

The wind flowed over the dunes, gently caressing them, leading strings of sand down to the bottom. Waves that curved over the hills. At the base of the dunes was a soft delineation. A vague border between the sands of the shore, and the sands of the sea. Here, some of the wisps curled back and over themselves, collapsing into the shore, reuniting with the massive dunes. The others wafted over the border and joined their brethren in the bubbling sands of the desert sea. For miles, the desert displayed itself a faint yellow beneath the burning sun. For miles, nothing but smooth sand encompassed the sight. With the singular color came the valleys, hills, and sharp cliffs that follow the mild dune slopes. The shadows and shades of yellow that would give definition to the desert. Like the winds, the desert shifted and flexed beneath the heat of the sun. But the only life that the desert sees is gifted by the boiling sands.

At the precipice of one of the dunes stood a girl beside a wooden craft, teetering on the edge. A wooden board, smoothened by the abrasion of the desert, and a sail billowing in the wind. Attached to the sail were two ropes that flapped alongside it. Around the girl's neck dangled a pair of goggles, the glass nearly opaque and marred by its defense against the sands. Below the goggles was a long cloth scarf, stark white against the desert and her suntanned skin. The girl sighted her city in the distance, and the flags that stood at the borders of the city, flowing with the wind. After careful consideration of the flags, the girl fixed her goggles in place and pulled her scarf up over her nose. She wrapped a rope in each hand and pulled them taut. With a loud snap, the sail swelled, and the girl was sent careening down the dunes. She glided down the cliff and met a shower of sand, pelting her sail and goggles like a sudden outpour of rain. Within the second, she broke past the wispy sands that bordered the sand and sea. Leaning, she skirted past the hills and dunes between her and the city, relishing the feeling of the cool winds surging from both ahead and from the boiling sea beneath. She raced across the desert, carving her brief trail through the sea.

For miles, the desert flowed until it met the metal of civilization. Clouded in the mist of sand and distance, the city sheltered the meager greenery and water of the desert. Its walls stood stout and curved outwards; iron bulkheads that warded off the sea. Within those walls, wooden buildings clustered desperately close to the oasis. On one side of the circular city, the walls stretched further as mere scaffolding. The clang of hammers echoed out along those wooden struts. Men were reluctant to work on the outskirts to help the city reach into the desert.

Away from the center. Away from the green and brown of fertile earth. Away from the solid land beneath their feet. The workers were loath to step away from the arable into the arid. Cities were difficult to grow. The seas were unpredictable. At any moment, the liquid sands could stop, and the boiling would cool. In an instant, the sands could settle, as still as the eternal dunes they surrounded. Anyone sailing would be stopped in their tracks, and the keel would grind to a halt before the clamping grip of sand. Just as easily, one could lose their footing as the sands slip away beneath them. With little warning but a gust of hot air from below, people were swallowed into the depths of the sea.

The girl swept the tail end of her board into harbor, splashing sand onto the docks and at the feet of her awaiting father. At a glance, he noticed her bare ankles.

"Jeyna, how many times do I have to remind you? Keep a tether to your board." He had to call over the din of hammering. Here, at the eastern frontier of expansion, they both lived and worked. A small wooden house by the slowly expanding boundaries. It was adjacent to the docks from which Jeyna departed frequently.

"You know I never leave my board in the first place." She fastened the sails down and moored the board to the docks.

"And you never know when the sands will rip you from it. Keep a tether. Live to see another day. You will not think you need one until it is too late."

Jeyna merely nodded.

"Any iron on your travels?" he asked.

"No red as far as the eye can see. I'd have to go further out."

"You know I don't want—"

"I know, I know. If none of the other scouts has returned yet, the southeast should be free." She stepped toward a logbook and signed her name off then set off at a jog to catch up with her father.

"When you next set out I want you to bring your brother. I know you'd rather do anything else in the world, but it's about time he learned to sail. The south-eastern dunes aren't too far out. It will be good practice for him, and you won't have to deal with him for long."

Jeyna couldn't help but sigh as they reached their doorstep. At the very least, the unwelcome news was tempered by the smell of stew and fresh bread that greeted her.

The house was sparse with little in the way of either furnishings or rooms. The kitchen was merely a corner of the main room and a few bedrooms branched off, separated only by curtains. The floorboards had ample gaps between them, not too dissimilar to the construction of the docks.

Her father already began portioning out bowls for Jeyna and her brother each. He handed a bowl to her brother before smothering the fire with a fistful of sand.

"You're lucky you came back in time, Jeyna. If we had left Kydin alone, we'd be coming back to dry pot." They took their seats on fur mats that were strewn across the floor.

Her brother snorted through a spoonful of soup. "I wouldn't have forgotten. I swear."

"I'm sure food is the only thing you won't forget about." Jeyna said.

Her father chuckled. "Kydin, you'll soon have something to think about. You'll be scouting out to the east with your sister later today?" He looked to Jeyna for a nod of confirmation. "Today."

Kydin leapt from his seat, nearly overturning the short table their bowls were settled on. Luckily, Jeyna and her father had the foresight to keep their hands on their food, and Kydin had had the foresight to wolf down the majority of his stew.

"Do I get my own board yet?"

"Not yet. You're still too young. And I won't buy you a brand new one just for you to damage it some way or another. Get some practice with a borrowed one. If you're on your best behavior with Jeyna, maybe she can convince me to reconsider." He turned his attention of Jeyna. "I'm counting on you to take care of him."

Kydin couldn't help pacing the room in his excitement. His hair ruffled in a slight breeze, and he approached the cooking fire.

"Dad, did you manage to put the fire out completely?"

The smile dropped from their father's face. Jeyna felt it now, too.

A slight rise in temperature.

Her father rushed for Kydin and carried him about the waist. At the same time, Jeyna rushed for the door, spilling out onto the wooden walkway. The tenuous foundations of the building shook, and the bubbling sands began to climb up the wooden struts of the house. A horrid creaking silenced the hammers.

The rearmost foundations fell first, and the pillars above wailed as the full brunt of the house's weight came upon them. Kydin found himself midair, thrown through the open doorway. Jeyna was quickly growing taller as their home sunk away from the dock. On shaky footing, her father took a running leap. He clung to the edge of the pier as the house continued to dip. With all her might, Jeyna tugged on his arms, struggling to bring him over the edge.

Then, the pillars snapped, and the roof came down like a great maw that descended, clamping down on her father's back and pulling him out of sight.

Her hands clasped air. Then they found themselves around Kydin's shoulders. She had to keep him from diving over. She could not find her voice. It was lost in the plumes of sand that spiked out of the spot their home used to be. She found it when she heard Kydin, fighting against her grasp, crying out for dad. Begging her to grab a rope or jump in and find him. But she knew. They both saw how quickly the ceiling had come down on him. How quickly the house had disappeared. How high that fountain of sand shot when the pocket of air trapped beneath the wooden house collapsed.

She found her tears, as well. They were revealed by the sands that pelted the two of them as they knelt on the dock. Jeyna clutched at her chest, as if the lump of iron that had made its way there were the same as the iron she dearly sought after on every scouting mission. And she tore at it the same way, wishing she could wrest it from its pit and put it out on the walls to be hammered into place. And then, she could watch those walls weather away beneath the sand.

A heavy hand landed on Jeyna's shoulder. It wasn't restraining like the hold she had on Kydin, but it was heavy all the same. And slowly, the hand pulled her back from the edge of the dock.

"Jeyna. Away from the port. This whole section is unsafe now. We're lucky we haven't put much iron into work here yet," the gruff man spoke.

She cast her eyes about to see the workers filing away from the extremities of the city. A reluctant few would be sent back out later to salvage what materials they could. This place would be reclaimed by the sea before long. The movement of the sands can only precede more movement. The scaffolding that stretched around the side of the port was useless now. The iron patches that had just started to stretch their fingers around the dock would never join the hand on the far side of the city. This branch of the city had died with her father.

The man had placed his other hand on Kydin, at the very least settling his desire to join his father. "You need to set out again." He pushed her toward the inner pier where she had leashed her board. "We need to close this place off. In iron." He looked to the flags overhead. "The winds are strong. You will make good distance. You have already signed. You will earn your keep. I hope you find a red dune. We will send out a carrier to dig for ore."

Jeyna quietly shuffled to the board. Her hand clung to the scarf she had tied to the mast.

"Kydin—"

"Will stay with me," he said.

Kydin remained quiet. The sorrow had left his eyes, but nothing replaced it. Jeyna turned away, unable to look at the tears that seemed to flow from empty sockets. She dried her own eyes and slipped the goggles on.

"Your father was a good scout. In his age, his sight failed him."

"His eyes are fine!"

"And *fine* was not good enough for a scout. You will be better." Even through the fogged glass she could see his gaze harden. "If you find nothing, you will not return."

Jeyna cut loose and sailed off. As the man said, the winds were strong and filled her sails immediately. She leaned back, placing her bodyweight into the reins. She felt the ropes dig into her hands so she pulled harder, bounding into the southeast.

“You will not find nothing.” The man spoke to himself.
