

CHAPTER 1

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

In the far reaches of the Shattered Land, in a delta between where the Delphine Metero rolls along in its canyon, and the Silt Sea shifts in undulations of dust, there is a place called the Desert of Idex MorteZ. Its a barren gray landscape made up of piles of ancient stone tablets; piled precariously, but as high as buildings in some places. The piles lean in all directions as they erode. Upon those millions of stone artifacts are chiseled stories both true and false, philosophies and theories, secrets and myths. They are all discarded, writings all very long forgotten—the languages they were written in, forgotten.

Very little lives in Idex MorteZ. The piles and piles of ancient texts are dotted only by mesas that lord over the vast wasteland, defiantly so. There are giant, fossilized trilobites and silt centipedes, creatures who chose to venture too far into the desert from the Silt Sea. Their transparent

exoskeletons are draped across the stone tablets and now their bodies only make homes for smaller things like silverfish and scurrying six-legged cybernetic chiton.

Why so much knowledge and history and law and philosophy had ever been discarded in the middle of a desert is unknown to any in the Shattered Land. Very few of the tablets, and very little of the writing can be read by anyone anymore. The language is lost. The tablets are a mix of cyphers and pictures, many from societies that no longer exist. The scribblings are now just representations of change. There is so much dust and shimmering, translucent heatwaves that carry the unkept knowledge further away from knowing, slowly eroding it to nothing.

In the Shattered Land there are only just a few stars in the night sky and even those have faded to what looks like red smudges. It is very dark at night in the Desert of Idex MorteZ. Occasionally some errant trader might ride a silt centipede through the area, looking for some 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. The mesas move only at night. And when a mesa stands, ripping its long-settled bulk from its crater, stretching out its spindly, crustacean-like legs, its sudden locution can be heard for miles around, like thunder. It is a mystery why the mesas of the

Desert of Idex MorteZ move at all, but they do, walking for a few hours in the dark of night, often lit up by static lightning, only to crash down their entire bulk on some new spot for reasons known only to themselves.

It is difficult to tell a dead mesa from a living one, but not impossible. To begin with, a dead mesa's legs will close up around it in a tight, spiny fist; like a dried out spider. Another is the ultrasonic noise that live mesa's 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.

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 machinations 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 the brundlex, which scans the tablets and then pushes them along a conveyor belt where the tablets of scribblings are crushed. Out of the back of the brundlex comes *blackrock* — a mild fuel

that can be sold to the trader caravans and others. With the right technology, blackrock can be used to create some light and small amounts of energy. The desert rodents, with their built-in brundlexes thrive on the stuff.

A second substance comes from the process as well; considered to be waste. It is a silver dust known (not by the locals) as chrysopraxe; it is exhaust from the brundlex, exhaust from the wildlife. Jedediah cares nothing for the chrysopraxe, so he allows Able to have it because 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 J'onn. One does make J'onn in the face of J'onn. Movement without soul is to spit in the face of J'onn, but Jedediah is old and tired and loves his wife, so he mostly looks past it. Still, Jedediah is suspicious of his adopted son and believes him to be cursed.



The desert rodent nearby is spewing blackrock particles in an effort to move, but its back legs are shredded from where a tower of tablets collapsed on it. It squeaks in panic as Able reaches for it. "There, there. You're all right." His words don't calm the creature but it does not defend itself. Able grasps the metallic rat with one hand underneath its forearms and holds it up in front of his face. Its shining orange eyes beam out and search Able. 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 lays the rat on its back and removes a bag of crysopraxe and some electrum from his belt. He pours it liberally on the little creature's back legs and then with a kind of sewing motion, works the electrum into the legs where it forms new shafts and ligaments. After ten minutes or so, the rat's back legs are fully formed 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, squirms in Able's grasp and tries to get free. Able quickly lets it go where it scurries off into some crack between piles of tablets. Able rolls his eyes. "You're welcome."



Evo lay buried among the hissing bio-brundlexes, in a tattered and gray linen nightgown. In a fever she has pushed all the blankets aside. She wears a mask that covers her nose and mouth and breathes with difficulty. Able stands in the doorway, listening to the hum of the machines that are breathing for her. The tall accordion towers surround her and move asynchronously up and down with tiny huffs and sucking sounds; liquids gush and rush from one tower to another, to some sphere that spins the liquid and dispenses it again.

Though he brought them into existence, he does not know how they function. It is the way of the crysoprase and electrum and some heavy air that he gives these things a will and a goal—though he knows the goal is unnecessary. As bad as he feels for his mother, he feels bad for the machines that 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, almost entirely filled with tubes and pipes and dirty glass huddled in around the valley of where her body lay on a small, rotting mattress. Only

a single window, high up on the rickety bedroom wall allows in any light, and only a tea-colored light pushes through the twin filters of dirt and fingerprints. Outside, gray restless dust whirls and presses the glass.

Able shifts his weight in the doorway and hears the tired floorboards beneath him creak, like a mourning that is disturbingly louder than his own. His is lost in confusion. He holds his hands uselessly at his side. Then clasps them behind his back. Then, he puts them at his side again—watching as the machines rise and fall, his eyes moving from cylinder to cube as each one reaches a peak, or spins, seems to hold a breath, puffs and then whooshes on again. The room is small chamber orchestra of gushing flushes, heaving movement, clicks and sighs.

The tired light in the room captures and frames a hundred motes of dust each in a Brownian dance. Able feels each molecule of pollutant travel up his nose and down his dry throat into his crusted lungs. He closes his eyes and takes 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 electrum creations that roll about on the floor, aimless but somehow 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. The land is gray and covered with discarded speeches and arguments, stone artifacts chiseled with letters, all overshadowed by the dead mesa.

The mesa is singular. It dominates the landscape, its massive legs crumpling in the hot sun. For miles around it is the only structure. East, further off from Jedidiah's little valley, sometimes 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 slips quietly into his room after foraging with his father for the morning. He slides a loop of twine around the door knob and a rusty nail in the wall—privacy of sorts. Able smiles to himself as he reaches underneath

his cot for a secret treasure. He smiles because he knows that not all the ideas in the desert are dead, that not all machines have goals. He has three that are quite alive—he calls them his *mistakes*. They are, all three just small orbs of light and shifting parts. But they are more to him than the machines he's created to assist his mother, at his father's command, for these "mistakes" have souls.

When Able has spoken to his Father of machines and things 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 after a time. And there is no idea ever conceived that does not rest here; in these fields. J'onn is entropy, boy. Entropy is all."

Able's mistakes roll about the floor, lighting up, whirring and blinking as they bump into the cot and Able and each other. He can 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—or, rather, he gave them no purpose. Instead he tried to imagine

what purpose they might want for themselves.

Po, the littlest of the three seems to want very little. Mostly, Po follows Able wherever he goes. Able amuses himself by walking around the room in a circle and watching as Po goes everywhere he does, dodging the other two more rambunctious mistakes, singing a short sweet song of relief when Able sits down and Po can roll up against him and also sit quietly.

Ka and Nip are much more content to explore the room to its edges sometimes get into pushing matches with each other when their paths cross. In large part they seem to ignore Able and Po except when Able has gathered some of the cryopraxe dust to feed them. When Able places his hand down with a small pile of the stuff, they quickly roll to him and suck it up with tinks and blips of satisfaction. Able feeds Po separately for this reason; the littlest of the three can't compete with its siblings when a feeding happens.

After a feeding, all three of his mistakes light up much more, burning with orange and violet and green and pink light that seeps out from between their clockworks and panels. Able sits with his arms around his knees, Po by his side, cooing, while Ka and Nip duke it out hyperactively, until the afternoon respite is 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 for a bit and then calm own, turn their lights down and “sleep” until later in the day when Able can check on them again.

Sitting and watching them after today’s feeding Able is delighted and takes in a sharp breath when Nip does something extraordinarily new. After bumping up against Ka several times, Nip sits still and quivers. Its light fades, and then with a burst of new light Nip is surrounded by two halos and lifts itself off the ground. Able’s eyes stretch wide open as Nip easily hovers over its sibling Ka, circles around it once or twice teasing, and then flutters back into Able’s hands, almost as if looking for approval.

Curious, Able holds Nip aloft, even though he is not touching it. There is some kind of force between Able’s hands and Nip’s new rings. The rings around Nip glow and rotate and it’s as if there is an invisible glass sphere around the mistake now. Able almost shouts out with glee, before looking around in the quiet; instead, he holds Nip close to his face, a neon green light reflecting, and says, “Nice trick, Nip!”



Able dumps an armload of tablets onto the conveyor belt. He watches as the stone relics rumble down towards the brundlex that crush them into chunks and powder, sad that he will never know what they might have said. Suddenly, painfully, he's awakened from his brief reverie by his brother slamming a cart into his back. "Get moving, blackrock-for-brains." Able steps aside to let his big brother lift the cart's contents on to the conveyor belt. He sniffs and holds back some tears as he bends down to rub the backs of his ankles. His father, approaching with a cart of his own, shouts out to Able, "If you don't keep moving in this world, son, it will cause you nothing but pain."

Rubbing his nose, Able walks away from his father and brother off toward one of the mesa's legs. He climbs a high pile of tablets to the top and looks south to see if he can see any of the dust clouds kicked up by the traders and their centipedes. Today he sees nothing. Later, after many more armfuls of tablets have been crushed and churned and broken, Able and his brother and father load a large cart with the blackrock. This cart is as tall as Jedediah and requires both Able's brother and his father to pull down a long trail to an outpost where they pile the blackrock in the hopes that traders will come and leave some grain and jerky in trade. Able's father and brother will be gone for several hours on this trip to the outpost and it

is, by far, the best part of the day.

As Jedediah and Able's brother are preparing to leave with the big cart, Able—without knowing why—says, “Father, I think I could make a brundlex that would pull the cart for you, if you like.”

Jedediah turns to Able, silhouetted in the low gray sun. He removes his large-brimmed black hat and wipes his brow. “No.” Able isn't sure what to make of the reply. He stands dutifully waiting to be dismissed, looking up at his father, whose eyes are so wrinkled and frowning that Able can barely see his pupils. “We do that for your mother because she is *ill*. We men and you have our health and it is ungodly to use your—“ Able's father searches for a word, “—your curse when we have our health and can do this work ourselves.”

After a moment, Able's father squats down to his height and says, with a little more patience, “Ungod forsook this world because men were lazy. Whatever your creations are, Able, you must not use them idly. You should not use them at all... unless you must.” Able's father puts his heavy, almost stony hand on Able's shoulder. “You can still be an ungodly man, my son, but to do so you must be humble about what you make.” Able looks to the ground and thinks about the mistakes in his room, hiding beneath his cot.

Back in his room, after his father and brother have left, and after he has checked on his mother, Able sits on the floor among his mistakes. For some weeks now, after a feeding, Nip would fly about the room. And now, for the last few days, it had taken to flying up next to a small window, high in the room. Nip would just sit at the window, lazily bumping against the glass, making a light tapping noise. Able, staring up at Nip says, “There’s no where to go, Nip.”

Nip flies several times from the window to Able, but when Able tries to hold the flying mistake, Nip whisks off back to the window. Finally, Nip does what it did the first time, hovering in place and quivering, its light growing brighter and brighter. The light is so bright that even little Po comes out from behind Able to look. (Ka is paying no attention whatsoever to his sibling’s seeming tantrum.) Then, with a flash, Nip has sparked a new third halo, and flies across the room opposite the window. In what seems like a rage, Nip glows bright green and then shoots across the room, smashing through the window.

Able’s face melts in horror. “No, no, no, Nip! Nip!” He jumps up and runs to the wall with the window. It’s too high for him to reach. He strains to see if he can make out the mistake anywhere in the sky. It’s bad enough if his father sees the broken window, but more than that, Able’s heart is

broken that his little friend has left.



The broken window was blamed on some errant rock falling off the mesa. Able escaped punishment, which usually consisted of him having to break something he loved. He looked for Nip for days and could find it nowhere. In the mornings, when collecting tablets for his father, Able would circle all the way around the mesa, looking constantly for his little green buzzing mistake. Every night, when the sun set, even though it was dangerous, he snuck outside hoping that the low light would be enough to let him see even a faint green glow. He did not stay out long, the desert was dangerous at night, he knew, but he also couldn't help himself.

Then, one day, after his father and brother had hauled the big cart away, he open the tablet-crushing brundlex and emptied the cryoprasedust inside to feed Po and Ka. Without Nip there to take his share, both Po and Ka had grown in size. Po was still the smallest but Ka had grown very big—so much so he was about the size of Able's head.

When Able went to feed them, he was ecstatic to open his sack and

see that there were once again three mistakes in the bag. Po was there and still the smallest, and Ka was there, and now Nip was there, too—at least he thought it was Nip. The little mistake was half the size of Ka, but no longer a sphere. It had grown a permanent ring around itself and there were small spires growing out of its center. Beneath the spires Nip had what looked like an eye as well.

He knew it was Nip because no sooner were the three mistakes out of the bag then Nip and Ka were at it as usual, bumping each other. Nip rolled inside its new ring but it wasn't long at all before its three halos appeared and it was off the ground hovering. Nip rushed by Able's face a few times, even faster than he had been when he left. It hovered in front of Able and Able gently put out his hands to hold it. Nip allowed him to do so, but then after only a few minutes it began to tug on Able, tugging until Able stood up, and then tugging again to move Able to the wall with the window.

Able found that he could grasp the new thick ring that Nip had grown, using it like a handle. Once he did this, Nip lifted him up off the ground, hauling him up to the window. Able scrambled to get his legs up on the sill and when he did, Nip made the strangest cheering kind of tweet. "Wow, Nip. Neat!" Nip made a second noise, what sounded like a warning, and then began knocking on the door to the Able's room. Able knew trouble

would come if he opened the door, but he couldn't help himself. What had become of Nip?

No sooner had Able opened the door than Nip was at the front door of the shack banging on that door, too. Able opened the front door and stepped out with Nip now circling his head. Once more Able grasped the ring around Nip and the little mistake carried Able off the ground and away into the air! Able gasped and tightened his grip as Nip whisked him far above the cabin, around and above the great spiny legs of the dead mesa and then with a loud triumphant chirp, hauled Able all the way up to the top of the mesa where it set him down gently.

Able was ecstatic now, hardly containing himself as he stood on top of the mesa and looked all around at the yellow afternoon sky. He could see so far he didn't even know what he was looking at. The piles and piles of tablets blended together into a beautiful landscape of valleys and paths. To the east he thought he could make out a kind of giant horn of some kind—a horn with more horns—but it was so far away it was a hazy shadow in the hazy air. There was something more strange and closer than the canyon. A small plume of smoke rose up from what appeared to be a giant beetle with its head buried in the ground. Its legs slowly moved around in the air. Nearby the beetle were a group of small spheres made of hexagons,

buried in the ground. And there were lights.



Able sat with Nip on top of the mesa for a long time, marveling at all the things to see. Especially to the north where Able could see something he could not even explain. Something in that direction undulated like clouds, but brown, and distinctly separate from the sky. “I wonder what that is, Nip,” he whispered. He walked in a circle around the top of the mesa and decided to lie down and peer at his own house, hundreds of feet below, but to his horror, the big cart was back. “Oh no! Nip, my father is back.” He reached out to grab Nip by its ring and pulled it close. “Please, Nip, take me back! You have to take me back.” Nip chirped inquisitively. “Please, Nip! Down! Back down!?”

In a panic, Able grabbed Nip with both hands and started to climb down. Nip shrieked and then opened up panels all over its insides, released a flash of light, spinning its halos and straining to slow their fall as they scrabbled to the ground. Able’s heart leapt out of his chest in a way that he had never felt before. He had been afraid of his father many times, but that

fear was nauseating and creeping; this fear was sudden and took his breath away. Still, Nip did manage to land them both safely and then ripped himself out of Able's grasp and flew to Able's face releasing a stream of clicks, chirps and shrieks as if scolding Able. But Able couldn't pay any attention.

Running around the side of the cabin, then inside and straight to his room, he found the door open wide and his brother crouched over Ka with a chunk of blackrock in his hand that he was beating Ka with. Ka moaned and had dents and cracks and didn't seem to be able to roll away while Able's brother bashed it again with the stone. Po hid under the bed moaning. "No!" Able roared. Without thinking about anything he grabbed the upraised arm of his brother and threw his entire weight on him, causing the both of them to roll over each other on the floor.

Kane quickly managed to get Able in a headlock. "What is it, Able? Is it yours?" Able struggled to get free and with ferocity, Nip flew into Kane's face and chirped and squeaked and buzzed. "C'mon, Able, what are these things? Did you use your curse? How do they work?" With Able tucked under one arm, Kane picked up the blackrock and threw it at Ka, laughing.

"No!" Able yelled, having lost all sense of thought, his vision having

gone red. "Please! Stop!"

Nip flew to the other side of the room and turning red, flew straight into Kane's head, bashing him hard and causing him to scream and fall down, dragging Able on top of himself. "Nip! No!" Able shouted.

Jedediah came storming into the room on hearing the commotion and saw his one son bleeding and the other waving maniacally at some mystery... thing. He shouted, "The Ungod forsakes us!" He grabbed Able by his neck and hauled him up into the air off his now unconscious brother. "What heresy is this?" he shouted at Able as he pointed to the mistakes. Nip, hovering near Ka, touching him gently turned a bright red color and flew in a flash at Jedediah's face, crackling with bolts of energy. Shocked, Jedediah dropped Able roughly to the ground to swat at Nip who shocked him every time the old man's stony hands struck him.

Able scrambled to grab his bag and Po and Ka, slipping them both in it and ran for the door past his father still contending with the enraged Nip. As Able ran through the main room to the door, Nip changed from red to orange and slowly hovered away from Jedediah, who stalked the mistake as it floated away, keeping his distance. "This is vile, Able! This is evil! I warned you about your curse and you ignored me!"

Able stood in the main door of the house. From there he could see

that his mother had sat up and was staring back and forth from him to Nip to Jedediah. "Mother," was all he could utter as began backing outside and Nip zipped between him and as his father making a cacophony. Jedediah, looming taller than ever and fuming, yelled, "You are a curse on this house! Your mother's heart was too big! You are no son of mine! Get out! Get out of this house, get out of my valley! Never return!"