

CHAPTER 1

*In which we meet Able and learn of his
simple existence in the Shattered Land.*

In a flat stretch between the Delphine Meteor rolling along its canyon, and the Silt Sea shifting in undulations of dust, there was a place called the Desert of Idex MorteZ. It was a barren gray vista made up of ancient stone tablets—piled precariously—as high as buildings in places. The piles of tablets lean in all directions as they erode and turn to dust. Upon those millions of stone artifacts were chiseled stories both true and false, philosophies and theories, both true and false, secrets, and myths. They were discarded writings from another age, long forgotten. Even the many languages they were written in are no longer known to anyone.

The piles of ancient texts were interrupted by mesas that lorded over the vast wasteland. There were giant, fossilized trilobites and silt centipedes. Their transparent exoskeletons were draped across the view, many frozen forever in death, in which smaller creatures, like silverfish and scurrying six-legged cybernetic rats, made homes.

A boy named Able lived in the desert of Idex MorteZ. At night, while Able poked about the tablets for injured or friendly animals, there were only just a few stars in the night sky and even those had faded to what looked like red smudges. It is black at night in the Desert of Idex MorteZ. There is no moon, just a band of faded blue dust stretching

across the sky.

The mesas move only at night. Occasionally some errant trader might ride a centipede through the area, looking for schwag or treasure (it is said there are still *books* in the desert). Those travelers often make the mistake of making camp near a mesa. And when a mesa stands, ripping its long-settled bulk from its crater, stretching out its spindly, crustacean legs, its sudden locution can be heard for miles around like thunder. It is a mystery why the mesas of the Desert of Idex Morteaz move at all, but they do, walking for a few hours in the dark of night, lit up by static lightning, only to crash down their entire bulk on a new spot for reasons known only to themselves.

While it is difficult to tell a dead mesa from a living one, it is not impossible. A dead mesa's legs will close up around itself in a tight, spiny fist; like a dried-out spider. Another sign of life is the ultrasonic noise that living mesas put out. You cannot hear it, but you can feel it in the ground. There are other ways, other signs, but the first sign is the best guarantee of some safety.

Nestled beneath one such dead mesa, there is a rusty shack where a man named Jedediah and his family live. He has a wife, Evo and two sons: Able and Kane. Evo is sick and bedridden in the shack, her body covered in rough blankets and surrounded by pumps and machines that are keeping her alive. The older brother is a nasty brute; one who decided to turn his discomfort and pain on others. The youngest son is Able.

Every day, Jedediah and his two sons travel out into the desert where they gather the ancient tablets, stacking them on carts and hauling the refuse back to a clearing between the great dead mesa and their homestead. There, they load the tablets onto a brundlex, which scans the tablets and then pushes them along a conveyor belt where they are crushed. Out of the back of the brundlex comes blackrock—a fuel that can be sold to the

trader caravans and others. With the right technology, blackrock can be used to create small amounts of energy, enough to run other brundlexes. The desert rodents, with their built-in brundlexes thrive on blackrock.

A second substance comes from the process. To nearly anyone, it simply looks like dust. But Able can tell the difference between mere dust and electrol. Jedediah keeps the electrol for his younger son Able. The boy has a strange knack for making things with it. It is, without question, a heretical behavior to make the things that Able does. The things... the things-that-move-of-their-own—even the things keeping his wife Evo alive—they are of a spontaneous nature, not of Enubys. One does make Enubys in the face of Enubys. Movement without soul is to spit in the face of Enubys, but Jedediah is old and tired and loves his wife, so he looks past Able's abilities and strange creations. Still, Jedediah is suspicious of his adopted son and believes him to be cursed.



The desert rodent nearby spews smoke and particles of electrol in an effort to move, but its four back legs are shredded from where a tower of tablets had collapsed on it. It squeaked in panic as Able reached for it. "There, there. You're all right." His words do not calm the creature but it does not defend itself. Able grasps the metallic rat with one hand underneath its first forearms and holds it up in front of his face. Its shining orange eyes beam out and search Able; scan his face. He can see that its light is fading. "You're going to be all right."

The first thing Able does is press his free thumb to the top of the rat's head. The

lights in its eyes go out. He laid the rat on its back and removed a bag of electrol from his belt. He poured it liberally on the little creature's back legs and then with a sewing motion, worked the electrol into the legs where it formed new shafts and ligaments. After ten minutes, the rat's four back legs are strong and he once again holds the rat in front of him, presses his thumb to the rat's head, and the lights in its eyes return.

"There. All fixed!"

The rat, detecting its newfound mobility, squirmed in Able's grasp and tried to get free. Able quickly lets it go where it scurried off into a crack between piles of tablets. Able rolls his eyes. "You're welcome."



Evo lay buried among hissing brundlexes that her son Able made for her. She lay in a tattered and gray linen nightgown. In a fever she has pushed all the blankets aside. A mask on her face covered her nose and mouth and only let her breathe with difficulty. Able stood in the doorway, listening to the hum of his machines that are breathing for her. The tall accordion towers surround her and moved asynchronously up and down with tiny huffs and sucking sounds; liquids gush and rush from one tower to another, in to a sphere that spun the liquid and dispensed it again.

Although he brought the machines into existence, he does not know how they function. It is the way of the electrol that he gives his creations a will and a purpose—though he knows the purpose is unnecessary. As bad as he feels for his mother, he feels bad for the machines as well. They will never know more than to do one thing over and

over and over.

The small back room where his mother lay is a miniature city skyline, filled with tubes and pipes and dirty glass huddled in around the valley of where her body lay on a small, rotting mattress. A single window, high up on the rickety bedroom wall allows in light, and a tea-colored light pushed through the twin filters of dirt.

Able holds his hands uselessly at his side, then clasps them behind his back. He put them at his side again—watching as the machines made their symphony. The tired light in the room captured and framed a hundred motes of dust, each in a Brownian dance. He closed his eyes and took a moment to miss her. He travels backwards.

Lost in memories behind closed eyes now, he turns his head up from the floor, playing with bits of rock, to see her looking at him with that familiar and perplexed look on her face, wondering at the measure of oddity in him. He sits and plays with electrol creations that roll about on the floor, aimless but excited. Then, as always she smiles and pats him on the head, the sun behind her silhouette, yellow and streaming. "You are so special Able. You are one of a kind. I love you."

Able opens his eyes to the reality of the room, filled with colors like mold, mildew, rot, and he is not sure why he remembers the sunlight ever being golden. Outside dust devils come to rattle the windows and pay their respects with obsidian-eyed sorrow. East, further off from Jedidiah's little valley, running against the dun-colored sunrises, marred by wavy lines of heat, run the silhouettes of the traders' centipede caravans; slow, rumbling, and multi-legged.



Able slipped quiet into his room after foraging with his father for the morning. He slid a loop of twine around the door knob and a rusty nail in the wall—a privacy of sorts. Able smiled to himself as he reached underneath his cot for a secret treasure. He smiled because he knows that not all the ideas in the desert are dead, that not all machines have purposes. He has three that he calls his *mistakes*. They are, all three, small orbs of shifting parts and lights. They are more to him than the machines he's created to assist his mother, at his father's command. These "mistakes" have no purpose.

When Able has spoken to his Father of machines he has made, his Father's answer is always the same: "This is a valley of men and women who have been outspoken against the True nature of things; who have thought their words history! They have all been wrong! Their petty and unnatural thoughts have come to rest here because ideas cannot outlast the Ungod of Time. All those outspoken against the True Nature of the universe are dead and wrong. They die with their mistakes. And there is no idea ever conceived that does not rest here; in this desert at the end. Enubys is entropy, boy. Entropy is all."

Able's mistakes rolled about the floor, lighting up, whirred and blinked as they bumped into the cot and Able and each other. He could hear the sound of his mother's kind voice, asking him, *What are you dreaming, Able?* Unlike his other creations, these three mistakes were created with no purpose. Instead, when he made them, he tried to imagine what purpose they might want for themselves.

Po, the littlest of the three wants very little. Able amused himself by walking around the room in a circle and watching as Po followed him everywhere, dodging the other two more rambunctious mistakes, singing a short sweet song of relief when Able sat down and Po could roll up against him and also sit in quiet.

Ka and Nip were much more content to explore the room to its edges, sometimes getting into pushing matches with each other when their paths crossed. In large part they ignored Able and Po except when Able has gathered the electrol to feed them. When Able placed his hand down with a small pile of what he saw as shiny dust, they rolled to him in a hurry and sucked it up with tinks and blips of satisfaction. Able fed Po separately for this reason; the littlest of the three could not compete with its siblings when a feeding happened.

After a feeding, all three of his mistakes would light up much more, burning with orange and violet and green and pink light that seeped out from between their clockworks and panels. Ka would just grow larger, heavier. Nip sometimes would throw out a new appendage of spin around it. Po, though, never changed much, except that his insides, between the cracks in his shell, were more dense than the other two.

Able sat with his arms around his knees, Po by his side, cooing, while Ka and Nip duked it out hyperactively, until the afternoon respite was over. Able's father will call out from the other room, "Boys!" and Able will herd his mistakes into a small burlap sack where they will fuss at first and then calm down, turn their lights down and "sleep" until later in the day when Able will check on them again.

After today's feeding Able is delighted and takes in a sharp breath when Nip does something extraordinarily new. After having bumped up against Ka several times, Nip sits still and quivers. Its light fades, and then with a burst of renewed light Nip is surrounded by two halos and lifts itself off the ground! Able's eyes stretched wide open as Nip hovered over its sibling Ka, circled around it once or twice teasing, and then fluttered back into Able's hands, as if looking for approval.

Curious, Able held Nip aloft, even though he was not touching it. There was a force

field between Able's hands and Nip's new rings. The rings around Nip glowed and rotated. Able almost shouted out with glee, before looking around in the quiet. Instead, he held Nip close, a neon green light reflecting on his face, and said, "Nice trick, Nip!"

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CHAPTER 3

In which Able wanders the Desert Idex

Mortez with Po, Ka and Nip

With no direction to follow other than his father's bony index finger pointing to the valley, Able headed toward the upside-down beetle. With its mysterious half-buried hives, there might be something for him to—he didn't know what. Like his mistakes, he had no purpose. At the bottom of the hill between his Father's cabin and the tablet-crushing brundlex, he quickly grabbed a sack and filled it with as much electrol as he could find.

Able scrambled over piles of tablets with the sack of electrol and Po and Ka stowed in their bag, and Nip flitting about his head, just ahead of him. He inched his way through small paths that had been cleared over many years by his family and others who mined the tablets. After several hours of this, and as it was growing dark, he came to a depression, a crater in the tablets. He guessed it was the former resting place of one of the mesas.

It was then that Able realized the full scope of his problems. He was alone, at night, when the mesas traveled (crushing other animals underfoot). He did not know where he was going. He had no reason to go anywhere. He turned to the only thing he had: the sack of electrol. He might as well feed his mistakes. He scrabbled to the bottom of the

crater. He sat on the ground with his back resting against the wall. As he sat and fed Po, Ka and Nip, more problems surfaced. And of all of them, the worst was that he was not sure if he would ever see his mother again.

As usual, Po quickly re-electroled and then rolled to Able's backside and hid behind him. Poor Ka, though, was in bad shape. It had gashes in its side that were leaking a vermillion dust. Nip was high above the crater, about in its center, hovering. When Able looked up, Nip was the brightest thing in the night sky. There were few stars to be seen, not that Able knew what stars were. He thought, maybe they were siblings of Nip?

He attended to Ka, taking a handful of electro from his sack and pouring it on and around Ka, who seemed to swell up a tad and then sigh, and then shudder. As it did so, Ka retracted in size a smidge and then the gashes disappeared from its surface. Ka brightened in color.

"Feeling better, then?" Able asked, and Ka spun in a circle and chirped.

"At least one of us is doing all right." He reached out and pet Ka, who reacted in no particular way, just rolling in angled circles, appearing to enjoy his renewed smooth surface.

Able peered under his arm at Po. Po never grew in size or transformed like Nip. "My father said I was a runt. Are you a runt?"

Po growled.

Finally Able turned a handful of electro to the sky, looking up at Nip, shining in a green-to-yellow and back again pattern. Nip made no noise, no move closer. Ka was bright enough that it never really got dark at the bottom of the crater, and Able curled up at the bottom of the ridge and slept, hoping that mesas would not come to rest at the same place twice.



Able was rapidly approaching the upside-down beetle. The wind rushed by him. The world moved by at such a fast pace he couldn't see every detail he wanted to. The world was very big.

That morning Able awoke with Po and Ka close by his side, but Nip, back down from his vigil, was scrounging around in the bag of electrol. Able tried to drag him out of the bag to make sure that he would not eat all of it, but Nip was too heavy. Instead, Able had to pull the bag off Nip, revealing a very swollen mistake. Where the center of Nip had been a sphere, it now pulsed with, flat hexagonal surfaces shifting into points and then back flat again.

Able shooed Po and Ka (who were rolling in a perimeter around Nip) back into their bag. He picked up what was left of the electrol, and then began to make his way to the opposite side of the crater. But when it became obvious that Nip was not following, Able turned and walked back to him. "Are you sick? Did you eat too much?"

"I'm not leaving without you. You need to come along." Able tried to push Nip with his shoe, but the mistake wouldn't move. Able squatted down to Nip's level. "You don't *look* sick." He reached out to grab Nip's outer ring, hoping to be able to drag the little mistake, and much to his surprise, the ring was warm and removable. Able lifted the outer ring up and with a loud *brrraaaat* Nip's center ring and then the core of the mistake rose up from the ground as if pulled by puppet strings. All of Nip's parts were in line with the outer ring raised over Able's head. Nip's core spun wildly in midair, vacillating from a smooth sphere to a pointed dodecahedron while the spinning center ring made a whumping sound. Nip's center shimmered like a rainbow, one color chasing another all

across the center. The ring begin to pull up on Able's hand and lifted his arm up over his shoulder. Able hung on, but wasn't sure he should. "We tried this before, Nip! I don't think it's a good idea."

The core spun until it was bright white, the humming turning into a melodic chord, then a flash, and then two metallic ribbons burst out from the core and dropped down to wrap around Able's waist and behind his legs. The tones that Nip was emitting grew louder and higher, as Nip began to lift Able off the ground. As Nip beamed and sounded out, Able found himself sitting comfortably in a swing seat made of the metallic ribbons. Then, Nip's music ceased, and light burst out of it, returning it to a bright green shimmering. Its core took the form of a flattened dodecahedron, and the sound returned to a low hum. Before Able knew it, they were above the crater and racing off toward the upside-down beetle.



As opposed to when they practically fell off the dead mesa the night before, this landing was quite nice. Nip brought Able gently to the ground about ten feet away from the beetle with its head stuck in the ground. Only now, it didn't look so much like a beetle. For one, it was very tall. Its legs looked more like thumbs, and they didn't squirm about the way a desperate beetle's legs might. They swung gently through the air, alternating back and forth, each one with a fan embedded in the end. Nip retracted its ribbons and hovered in place. Able reached up and patted him, "Thanks, Nip. That might've taken us days to walk."

They had landed on top of a hill, and from where they were, Able could see new things. For one, he could see the dead mesa near his father's house, smaller now than he had ever seen it. Knowing he could travel faster with the help of Nip, he felt less upset about being away from home and his mother. Maybe his father would calm down. He could go back later.

Looking, down the hill, away from his home, he saw the structures that looked like hives buried in the ground. They were covered in hexagonal windows, almost the whole of them being dark glass. And then, not too far from those, he could see a figure digging in the ground. *Well*, Able thought, *I guess I could ask where I am.*

CHAPTER 4

In which Able meets the Lady in Green.

As he approached he saw that the digging figure was an old woman in a red cloak. Able wasn't sure how to start an interaction. He generally only spoke when spoken to. With his feet crunching on the rock, she must have heard him coming, but she did not look up. He stood still for several more moments, and then, "Hello. Could you tell me where I am?"

Without looking up, she said, "Did you know that Jupaeter ate one of his children?"

Able was struck silent by the unexpected question.

"Do you even know who Jupaeter is?"

"Yes. Jupaeter ate Levy, his son, the shoemaker. He ate him whole."

"You know that, do you?"

"My father told me."

"Jupaeter's the sky. And he wouldn't take kindly to you dashing about on whatever that contraption of yours is."

"I... I couldn't really help it," Able said with a shrug.

She stopped digging and looked at him surprised. "You couldn't help it?"

"Not really."

Finally, the old woman looked up, directly at Nip. "I suppose it has a mind of its

own, hmm?"

Able just shrugged again.

The old woman furrowed her brow and slowly pulled herself up from the ground, bringing her digging instrument up as a cane. She is so hunched over that she is almost at eye level with Able. "So how do you feel about Jupaeter eating Levy?"

"Seems sad."

She raises her makeshift cane and pokes it in Nip's direction—Nip flits back away— "And how did you come by such a thing?"

"I made it."

Bringing her cane down, and stroking her chin with her other hand, she closes one eye and looks Able up and down. "I find that unlikely."

Able was shocked, but replied, "It's very true." He pulled out his sack with the other mistakes, and poured them on the ground. "That one," pointing to Nip, "is Nip. These other two are Po and Ka."

"Ha ha! They have names, do they?"

"It seemed... appropriate? To name them?"

"Maybe. At any rate, I need to eat. I take it you do not."

"No."

"Then, I suggest we go inside and I eat and we talk, little one."

"My name is Able."

"Oh, it has a name too!? Well, my name is Ghendra." She turned to walk away, paused, and turned back, "That is not my only name, but it's the only one you need to know."



The inside of Ghendra's home was crowded tight, filled with a hodge-podge of knick-knacks and thingamabobs, all piled and stacked and pushed into corners in no particular order or pattern. She cleared out an area and a cleared off a chair and offered it to Able to sit. Able picked up Po and set him in his lap as Ka rolled around the base of the chair, bumping into things. Nip had stayed outside. Once seated, there was silence for a time until Able began asking questions, and he found that once he'd begun, he had no end of them in mind.

He asked about the beetle. It was some kind of "moisture collector" and had something to do with gathering water and some other things that Able didn't quite understand. He asked about the hives and was told that they were greenhouses—houses for plants. He remarked that they were not green, and she replied that they were on the inside, as he would see later. First, she needed to eat, and she lay a wooden bowl of stew of mushrooms on the table. Po, had been bouncing on Able's lap, seemingly wanting up onto the table, so Able lifted him up and let him roam about there. All eyed the stew. It was nothing like the food Able's father made, but it must be for eating. Able stared curiously as Ghendra put spoonfuls of the stuff into her mouth.

After a time, Ghendra finished her bowl of stew and burped. She pushed it away from herself. "Now it is time for you to answer some of my questions, little one. How did you come to acquire these little friends of yours?" Able explained that he had not acquired them but had made them from leftover material from his father's brundlex. He wasn't supposed to make them. He told Ghendra what had happened with his father and how it had brought him here. Mostly, she listened, but at one point she mumbled,

"Witless old fool." Able was not sure of whom she was speaking. As she asked more questions, Po made his way around the table near here, veering away when she first reached out to touch it. Able pet Po and said, "It's fine Po; she's a friend." And after that, Po allowed Ghendra to poke him and roll him over to examine him.

"I imagine, then, that you have built other mechanicals like this one, but they were different, no? More like my beetle—as you called it, yes?"

"Yes."

"But these three that travel with you, what is different?"

Able squirmed in his seat, unsure of the answer. "I didn't—or I don't—tell them what to do."

"Yes." Ghendra said with a sigh, "Such a boring life has a mechanical that has an intent—a purpose. I suppose it is good to have a purpose—not everything does—but then a purpose does cause one to repeat actions over and over. Can you imagine being such a machine?"

Able thought on this for a while. He did not know of any purpose that he had or had been given. His father spoke of their purpose at times, but Able never felt it in his body. "I guess not."

Ghendra smiled and arose from the table and said, "Let's check in on the garden."



Once inside the greenhouse, Able felt the strangest sensation—that his surface was covered in some substance. It made the air feel heavy and cooled him. All around him

now, he could see all manner of pipes that shot up from the ground, split in any number of directions and ended in bright green plates. He was baffled. He'd never seen so much color, let alone felt such a sense of life. Ghendra explained that the thing he felt on his skin was moisture—very thin water—and that the many things he saw were called plants, and that though they did not move or talk, they were indeed alive, and in fact, she pointed out, they tended to make more of themselves. They needed water and light, and beyond that, they would "do their own thing." In fact, she pointed out, the moisture that he felt was, in fact, their breath. Able marveled at their beauty.

As Ghendra and Able shuffled down winding paths between all the plants, Ghendra spoke, "It is said, that a long time ago, back when the world was well-balanced, these plants grew *everywhere*. They did not need houses to thrive. They didn't need mechanicals to find water for them, for water was everywhere, said to even fall from the sky. That was when the council was whole. That was when the codification of the world was clear. But, as you know, from digging up tablets with your father, the codification has been broken for some time."

Able followed Ghendra as she walked, but didn't really follow her speech. *Water falling from the sky?*

Even more amazing, some of the plants had small bowls of bright colors, seemingly folded together out of paper. Ghendra called these flowers.

"Look at how much color you've created! It's fantastic!"

"I didn't really create it. I built the houses and gathered the water and planted the seeds. The rest was up to Jupaeter's wife, Gaea."

"I did not know that Jupaeter had a wife."

"No doubt. Many believe she left this world long ago. But that's not entirely true.

She is merely sleeping."

The pair stayed in the garden for a time, Ghendra tending to the plants, and Able examining them all, breathless at the sight of yellow and blue and pink and green.



After a time, Ghendra and Able returned to the house. Able sat at the table again and Ghendra joined him, picking up Po to examine it. It chattered with nervousness as she held him. "This one makes me curious." She spoke to Po, "Your brothers seem content to absorb things and change, but you—you've been remembering things haven't you?" Po shook in Ghendra's thin fingers, seemingly spinning on the inside, until she set him down. Once on the table, Po rolled in a circle and then, three small feet unfolded from him, setting on the table to hold it still. Then, a split formed in its center, and a section opened up revealing a gem that was filled with light. The light stretched up from Po forming many dots that danced and coalesced into a picture of Ghendra's own face. "Oh my." A three dimensional blue and green light picture of Ghendra rotated above Po.

Able was stunned. "He's never done that before."

"I see." Ghendra got up from the table and made her way over to a stack of papers and books.

Able reached out across the table and grabbed Po and dragged it over in front of him. Po chirped and suddenly the light picture danced and changed into a picture of Able. Able laughed and said, "Po, how come you never did this before?" Once more the light changed and danced, turning deep purple, and creating the visage and Able's

father's face. "Oh," said Able, sadly.

Ghendra set a heavy tome down on the table and let it fall open. She grabbed Po once again and turned it upside down. Po made a churlish sound and the light spread out over the book. But after a moment the light fell flat on the book and the letters and characters began to also glow. Po made many, many noises, all in succession. And then, after a moment, light from the characters in the book faded, and Po uttered a low bell sound. Ghendra laughed and turned the page, whereupon the whole process happened again.

"What is he doing?"

Ghendra smiled and looked at Able, again turning the page, "He's eating." She picked Po up after the third page turn and turned him feet-down on the table. "Now, show us."

Po's light danced about and in as many colors as the rainbow, he quickly illuminated a series of shapes and objects—a castle, a mesa, some tools, a wave, creatures—all so fast that Able could barely make out what they were.

"My, my," whispered Ghendra.

"I don't understand," said Able, his brow furrowed. "How is he eating pictures when there are none in your—" Able looked at the book on the table.

"Book," Ghendra said. "It is a book and it contains information."

"What is that?"

"Information is many things, Able. The world is filled with it, really. Your name, for instance, is information."

"My name?"

"Yes. Just a moment." Ghendra got up again and knocked a stack of papers and

books to the ground. She picked up little Po and set him on the messy pile. "Have at it, little one." And Po's feet grew longer as he held himself over the jumbles of characters and began rapidly tracing them with lights.

Turning back to Able, Ghendra said, "If I wanted to talk about someone in the world, how would I do it if no one had names? I can't speak to you about my plants because even though they have names, you don't know them. But a name gives things a kind of uniqueness. Names are information. They aren't the only kind of information—there are many kinds of information. Po, it would seem, eats information. You and I also eat information, but we do it differently. In fact, the way you and I do it is even different. And when we want to remember or trade information, we have to talk about it. Po, he can simply show us what he's thinking."

Able nodded. "I see," he said, although he didn't really.

Ghendra made a quizzical face and then asked Able, "What do you feed your little mistakes?"

Able reached into his sack and pulled out the smaller bag of electrol dust. "It comes from my Father's well. He says it's just dirt but I call it electrol."

Picking up the bag, Ghendra removed a handful of the shimmering dust and let it pour from her hand back into the bag. She set it down for a moment and got up, walked to an armoire, and pilfered through some drawers. Retrieving a small tube, she returned to the table. She held the tube top to her eye and once again pulled a handful of the substance out of the sack and poured it back. Able could see her eye without the tube grow wide. She removed the tube from her eye and blinked a few times, removing a charm from her mind. "Most people in this world of ours are fools, Able." She handed the bag back to him. "They would think this substance useless, as your father did. But it

is special—very special. And you, since you know what to do with it, and I assume, how to find it, are also very special."

Able looked at the bag, noticing how light it had become. "Yes. I was thinking that, maybe after my father—maybe he wouldn't be mad anymore—and I could go home to get more."

"No. Your father is also a fool. You should seek out others like yourself. There are those that can do what you do, and they can show you more." She reached over and picked Po up and said it on the table again, where's legs shrunk down, and where the light again formed a picture, this time of a brundlex. "Bah," said Ghendra, "a primitive mechanical at best." She leaned in close to Po and said, "Show me the Ultracircus."

Po quivered and whirred and the picture of the brundlex transformed into an eight-legged machine with a plate on top of it, and on top of the plate, castle walls surrounding tall glass buildings. Though the image stayed in one place, the city on legs seemed to walk through the air. Ghendra spoke again, "You must find this place, Able. You must seek out your kind."

"I don't know. Is it far?"

"Who knows? I do not. It moves and I don't. However, I know someone who can start you in the right direction—a friend, of sorts. But I think he would be interested in helping you. His name is Gef. He is a Dustman. You will find him near the Delphine's run.

"I don't know. I should go home. I need to help my mother."

"Your mother, Evo; I do not think there is anything you can do for her, Able."

Able wondered how Ghendra knew his mother's name, but not for long. "I don't know."

Ghendra made a bed out of blankets for Able. He lay down and watched as, across the room, Po continued to shine lights on books and papers and sometimes make squeals and beeps. Ka rolled over next to Able and nuzzled him. Able asked him, "What do you do?" to which Ka replied by purring. Able smiled and drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, Able gathered a now quiet and spherical Po and Ka and his sack. He crept about the house and saw Ghendra sleeping in another room. He made his way out of the house and looked up to see Nip hovering far above in the dusky morning light. He waved Nip down, and said to him. "Take me home, please, Nip."



When they arrived at his father's house, Able, from the sky could see his brother outside digging in the ground. He had dug a large, long hole. Nip set Able down away from the house, near a large outcropping of tablets where Able could see the house. As his brother continued digging, Able's father came out of the house with something in his arms—something wrapped in sheets. In his heart, Able knew what was in his father's arms—who was in his father's arms.

Able watched as his father lowered the body into the hole. The two men stood quietly over it, Able's father having removed his hat, speaking, though Able could not hear him. Then, after a time, the two men began filling in the hole. Po and Ka made soft noises in the sack. Nip hovered close by. Able grew immensely sad and wished he could cry.



"You're going to need another name, little one," Ghendra said.

Able had returned to Ghendra's house in the afternoon and she could see from his posture what he had discovered. She felt poorly for him and hugged him. But she also knew that it would only be days before the caravan would leave at the next approach of Delphine, and then it would be many months before the traders built a new bridge and returned to Idex MorteZ.

"My name is Able."

"No, no. A surname. With it, you can add more information to yourself. You will be called Summary. When anyone asks, you can tell them you are Able Summary."

"Um, ok."

"You'll find the caravan to the east of here. You'll know them when you see them. There, among them, you will find Gef. Tell him that I sent you. And perhaps, don't show him or the rest your mistakes—not right away. Don't show anyone the mistakes until you are sure the time is right. You'll know when."

"Gef has been searching for some time for an object called the Cyclopedia. Tell him you can help him find it in exchange for taking you out of Idex MorteZ."

"But I don't even know what that is."

"It won't matter; not right away. Just know that he will help you, and then you will be on your way. And remember that Po knows things."

CHAPTER 5

In which Able finds Gef and the Caravan and Delphine.

As they flew through the air again, Able comfortable in Nip's seat, he could think of little else but his mother's eyes. He missed her desperately. In his lap, sat his sack with both Ka and Po and now a great deal of sweetbread and something from the plants that Ghendra called fruit and vegetables. She said he could use them for trade for things he might need. He was glad to have it, glad to have met Ghendra, but he was also sad and scared. Never in his life had he known so little about what would come next.

In a way, he supposed, he had never known what would come next. Days only seemed to repeat themselves without much change. But now, having lost his mother, having seen his mistakes do amazing things right before his eyes, having met Ghendra and seen new colors... now, it seemed like his life was changing daily. There was wonder in it that he liked. But then there was no knowing what would come next.

In the distance, he spotted a massive crack across the land. Before it, the tablets of Idex MorteZ spilled over each other, but the piles of ancient written language grew shorter and shorter in height until there was just barren ground. Past that, there was the crack—a huge wound in the ground that was wide and dark and seemed to stretch from one end of the horizon to the other. Then, between the diminishing piles of the tablets

and the crack, he saw a mass of movement. He could see beige tents, and people moving about them, and massive creatures of a kind he had never seen or heard of before. They were long and made of sections and had many, many legs.

Able, looked up. "Nip, don't get too close. Let's just land nearby." Nip chirped a gleeful reply and flew lower to the ground, whisking them over the hills and hills of tablets until they came near the edge, where Nip set them down.

"Now, Ghendra said to keep you all hidden, so I need you to hide, okay, Nip."

Nip buzzed with some annoyance, but then sucked up the ribbons into its ring of light, and then sucked the light into its center. Nip turned a dull, metallic orange and dropped out of the sky onto the ground with a thud. It made a sound like a huff. "Well, all right," said Able. Nip was now just a dodecahedron and Able rolled him into the sack with Po and Ka who chirped different greetings. Nip made a farting sound.

Able hefted the whole, now *very* heavy sack onto his back and set off in the direction of the caravan. It amazed Able how quickly he had become used to the idea of flight. One day he had no idea that such a thing was even possible. Then another day he was breathless and amazed that it was. And now, he hated walking and carrying heavy stuff.

When he arrived at the caravan, people were pulling down the tents and tending to the massive creatures in their midsts. The creatures had looked so small from the air, but now Able could see that they were many times his own height, and bigger and longer than even his father's house. Most people gave him very strange looks and pointed at him. Sometimes when he asked them about a man named Gef, they would say nothing and turn away. Able felt a very odd feeling. It wasn't quite fear; something like it but more creeping. Finally, though, one man, looking him up and down, shrugged and

pointed at another man who was tying bags to one of the creatures. "Thank you," said Able to no reply.

The man Gef was dressed in heavy robes and was wearing a mask with glass eyes and a large-brimmed hat. When Able got over to the man named Gef, Able forgot himself and said instead, "What is that?"

The man paused and turned toward Able with some curiosity. "What is what?"

"Um... your animal."

"Have you never seen a centipede before?"

Able silently shook his head. The man scratched his head underneath his wide-brimmed hat. "Well," he said, "It's a centipede." Able nodded.

"You're a pretty far ways off from anywhere, kid."

"Oh. Well, I'm looking for a man named Gef."

"Ok. Well, that'd be me." He stared down at Able from behind his mask. "And you are?"

"Ghendra sent me."

"Ghendra, huh?" The man turned and tightened some straps on the bags on the centipede. "Okay."

"She said that you were looking for a—um—a cyclo..."

"The Cyclopedia?"

"Yes. She said I could help you find it."

"She said that, huh? Now did she mean that you *want* to help me or that you *could* help me?"

Able thought. "Um... she said I *could* help you. And she said that in exchange you could help me past Delphine's run."

"Really? So you know something about the Cyclo?"

"No."

Gef chuckled. "Wonder what that old bat is up to?"

Able thought on it. "She's growing plants."

Gef laughed louder. "Yeah, we all know that. Won't trade seeds for nothin', so what of it? What do you got in that sack?"

"Fruitsandvegetables."

"Fruits and vegetables."

"Yes."

"No, kid. They're two different things. There's fruit, and then there's vegetables."

Able stared blankly.

"Well, you're the only one around here who's got any of that, so that's something."

"Okay," Able said.

"You got a name?"

"Able Summary."

Gef furrowed his brow. "That's a weird name, kid."

"Is it?"

"Yeah."

The pair just stared at one another for a moment.

Gef squatted down to be on Able's level. He looked around the crowd and pulled his mask up. His face was much like Able's! "You are a curious thing, little man."

Able just stared.

"Where did you come from again?"

"The Desert Idex Mortex."

"Sure. I doubt that."

"I did! My mother..." Able paused and looked down, then continued, "My mother and Father lived out there and farmed."

"Your mother and father?" Asked Gef. "You have a mother and father?"

"Yes."

"And are they like you? Like me?"

"What do you mean?"

Gef scratched his head again. "Did they drink water?"

"Yes."

"But see, you and I don't."

"I know."

"Okay. Huh. Mother and father, huh? Well, if you don't know nothin' about the Cyclo, I don't know how she thinks you could help. But then who knows what she had in mind—probably something. She knows things."

"She showed me lots of books."

"Is that right?" Gef paused.

Able panicked, and did something he did not like, he lied. He thought of Po, and said, "I've memorized all of them."

Gef looked at his mount for a moment and then turned to Able again. "Well, you don't weigh much, so I suppose it's not too much trouble. Get yourself up on my pede and find a place to secure that sack of yours. We're getting out of here pretty quick. The Delphine's coming soon."



The bridge across the chasm was long, thin, and badly built. Mostly it was constructed of steel wires shot across the crack with massive crossbows. Everything on top of that had been knitted with steel cable. The trader's camp had entirely disappeared; now there was just a traffic jam of centipedes waiting to cross the rickety steel-sewn bridge one at a time. The riders shouted at one another about their place in line. From what Able could tell some people had more reason to cross than others. At times there were families onboard of massive insects and yet the order of the crossing was only respected in that it should be one at a time.

With not that many pedes in front of them, Gef called back to Able (barely hanging on to the chitin of the monster) that "We'll get to the other side soon! Until then, hang on tight to Arthra."

"What's an Arthra?" Able yelled back.

"You're sitting on her!"

And then, the order broke apart. Someone riding something other than a pede—a kind of steam effusing mini-mesa—came racing down the edge of the chasm, screaming, "Delphine's coming!" The world seemed to lurch as every driver of every pede now rushed the bridge and began crossing without waiting, the entirety of the bridge beginning to vibrate and undulate with the thousand legs of tens of different centipedes. Gef somehow convinced Arthra to muscle onto the bridge ahead of many other riders. Able noticed she was one of the larger pedes and seemed to be carrying much less.

He looked all about the confusion to try to figure out what was going on. He couldn't see Gef's face while sitting behind him, but he could see panic in the face of the driver behind them. He wanted to grab on to Nip and fly, but the words of Ghendra kept in his head. *Do not reveal them too soon. You'll know when.*

Then Able began to see changes in the light all around. The whole time he had been with Gef and waited in line for the bridge, the light was normal just like at home. There were clouds in the sky, and from them light. Now, a shadow had overtaken the horizon. It was different. The shadow was like a new horizon. It was moving, stretching out from one end of the chasm and reaching towards the riders and the bridge. He could see shadows down in the chasm changing, lengthening.

He could feel the shadow in the center of his body, so much so that he even thought he could hear it. He looked towards the source of the dark at the end of the chasm and saw what looked like a sandstorm, only it was getting taller, and unlike a sandstorm, it was curved. A sandstorm would have been drawn across the horizon like a line, but this was like the edge of circle, and growing.

Gef, in the meantime, with Arthra maybe an eighth of the way across the bridge, began to laugh. "If you wanted to ride with me, son, you picked an amazing day to do it!" The centipede wound its hundred legs out over the steel knitting, each leg sticking to the cables with massive fibers.

Beyond the bridge, far down the chasm, a dark arc continued to reveal itself. Able could see that it was like a sandstorm, dust and clouds broiling around a dark center. Shouts across the caravan went up, "Delphine!"

The massive body rolled slowly and crushed everything in its path, smashing the sides of the chasm, tearing massive pieces off as it went. The sound Able had only thought he could detect earlier began to truly vibrate his insides and soon there was no question he could hear it. He could hear little else, only Gef shouting at the top of his lungs, "Move, move, move!" There was death in it, and he had not felt fear quite this intense—or at least only in the last few days. This was even more fearsome.

They neared the far side of the bridge and Able could begin to see much more of the outline of the the giant rock, the meteor. He could see its pock-marked surface rolling slowly over from top to bottom, huge boulders being thrust off of it and the edge of the canyon, landing with explosions hundreds of kilometers off. Surrounding the edge of the massive object was a twisting ebony nightmare of roiling, twisting clouds. Some of the debris even flew at the bridge down into the chasm or up over their heads. The air was growing thick with dust. The light from the sky was disappearing.

"C'mon, Arthra! C'mon!" The centipede zigged and zagged across the steel cables. Gef had bent way low over her and Able did the same, clinging to the insect's armor and jostling all about, sometimes so much he couldn't make out the shape of anything at all. Past Gef and over Arthra he could see the other side of the chasm, but he had no idea how near they were.

Would this not be the time to use the mistakes? But how in the world could Po, Ka and Nip even manage to deal with this massive beast? And even though Able had only known Gef and Athra for maybe an hour, he couldn't imagine leaving them behind for some reason. Something inside him felt attached to Gef. Gef's questions had raised questions in Able. There seemed to be so much to discover. Able wouldn't abandon them and fly. He hunkered down and dared to gaze again in the direction of Delphine.

With the rock blocking out so much of the sky, so close Able thought he could reach it, with the noise so loud, it drowned out everything, the dust so thick Able couldn't see the riders behind them, Arthra's shape changed. Suddenly, she was not rippling from one end to the other or side to side. Had they reached the other side? Dust was everywhere.

Another few minutes and the centipede was climbing up out of the dust cloud, up at a steep angle. Able had been worried about sliding off the side of the creature, no he was