our pack mule."

Rei-Jin waved to the man. He recognized Lo-Ban from when he used to be his teacher. Lo-Ban got into debt and became a borderman to pay off the creditors. Rei-Jin remembered the dull classes and the voice that tremored like an out of tune guitar lulling him to sleep on those hot summer days.

Lo-Ban turned and nodded. "Nice to meet you." Rei-Jin frowned at Lo-Ban's greeting. Nice to meet you? Rei-Jin had been Lo-Ban's largest headache for years. Lo-Ban turned to Talikai. "Stations are low on dust."

"Shipment doesn't come 'til next week. For now we'll have to focus on reinforcing the line on the outcropping." Talikai nodded up the hill.

"Risky," Lo-Ban said and shook his head. "It's too close to the town. They could set it on fire." Rei-Jin stared at the man. His voice had lost its stutter.

"Rei-Jin," Gioki said, "You head back to town. Nothing else you can help with today." Rei-Jin might have argued with him, but his mouth was dry. Gioki was well used to Rei-Jin's habit of loitering at the border. The man's face became stern. "You did your part. But we have work to do and can't look after you."

Rei-Jin's palm was slick around his spear cannon. He kept his body bladed against Lo-Ban. He glanced at the others. Talikai examined the report book with his back to Lo-

Ban. Gioki had his arms crossed and glared at Rei-Jin. They didn't suspect. But why should they? It had been a dry season so far.

"I'm not going to tell you again," Gioki told him and moved to the fire. "Now get back to town."

Lo-Ban stepped closer to Talikai. Rei-Jin felt his heart rate shoot up. "Point forty will be the first to go. It's close to the river. Water seeps in and washes the line out."

Not human. He wasn't human. Just a shell.

"Lo-Ban," Rei-Jin called. The man faced him. The spear cannon went off. The spearhead hit Lo-Ban over the heart and blade pierced flesh. Talikai bellowed. Gioki whipped around. But Rei-Jin had already hit retract. The spearhead snapped back and tore a hole through Lo-Ban's chest. He tipped forward with the pull and fell face first to the ground.

"What have you done!" Talikai crossed to him and swung his ax down. The blunt end caught Rei-Jin's arm and his cannon shattered. He fell to the ground and bit back tears. Gioki rushed to where Lo-Ban lay. He turned the body over to discover Lo-Ban was dead. "Shell!"

Rei-Jin shook his head and tried to speak. "I'm not. I'm not!" Talikai raised his ax, blade pointed downward. "Jinson!" Rei-Jin shouted. "My code word is Jinson!" Talikai's blade quivered. "Lo-Ban was the shell," he said. "He was a townsman. My teacher. I knew him before."

They stared at the body. The false shell of Lo-Ban stared into the sky, eyes wide with surprise. Rei-Jin smelled metal. He realized it was the smell of blood. What a strange smell for blood to have, like hot iron.

Talikai glared at him. "Give me your hand." Rei-Jin lifted his uninjured arm up. Talikai lowered his ax. Rei-Jin flinched as the blade pressed against the pad of his pinky. The skin split

and blood swelled up. Talikai reached for his pouch where the special dust was. Rei-Jin held his breath. Talikai licked the needle and dipped it into the pouch. On the tip, a rust-brown powder clung. It looked almost like cinnamon. Dust. Rei-Jin had never seen dust before. It was guarded, and only bordermen were allowed to carry a small pouch full. Talikai lowered the needle to the cut and rubbed the dust against the wound.

“Why are you doing that?” Rei-Jin asked.

“Shell can’t stand contact with the dust. Blow it in their eye, they go blind. Add it to their blood, it boils.” Rei-Jin stared at his finger. He felt a burn and his heart picked up. But Talikai nodded and dropped his hand. Apparently he passed. “You smelt him out. You really did. You’re sharp, Rei.”

“Why did you think he was a shell?” Gioki whispered.

“He talked different,” Rei-Jin said. “I knew him before he became a borderman. He used to stop and talk to me when we saw each other. But he didn’t know me,” he said and jerked his chin at the dead shell.

“He must have found out the safe word,” Talikai said.

Gioki shook his head and nodded at Rei-Jin. “Looked him straight in the eye. That’s what makes most men hesitate. The shell reminds them too much of who they knew. They don’t have the heart.” Rei-Jin held his pinky against his shirt. “Must have told the truth about the breach near the river,” Gioki went on. “Maybe there’s an ambush waiting for us. They took Lo-Ban, then were going to take us.”

“Sounds like one of their sick games,” Talikai said.

“No telling how many are in the town already,” Gioki said.

Talikai cursed. “It’s like Tiponi all over again.”

Rei-Jin knew the name of that place. He didn't remember from where. "What happened at Tiponi?" he asked.

"It was when Ocuta'o was captain," Talikai said. "City held for seven years. But shell got in. Took it over, one person at a time, patiently, for a year they fed. Amongst us, replacing us. They took two thirds of the people. And no one realized it. The shell acted friendly, like humans, kept trade going, did patrols. They would have turned the entire city, then moved to the others."

Rei-Jin knew Tiponi now. It was where his dad had died. He wanted to ask more. The crease in Talikai's face made him hesitate. "Who found them out?" Rei-Jin whispered.

"Pure accident. Backlands shipped a keg of dust. The shell had been requesting more and more. They wanted to destroy our supply. No one knows how, but a keg must have broken. Sent dust wafting out. And the people, the shell, started boiling, screaming from the poison."

"What did you do?"

"Me?" Talikai said and looked at him then. "I wasn't on the inside. Thank the dust. Me and the rest of my battalion were called in to make sure no one scaled the walls to escape." He turned back to the plain as though reading history as it unscrolled from the horizon. "The bordermen sealed off the town, leaving only one gate open so we could test the people leaving. We couldn't let it spread." He shook his head. His sockets seemed to draw in the shadow as he stared into the past. He spoke softly. "It was a bloodbath," Talikai said. "Pure panic. No one could trust anyone. Not even their own family. They slaughtered each other in those walls, driven mad with paranoia. Only a few hundred survived. Out of a city of fifty thousand. Hundreds."

Rei-Jin had been one of them. He had been a child. Barely able to walk or remember. But as Talikai spoke, he thought he could see those images click on in his mind. His mom carrying him on her hip, her free hand clasped the hand of his older brother Jinson. She forged her way to the gate alone, leaving her husband unburned. She didn't cry, and she didn't scream. She passed the murder, the bodies piled like cut hay, only stopping to bare her teeth, spit and growl to scare off anyone who came too close. Had that been her only defense? No. She must have had the spear cannon. She brandished it, hissing threats. And behind them the city burned.

Talikai slid his ax back into its carrying case and turned to face the town. Below them, Chanta-Ton was small, like a child's toy. Its streets were carved in the earth as though traced with a stick. The tavern perched defiant on the hill. Rei-Jin thought he could see Trade Street and Ke'emo's shop behind the house.

"We haven't lost it yet," Talikai said.

"There's no telling how long the shell have been here," Gioki said. "How many got through."

"It's not lost yet," Talikai argued. "We can still hold it. We have to."

"How?" Gioki said. "People do crazy things when they're scared. And then we'd have another Tiponi. People killing just because someone looks at them funny."

"Can't we use dust?" Rei-Jin voiced. "We can test them all like me." He held up his cut finger.

Talikai shook his head. "Too many people. Too little dust"

"And dust isn't worth saving a town from chaos?" Gioki said.

"Dust doesn't just protect this town. We have all of the backlands to think of. We'd lose

half a keg doing tests. And that could go to maintaining the line for months.”

“I have an idea,” Rei-Jin said. “We won’t use real dust. We’ll use something else. We’ll tell people it’s dust. We’ll know who the shell are from their reaction. Real people will do the test like I did. They’ll be nervous but they know they won’t be hurt from it. But to real shell, it’s poison. They won’t let you test them. They’ll try to run away or fight.”

The two bordermen exchanged glances. “Fake dust?” Gioki said. “Won’t the shell be able to ... to know somehow?”

“We could put the town on lockdown,” Talikai said. “Pass it off as a drill to keep everyone calm. Then we do a grid search to all the houses.” He turned to Rei-Jin and told him to alert the bordermen at the tavern so they could start shutting down the town. Talikai and Gioki would test the bordermen on duty to confirm they were human then return to town and help with the search. Rei-Jin nodded and took off towards the town at a jog.

At the tavern, Rei-Jin went directly to Sima'un who was the deacon over sector E. He was one of the older bordermen, about forty years old. He had straight dark hair, peppered with gray and a broad nose. Rei-Jin found him asleep on the floor of the main hall. Sima'un ate enough food for four men, slept off the drowsy splurge by the table, then woke up for his second round. He took to sleeping with his arms thrown over his face because his friends would try feeding him, slipping bread and sliced fruit into his gaping mouth as he snored.

Rei-Jin slid to his knees and shook Sima'un by the shoulders to wake him. The man gulped in a breath and his arms flopped to the floor.

“Soup ready?” he slurred.

Rei-Jin shook his shoulder again. “Deacon, Sima'un,” he coaxed. “It’s an emergency, sir.” The man’s dark eye peered from puffy eyelids. “Talikai needs a quarantine. On the whole town.” The group at the table stopped eating and turned to face them.

Sima'un stretched and rolled to his knees. Even seated, Sima'un towered over him. “Who are you?”

“I was with Talikai on the border,” Rei-Jin explained. “He said to tell everyone it’s a drill.”

“What’s the matter?” Sima'un asked and rubbed at his stubbled chin.

“There was a breach in the line,” Rei-Jin said in a low voice.

“For how long? How many got through? We going to test the whole town?”

“Do they know how much dust that will take?” another bordermen said.

“Talikai said he’ll explain once he gets back.”

Sima'un nodded and swaggered to his feet. He was a head taller than any man at his table. “Tell them to hold my soup,” he said and shrugged into his jerkin. Word spread through the hall and the boisterous laughs turned to murmurs.

“Anything I can do?” Rei-Jin spoke up.

“You a Peji?” Sima'un asked. It was the lowest ranking bordermen who had a year or less experience under his belt.

“I haven’t been instated yet,” Rei-Jin said.

“Then you can go home,” the deacon said. “And don’t tell anyone about this not being a drill.”

“I’ve done more than most Peji’s,” Rei-Jin argued. Which was true.

“Most Peji’s are ten years older than you,” he retorted. Also true. Before Rei-Jin could

argue his case further, there was a crash as someone dropped a teapot.

They turned to the noise and Rei-Jin spotted Eila with white porcelain around her feet. He smirked. Graceful as ever. E'olani would have her hide for breaking that. But then another glass fell to the ground, and another. Eila backed up, arms over her face. A woman was screaming and throwing things at her. The attacker was Eila's mother Iripora.

"Monster!" she was yelling. A few people who were close tried to stop Iripora, but she plowed over them and pounced on her daughter. She wrenched at Eila's hair. "You did this," she screamed. "You brought them here, didn't you!" Eila crumpled and tried to cover her head. Iripora fell on top of her, clawing, wailing on any inch she could reach. "You little monster!"

It took three bordermen to pull Iripora off. Even then, she curled her fingers into Eila's hair, clothes, kicking at her. "I'll kill you! Should have killed you the second you were born," she hollered.

E'olani hustled towards the commotion. She was used to Iripora's outbursts. She ordered Rei-Jin to get Iripora a cup of hot tea. When Rei-Jin came back, Eila had vanished and Iripora sobbed into E'olani's arms. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry." Rei-Jin couldn't tell who she was talking to.

Sima'un sounded the double bell and sent pairs of bordermen down the main streets to spread the word. Until the next chime, everyone was to stay in their homes. Anyone found outside before the drill was complete would be fined. By the time Talikai and Gioki returned to the tavern, Sima'un had the quarantine over the entire town.

Rei-Jin's plan was explained and groups of bordermen were equipped with the fake dust. As the teams headed out, Rei-Jin skirted next to Talikai.

"What about me?" Rei-Jin dared to ask.

Talikai hooked a thumb on his belt and considered Rei-Jin. "Gioki," he said. "How about you pair with Sima'un. I'll go with Rei." Rei-Jin's heart jumped and he forced himself to swallow a grin. "Go get an extra sword and breastplate from the back," Talikai nodded.

Rei-Jin dashed off to obey. Finally. No more grunt work. Action. The storage room had leather armor hanging from racks and weapons ranging from wind rifles to daggers. He selected the smallest leather breastplate he could find. Even then it was like he was wearing a box, the shoulder guards coming out too far and making his neck look nonexistent. He strapped a short sword around his waist and craned his neck to try and see how he looked. His hand passed over the leather straps.

"Cool," he smiled.

Rei-Jin turned back to join the town patrol. The hall was deserted now except for a few servers who shuffled around gathering up empty plates. As he reached the doorway, a hand grabbed him from behind. He yelped as the figure pulled him back. He recognized Eila's mother Iripora.

"They think I'm crazy," she hissed at him. Rei-Jin tried to pull free but her fingers, like slender metal bands, cold and hard.

He tried to tell her she was crazy. And drunk. And to let go of his arm. All he could say was, "Why?"

"I told them she's not human."

"You mean Eila?"

“Father wasn’t human. She’s a monster. She’s zombie.” Rei-Jin could only stare up into her face as Iripora leaned in. “They infected me with their seed. She’s one of them. Spy.”

Rei-Jin found his voice. “I have to go. Talikai said-”

“Look in her eyes,” Iripora whispered and shook him as though trying to wake him up. Sweat drenched her face. Her tongue moved in a ring around her mouth to lap at the salty drops. “Don’t you see her eyes? The zombie took my husband in Tiponi.” He felt the hairs on the back of his neck go up. “I knew it wasn’t him. It forced me. Infected me with its spawn. No one would believe me. I ran away. And that thing was born. And I was right. I was right,” she said and pulled him close. “Tiponi was full of shell. You believe me,” she said. “You believe me, don’t you, Rei-Jin?”

His mouth was dry.

A tisk sounded behind them. E’olani shook her head. “There you are, Iri. I told you to rest.” E’olani took Iripora by the arm. Rei-Jin pulled freed as her grip on him melted. The two women hobbled towards the rooms.

Talikai and Rei-Jin took the back end of the town and moved inwards. At every house, Rei-Jin felt his heart pound in the seconds before the door opened. But they were only met with wide eyes and scared families gathered around the stove and holding hands.

“I need your help,” Talikai told him as they approached the first house. “You know most of the people here. Keep your eyes open. Let me know if you see anything strange.” Rei-Jin nodded.

Everyone asked questions. They were desperate to know if something had happened, if

the line had broken, and if it would be safer to go to the inn for protection. Talikai reassured them expertly. He smiled warmly and joked, but out of the corner of his eye, he watched Rei-Jin for any signal that something was wrong. But for every test Talikai did, every person calmly submitted.

After the last house on the street, Talikai pulled out a map and glanced at the streets. “Let’s hit the next road over. We should run into Sima’un and Gioki.” It was still three hours until dusk but the streets were deserted as though it were midnight. The quiet was the thing Rei-Jin found most unnerving. At this time of day, the food vendors would raise their calls and cut their prices as the day came to an end. They tried to lure buyers by turning their thoughts to dinner. They sang high and long, “Fry-ied paste-eh-el. Two-oooh for wu-un!” Those with gardens loaded the produce of the season into small handcarts and push through the crowds. “Toh-mate-oh! To-oh-mato!”

Now the only sound to break the hush was their feet against the cobblestones and their fist against doorframes. As he followed Talikai to the street corner, Rei-Jin saw someone down a side street. He turned to see if Gioki had already finished that street and was waiting for them. But it wasn’t Gioki. Or any borderman.

Rei-Jin froze. He knew the face, the shape of the body, the high chested proud walk. But the face seemed to flicker in his mind’s eye, readjusting memory to reality. Rei-Jin’s mom looked at him and they locked eyes. She didn’t smile or wave, just looked, and then turned down the side street. He felt his heart hammering and realized that his feet had started moving after her.

“Rei-Jin,” Talikai said. “Where you going?”

“This way,” was all he could say. Talikai mistook the statement as a summons and

followed after him. Rei-Jin reached the street just in time to see the figure turn the next corner. He picked up his pace and followed her.

“What are you doing?” Talikai said.

“There’s ... someone,” he answered. “Someone in the street.”

They continued on until Talikai said. “I saw them. If they’re trying to avoid us, it can’t be good.” And then they ran. Dodging, cutting into side streets, but the figure was always just ahead, just a little bit further, always out of sight.

They came to the back end of town and a broad street. Rei-Jin halted. She stood under an awning, watching something across the street, an intent stare that said, “look there.” He turned and scanned the scene. There were three houses, all sand colored and surrounded by tall grass and a few dormant flower beds. A man was staring at him and Talikai. When he realized he had been seen, the man ran up the steps and slammed the door closed.

“There he is,” Talikai said and pointed to where the man dodged into the house. “Did you see him?”

Rei-Jin spun back to the place where his mother stood but she had vanished. He swept the street but there was no clue as to where she had gone. He shook himself and turned back to the cottage. “That was the miller Fi-Inoro,” Rei-Jin said and frowned. “That’s not his house.”

Talikai unstrapped his crossbow. He passed it to Rei-Jin and said, “If either of us come out the front, kill us. If we come out the back, we’re human.” Rei-Jin took the crossbow and nodded. “Don’t flinch.”

“I won’t, sir,” he said.

Talikai, wind pistol in hand, crept around the cottage. Rei-Jin wedged himself in the doorway of the house opposite and propped the weapon on his knee. The captain disappeared

around the back. Silence pressed the seconds. There was a shot from inside the cottage. The door jerked open.

A woman bolted out of the front. Her skirt was curled in her fists. She ran towards the road, straight into Rei-Jin's sights. Rei-Jin let off three shots. The bolts hit her center. She jerked at each hit and slowed. Her eyes were wide and black hair tangled around her face like a veil. She fell to a knee, one arm holding her chest. She wavered to rise. Rei-Jin's heart thudded. He pumped another bolt into the barrel. His arms were tight to keep them from shaking. He took careful aim this time. The bolt struck her through the heart. She tipped backwards and collapsed. He cocked the crossbow again and stared at the woman. He waited, his muscles ratcheting tighter with each pulse of his heart.

Rei-Jin scanned the cottage. There was no other movement. Crossbow held at his eye, he stood and inched towards the street. The woman's face was covered by her hair. He had seen the woman before though didn't know her name. He paused by her body. Crimson soaked through her clothes and pooled in the creases between the cobblestones, tracing a path with an invisible finger. She didn't stir.

Rei-Jin crept down the path to the front door. It was crooked in its frame, jammed from the woman's haste to escape. He edged to the side to peer into the house. A body lay facedown on the floor with its legs curled under it. It was the miller Fi-Inoro, shot in the back of the head. A meaty wound protruded from his hair. Shifting further he saw two other bodies. One was a townsman. He had been stabbed in the neck. Propped next to him was Talikai. He was breathing heavily and held his right leg. The mat beneath him looked stained brown.

Rei-Jin kept the crossbow centered. Talikai looked up at him. "If I could walk, I'd go out the back," he almost laughed.

Rei-Jin still didn't move. "Jinson," he said.

"Rice pudding," Talikai replied. Their safe words exchanged, Rei-Jin let the weapon drop to his side and fell next to the captain. Talikai's pants mixed with his flesh until it looked like the leather was his skin, shredded and bleeding. The captain tied a tourniquet above his knee to staunch the blood. "There were three of them," Talikai said. "Just saw the two. Third was under the table. Jumped me as I took out the one." His face was pale as though the skin on his face had been peeled off, leaving a green-blue shadow where he should be tan. "You get the other?" Rei-Jin nodded. "Good, man. Tell someone at the inn to come pick me up. Then you go and join Gioki."

Rei-Jin wove through the streets at a jog back to the tavern. The woman he shot was a friend of his mom. She was soft spoken and shy. Whenever Rei-Jin would see her, she talked to the floor and blushed into her hair as she held it to her mouth. In the seconds it took him to aim and pull the trigger, Rei-Jin thought she might not be a shell. What if she hadn't known? What if she had been held hostage? What if she had tried to run from the killing? That would mean she had been human and that Rei-Jin had ... had shot her. Killed her.

He was so absorbed in this thought that he almost didn't see person on the street until they were a few feet away from each other. He stepped to the side to move around her, but then he saw it was his mom. He thought he felt the crescent scar on his arm tighten. For a moment, he didn't know what to do. Shoot her? Ask why she had led him to the cottage of shell? Ask if the woman he killed really had been a shell?

The woman smiled and revealed delicate white teeth and Rei-Jin felt his heart burn, swelling with rage until it took over his entire chest and crushed the breath out of his lungs. He aimed the crossbow. Her eyes were creased with her smile. She held a shawl to shield her

shoulders from the cold. Every line in her face was as he remembered.

She paced across the street, walking backwards as she went. It was like he was in a trance. The crossbow followed her, his eyes stayed locked on hers. He had seven bolts left in the clip. All he had to do was pull the trigger. His arm ached from the strain of holding the crossbow out. It trembled. She was almost to the next street corner now. He squeezed the trigger. But she was gone before the bolt hit. His arm dropped and he stared after her. For a second he couldn't remember where he was going. Talikai needed medical attention, he reminded himself. He turned and retraced his path to the main road.

Six other shells were found and killed. Besides Talikai, four others were hurt and two died, making it twenty deaths in total counting the vanished shell had eaten. Not added to the death toll was Eila's mom Iripora. She hung herself from the rafters of her house. Eila was the one who found the body.

"We're moving north," Ke'emo said. "I have cousins in Urabara." The four of them sat around the table eating their meal of flatbread and mashed roots. Welinu's face was passive. She looked more sad than victorious. Omi froze with the bread inches from his mouth.

"Why?" he asked.

"We only have one wagon. The tools will take up most of the space," Ke'emo went on.

"What about -" Omi shook his head. "Papi and mimi and here and uncle Wrenoto and ... Eila's all alone now."

"Wrenoto's waiting until spring for when my parents can travel," Welinu said.

"Why can't we wait? When are we leaving? And what about Rei-Jin? He's a

borderman now.”

Eyes turned to Rei-Jin. He had wanted to tell them later. He shot a glare at Omi then faced his adoptive parents. “Talikai said he’d instate me next week,” Rei-Jin said.

“You’re only eleven,” Welinu said.

“I’m old enough to fight,” he said.

“We hope you come with us,” Ke'emo broke in. “But it’s your choice.” He said the last looking his wife in the eye. She pursed her lips and turned away.

Omi turned to him. “You’re coming, aren’t you, Rei?”

Rei-Jin stared at his bread.

“He doesn’t have to answer now,” Ke'emo said. “It’s a big decision.”

“But he has to come,” Omi said. “He’s my brother. That makes him your son too, you know!” He went out the back and slammed the door behind him.

Welinu touched her throat. “Omi!”

Ke'emo stood and looked out the back. “It’s okay. He’s in the shop.”

“He shouldn’t be out there alone,” she said. “Ke'emo, get him in the house.”

Rei-Jin paced to the door. “I’ll get him,” he said and slipped outside. He could hear their voices rise into an argument as he went down the back steps. The shop was always warm. At night Ke'emo covered the coals to keep them fresh until morning, then pumped the bellows like a drummer pounding a calfskin until the coals peered out with red eyes. The cool from the night snaked through the cracks in the walls and made his sweat chill.

Omi sat on the main anvil that was almost as large as a table. Rei-Jin eyed the other tools and wondered how the wagon would carry it all. When Omi noticed he wasn’t alone, he turned to the workbench and shuffled through the odd scraps of metal.

“Don’t be mad,” Rei-Jin said from the doorway.

“I’m not,” Omi growled. “Not at you.”

“Then what?”

“Nothing,” Omi said. “Myself. I don’t know.” He spun to Rei-Jin. “Do you have to stay? Why do you have to leave? I know you don’t feel you’re family, but you are. You can’t change that.”

“I’ll be instated,” Rei-Jin said. “I have to go on patrol where I’m ordered. For however long they say.”

“But why?”

“That’s what bordermen do.”

“You don’t have to be instated,” Omi shot back. “You can say no.”

“No I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Rei-Jin stared at Omi until he looked away. “I’m going to find a way to stop the shell,” Rei-Jin said. Omi shook his head. “We won’t have to run anymore,” Rei-Jin went on. “We won’t have to be scared.”

“Are you scared?” Omi asked.

He paused. “You know that fear we have, like that pit in our stomach. And it just sits there. And we try and starve it out of us, or fill up so much we can’t feel it anymore. But it’s always there. Like we know what’s going to happen.” Omi didn’t answer. “I’m going to get rid of it. We’ll never have to be scared again.”

“How?”

Rei-Jin’s gaze shifted to the wall. “I’ll find a way,” he repeated.

“You could die,” Omi said. “You see what it does to mom when you leave. She’s scared for you. I’m scared,” he yelled.

“I’m not going to die, Omi.”

“Milono didn’t think so either. Where’s he?” He spun away so Rei-Jin was forced to stare at his back, the frayed green jacket. Rei-Jin had patched it several times himself. The left sleeve had a dark crescent mark from an ember that jumped out of the fire. At the shoulders, the sleeves stretched and showed the stitching when Omi moved his arms forwards. It was Milono’s coat. Omi had nearly outgrown it.

Rei-Jin felt his eyes sting and was glad Omi was faced the other way. I’m not Milono, he wanted to scream. He just started at the green fabric and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

“Dad didn’t make it in time to save Milono,” Omi said. He spoke to the wall, addressing the tools as his audience. “The zombie was already starting to change into him. Dad has to live with the fact that he let Milono die ... but also that he killed him. It was Milono’s face. I thought about becoming a borderman with you.” Omi turned to him. His eyes were red. “But I don’t think I could do that. I thought dad killed him. For a second I thought he killed Milono. Sometimes I wake up at night. And I still don’t know if he did.” He shook his head and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Nothing’s the same. I’m not the same. I don’t know who I am anymore.” Omi picked up a mallet and weighed it in his hand like he would strike it against the anvil, beat something out into a new form. “I still laugh. I still work. I still love my family but ...” He placed the hammer back on the rack. “I’m not a part of anything anymore,” he said. “Not even myself.”

“I know,” Rei-Jin said. Omi turned, his eyes wide but creased at the same time. “I saw ... I was there when my brother Jinson died.” Rei-Jin crossed the room and leaned against the

work table next to him. “We’re still here,” he said.

The funeral was the next morning. The twelve bodies including Eila’s mom were laid in the pyre. They were wrapped tight in blue linen. He remembered the lullaby he mother sung to him of the Blue Lady. He closed his eyes and breathed deep. The smoke would carry them upwards. They’d be freed to the sky where even the clouds couldn’t touch them. A place with no night. No tears. He felt a hand on his shoulder and knew it was Welinu. He focused on its weight to keep him anchored to the ground.

When he opened his eyes, Omi had passed to the front of the crowd to hug Eila. His shirt was already dark from her tears. Rei-Jin couldn’t hear what he said, but Eila smiled and wiped her face. He passed her something wrapped in cloth, small, about the size of her palm. He scratched the back of his neck and smiled as he hurried back to stand by his parents and Rei-Jin.

Eila would stay in Chanta-Ton. The innkeeper E’olani offered to take care of her. E’olani stood behind Eila like her shadow. Eila opened Omi’s gift and looked over to thank him. For a moment, her gaze met Rei-Jin’s. Her eyes were bloodshot and made the blue turn into molten sapphire drops. He shivered and looked away.

The fire was started. The smell was all too familiar. Beyond the sweet crisp wood there was burnt hair and rotting. Rei-Jin glared at the red flames. His dad hadn’t received a proper funeral. Neither had his mother. Did that mean they were trapped? Could they still find the way to the sky without the gentle smoke pulling them upwards? His glare turned to Eila. At least her mother hadn’t vanished.

The shroud blackened and peeled back as though the fire unwrapped the parcel. And for

a second, just before the smoke turned thick and black, Iripora was there. A sleeping doll.

Eila stared into the fire and watched her mom's skin curl and pop. Rei-Jin saw the red flames freeze in the deep pools of her eyes.

The Legend

Year 13:

At dusk, the rain stilled and they turned the perimeter lights on. There was a silent file of bodies a few hundred yards from the wall. Watching. Their eyes were invisible from that distance, but their gazes were felt. They didn't pace, they didn't prepare, they only stood. A few tried soothing at them from the wall but they were just out of range.

"What are they planning?" Puale said.

One of the twins, Rei-Jin couldn't tell which one, turned to him. "What would they be planning?" the twin asked.

"Look at them," Puale spat. "What else are they doing? They're waiting for something."

"Maybe," the twin said.

"We need to - to -"

"To what?" Ke'emo broke in. "To march out there and attack them? To abandon the wall, our only strategic defense, to fight the zombie on their terms? We're not going to do anything."

"What if that's what they want?" Puale insisted.

"What are you talking about?" the twin said.

"They're waiting for something," Puale yelled. A purple belch flickered in the heavy belly of the approaching storm clouds. "They could already be on the inside. We have hundreds of refugees. Any of them, maybe all of them are zombies."

Daylight was consumed in pieces, the horizon diming, then the sky directly above them,

like a bedcover thrown over their heads. There were at least five reports every day of riots. People fighting against each other, convinced there were things less than human, and darker than the storm hiding, lurking in the person at their elbow.

Omi's three uncles and dad had volunteered for the first line of response. Omi volunteered as well when he had heard Rei-Jin was escorting a caravan of refugees to the city. His mom must have thrown a fit. The two stood side by side. Omi's face looked pale in the light.

"Shoot it down!" came the yell. Rei-Jin shook himself and ran to the edge of the wall. The spotlight caught a single figure dashing over the narrow no-mans-land. Shots bit at the ground around it. Makalano and A'inane, again he could tell which, joined in the frenzy, their wind rifles hissing out compressed air.

Ke'emo shoved his brothers. "Don't waste the bullets."

Then shouts came from the left. "There's another!"

Rei-Jin glanced over. It was like watching a dam break. The runners came slow at first, two or three. Either bored or curious. Then more followed. They dodged like dancers, their feet flitting over the ground in arbitrary twirls and leaps. When the first made it to the wall, Rei-Jin's heart spiked. It sunk its fingernails into the stone and launched itself upwards with a single heave. It rose five feet, then clung there to prepare for another boost. Others made it to the base and did the same.

The uncles spotted one under their post. Ke'emo swore. They shot down at it, pegging it's face and shoulders with rounds. There was a low gargle as the shell growled. They were only making it mad.

"Shoot it's hands," Rei-Jin ordered as it launched upwards again. It was only an arm's

reach away. The uncles obeyed and riddled the rock at the creature's hands. It made a skitter for new handholds but Puale shoved his brother aside and pressed his cheek against the stock. He shot it through the eye. The shell flinched and fell.

One of the twins gave a whoop. "Eat it, zombie. Eat it and like it."

"There's more on our left!" Omi alerted. The group shifted to intercept. Rei-Jin grabbed a handful of bullets out of the barrel and poured them into magazine. The attack was coming steady now. He checked the rest of the wall to see how they were doing. Fighters moved around, perched on the lip of the wall, barrels pointed down. So far no shell had made it to the top. Rei-Jin glanced out and felt his heart drop. The mass was still there. Staring. Like dogs waiting for their master's call. The attack was weak. The wouldn't take the wall that way. He thought of what Puale said. Could they be planning something?

Rei-Jin scanned the scene once again. There was something wrong. Something. He could feel it pressing down with the approaching front. Then he saw a light go out. He spun around and saw that the spotlight they were meant to be posted was abandoned. The shell were leading them away.

Rei-Jin grabbed the uncles' shoulders. "Protect the lights!" he shouted. He shoved them towards the spotlights, yelling over his shoulder so others could hear. "They're trying to draw us away from the lights." Rei-Jin spotted three shell leaping up the wall at the light near their post. The uncles took dodged shots while sprinting back to the post. One shell slipped and hung from a hand.

"Bring it down!" one of them barked.

The air hissed with the escape of compressed air. The shell glared at them and leapt down.

“Omi, wait!” Ke'emo yelled. His son didn't have a rifle so hadn't stopped.

Omi was the first to reach the post. He swung out his axe just as a shell scrambled to a perch on the wall. It dodged the blade.

Ke'emo and the uncles reached the post. The second shell hopped on the wall to the side and flanked them. The shell waited. Puale let off a rapid succession of shots. The shell skittered to the side and dodged. Makalano and the twins did the same to the other to try and take it out.

Rei-Jin knew the shell were making them waste their bullets so when the men had to pause and load ... But he didn't have time to warn them. Already Puale flipped the magazine open and fumbled for his pocket. A shell pounced on him. The twins rushed to Puale's aid while Ke'emo and Omi held off the other one.

The two metal smiths took turns swinging as though they worked metal on an anvil. At last, Omi's axe head buried in the creature's thigh. It jerked back, ripping the weapon from Omi's hands. The shell pulled the axe free and dropped it to the ground. Omi retreated.

“Down!” Rei-Jin shouted. Omi dove to the side and Rei-Jin fired twice in between its eyes. But then something came at him from the side. The third one. It had climbed back up. Rei-Jin spun his barrel to meet it, but the shell loped past him.

“The light!” Rei-Jin warned.

Too late. Sparks exploded and skipped across the wet rock like embers. The light went dark and for a moment so did Rei-Jin's vision. He blinked and rubbed, all the time swinging his rifle out like a sword to keep the shells away.

“Got you, Rei!” someone said and there was a thunk like an axe to a log. His vision came back, dim and purple at first. The shell lay dead at his feet, cut through shoulder halfway through its chest. The twins pressed their palms into their eye sockets. Puale was at the wall

shooting. Ke'emo returned the axe to the loop at his belt and slapped Rei-Jin on the back. "Close one."

They joined Puale at the wall. The stream of shell fell back. They had done the needed damage. Across the wall, lights winked out like candles snuffed by breath and forced them into night. Puale grabbed the barrel of bullets. "Let's get off the wall."

"We stay," said a twin. Rei-Jin thought it was Makalano from the deep heft of his voice.

"There's still some light," his twin agreed.

"You're crazy," Puale hissed. "What if you don't see one? And it gets up?"

"Someone needs to make sure the shell don't swarm all at once," Makalano said. "Go ahead, big brother. Take Omi and go."

"I'm staying with Rei-Jin," Omi said.

Ke'emo's smile shone in the dark. "Hear that? You're on your own, Puale."

With a grumble, Puale hedged himself between the twins and aimed his rifle over the wall. "If we die, don't blame me." Tension pulled at time and strained it to a breaking point. They scowled at the landscape down their barrels, only flinching to add more bullets or wipe sweat off their faces. They stayed posted for almost an hour. Rain drifted over them in a fine mist and beaded over their clothes.

"There's the flare," Omi said. The others followed his finger to the sky.

Puale said and sighed a breath of relief. "We have to fall back to the barricade."

The twins kept their posts, peering into the dark. "Right behind you," Makalano said.

Puale's mouth firmed. "The bordermen gave the order," he said. "Rei-Jin, will you tell these blockheads we have to go?" Rei-Jin was barely listening. He was watching the wall. There were three lights still working though they wouldn't last long. He could see the dark

shadows of fighters retreating down the steps to obey the order. His eye was drawn to a single figure much closer. His finger rubbed the trigger guard to his rifle. It wasn't a borderman, and he was alone, cradling a rifle and making his way towards the group at a jog.

Rei-Jin brought the stock to his shoulder and took aim. "Stop right there," he barked. "Turn around. Use the steps behind you."

The uncles glanced over. "Who's that?"

The man waved and gave a tired smile. "Have to evacuate-" he started. Rei-Jin dropped the man- a shot clean through the head - before he could reach them.

"What - What did you do?" Makalano gaped.

Rei-Jin lowered the rifle. "He wouldn't listen. Can't take chances."

"He knows what he's doing," Ke'emo said.

"What if he wasn't a zombie?" the twin accused. "You just killed someone!"

"It would be worse if he was one," was Rei-Jin's answer. "We need to get off the wall."

"I'm not running," A'inane said.

"The river cuts the city in half. The bridges are easy to defend. You know the plan," Rei-Jin said. "We're no good here. We need to hold the barricade so everyone can escape."

They grabbed what supplies they could carry, ammunition mostly, then the group retreated. The rain dove at them in fat drops. In the streets, there were a few straggling refugees but most were fighters from the wall.

Everyone evacuated to the northern half of the city. Four main bridges connected the safe zone from the breached section of the city. Barricades were set up a few blocks in front of the bridges to hold off the shell until the refugees could make it across.

Rei-Jin sent Ke'emo to run and check on the retreat. Meanwhile, he and the others posted

themselves in front of the market area and town square. Once the refugees were safe, the bordermen would fall back. The aluminum decked bridges had been rigged to several generators. When the shell tried to cross they'd have sixty amps coursing through their system, enough to kill a man twice over.

For now, they needed time. The refugees were bottlenecked at the bridges. They'd be slaughtered if the shell fell on them. The square was a vast open space and the shell filled it, pooling over the scene like cockroaches. Rain splattered on Rei-Jin's arms and face. He kept his eyes wide open. Shell leapt over abandoned booths. Omi stood in shock, his hands limp at his sides, fingers so loose the axe could have rolled from them.

"Get ready," Rei-Jin shouted and raised his wind rifle. The command woke Omi. He hefted his doubled sided axe, ready to swing.

Rei-Jin picked off what leaders he could see until they got in too close for his rifle. He switched to his sword and braced for the unseen horde. One came right for him. The shell's face shone like the surface of the moon, calm and distant, a lure of beauty. Gold hair framed its colorless eyes.

Rei-Jin let heat fill his chest and swung the sword at a shell's neck. Metal bit into bone and stuck. He let the sword go and it hung quivering in its collarbone. The shell was too full of bloodlust to realize it was dead and kept coming towards him. Rei-Jin pulled his butterfly daggers out of his belt and thrust his hands forward. The blades sunk into its chest, one at the navel, the other through the ribs at the heart. He let the limp corpse drop. Twenty more foes took the shell's place.

Rei-Jin tried to keep the entire battlefield in his view as he dodged between enemies. A line of fighters held off the assault at their makeshift barricade on the right flank. Bordermen

fought back to back in the thick of it and those who fell were swarmed until, like locust on crops, nothing was left. What little was left could barely be called human remains.

Omi and his uncles were at Rei-Jin's side. Their swings were like shockwaves, shell falling back at every swipe. The ground was thick with blood and rain. The movement of feet made the mud look like the earth was clotting.

Ke'emo returned and Rei-Jin stepped back to yell to him, "Those civilians clear yet?"

"Problem," he reported. "Powerlines to the west bridge got wet and shorted out the generator."

"Can't they get another one?" Rei-Jin asked.

"None big enough."

Omi shouldered his way into the circle. "There's a generator in the city hall," he said. "That one should do it."

"That's on the other side of the square," Puale protested. "Even if we make it over there, generator's too heavy. We'd move too slow. We'd be slaughtered trying to bring it back."

"And we're dead if we don't," Rei-Jin said. "We need those bridges wired. Have to draw them away from the square so a group can make it to the hall."

"How?"

"The lights," Rei-Jin explained. "While one team gets the generator, another needs to turn on the lights to draw the shells to the buildings."

"The zombies go after the lights leaving the way clear to the hall," Ke'emo nodded. "It just might work." He nudged Makalano. "Bet I can make it to the hall before you."

"Not before I reach the generator and bring it back," Omi grinned.

Ke'emo faced his son. "You're staying here. It's too dangerous."

“And it’s not dangerous for you?” Omi challenged.

“You’re not going.”

Rei-Jin placed a hand on his brother’s arm. “Omi, we have to draw the shell away from them.” Omi glanced between them and gave in. Ke'emo gave Rei-Jin a nod of thanks. “Let’s move,” Rei-Jin said. The group split. He and Omi sprinted through the empty stands.