

Chapter I

The unmistakable sound of agony shook Clint from his sleep. His dehydrated eyes pierced into the night sky above him, but only briefly, as he quickly remembered where he was.

“CLINT! PLEASE!! HELP ME!!”

Clint shot up from his dusty sleep sack, the desert sands dimly lit by the night moons and the dying campfire. His gaze darted around the darkness, trying to find the source of his wife’s cries for help.

“Mara?!”

Clint’s voice echoed back at him from the tall dunes of the Southern Desert. All that was left was the sound of shifting sands. He turned to see Mara’s pale hand, reaching upwards from the sand, but slowly sinking downwards, into a tight vacuum.

“Sand Hags...” Clint muttered with fear.

He knew the warmth of the campfire would only attract them, but his judgment was bested by his exhaustion. There was no time for excuses, Mara’s hand was sinking farther and farther down into the pit. Clint dove across the sands towards her. He reached the low center of the sand trap, and as his body began to pull into the pit, he formed a loose grip around Mara’s fingertips but lost it as her hand went under. The sand gave way under Clint, and only made him sink further down. He desperately fumbled for her touch beneath the sands, but he could no longer reach her. Just as he attempted to once more, thrust out for her, the sand trap began to rise, and flatten out. And just like that, in what felt like a matter of seconds, the pit was gone, and the sands were still again.

“MARA!!” He cried out at the endlessly deep ocean of sand.

Clint uselessly clawed at the sand, digging downwards hoping for any chance of rescuing Mara. He cried out once more at the bottom of the hole he had dug, but this time, something cried back.

“Cl....Cli...” a muffled voice screamed back at him.

“I’m coming Mara!” Clint began pawing at the dune feverishly

“Clin.... CLINT!!!” A hand came down onto Clint’s shoulder as the muffled voice suddenly cleared. He spun around to see a worried Mara, kneeling down to him, holding close a bundled child.

“By the Mount, what are you doing?!” She continued.

“I... I don’t understand” Clint fumbled to make sense of everything.

“You must keep your voice down Clint, the desert is too dangerous at night. What are you thinking?” She whispered to him in a frantic tone.

“..but you were-” Suddenly, the hand reemerged, but this time, vile, and decrepit. The flesh peeling away revealed the dark red-skinned hand of a malnourished Sand Hag. The bony fingers quickly snatched Clint’s boot and began to pull back down. The creature’s barbed fingertips dug through the thin leather and into Clint’s skin. Mara lept back in fear, holding young Flint tighter than before.

“My axe! Bring it to me!” He called to her in pain as the barbs pulled harder on his flesh.

Mara hurried to the bedroll, where a brown cloth tightly concealed Clint’s plan. Lifting the heavy bundle with one arm, and holding Flint in the other, she hurried back to the struggling Clint. Then, like a well-choreographed ensemble, Mara tossed the bundle while holding onto one end of the fabric that bound it together. It tumbled and unwound through the air, and revealed a naked, glittering axe. It seemed to glide through the air as it continued its tumble to Clint. He reached out to it, and with a strong grip, guided the falling axe down onto the Sand Hag’s wrist. The flesh gave in from under the blade, and the sand shrieked as the spurting nub hid back underground. Now was his chance. With the barbed hand still attached to his ankle, he quickly crawled away to his safety, leaving behind a trail of thick, black, Sand Hag blood.

“Vile things..” Clint grunted in exhaustion. “It’s trickery and sinner’s majik had me fooled.”

“The Great Mountain has smiled upon us this night Clint.” Mara breathed as she kissed the back of her clenched hand, and extended an open palm to the Northwestern sky. A customary salute to the Great Western Mountain, home of the Farim.

The Farim are simple-minded people, thick-skinned and hardy. They are hunters, blacksmiths, and great warriors. However, unlike the rest of the races of Kavkiin, they do not practice majiks of any kind, nor do they pray to the Aetherwalkers and use their sacred Vis technologies. Back home, this is heresy of the highest caliber, and because of this, the Farim sciences are non-existent; and their ideology is a fallacy. The Aetherwalkers and their gift of majiks are very much real, and Clint, Flint, and Mara are very far from home.

Chapter II

"Here, let me help you." Mara pleaded as she leaned in to help Clint.

She kneeled in the sand and gently set Flint down on her bedroll. Reaching into her pouch, she pulls out a felt bag, a glass pipe, and a knife.

"Mara; that isn't Mountain Mana, is it? Where did you get that from?" Clint moaned in pain, studying the felt bag and pipe.

She turned the bag over into her hand, spilling out the bright green crystalline contents within.

"I don't think the Pharax are just going to help us for free, Clint. I stole this from the Great Mountain Heart, in hopes that they will accept it as a trade." Mara's rebuttal cut Clint deeply.

"Those crystals are sacred to our people, Mara; and those outsiders only want it for their sinful indulgence! How could you betray-" Clint was cut short by an immense wave of pain.

The Sand Hag toxin was working its way up his leg. Crawling the walls of his veins, digesting everything it touched. It was as if his leg was rotting from the inside out. He screamed in pain, burying his face in his cloak, to avoid waking Flint. However, Flint was far from conscious, as his fever would soon take him in a matter of days.

Clint watched Flint sleep and remembered what this was all for. Nothing mattered now, but to find a cure for Flint's illness. His face red with pain, he turned to Mara and nodded.

Mara began to sort through the pile of crystals in her palm. Picking out a few that would be small enough to fit in the bowl of the pipe, and gently crushing a few larger ones to add to the pack.

Returning the remains of the crystals to the pouch, she handed the packed pipe to Clint and used a stick from the dying fire, to help light it. The crystals took the flame in and began to glow and evaporate.

"Remember not to overindulge, and to thank the Mount for its bounty" Mara added.

Clint closed his eyes in silent prayer and took a draw from the burning crystals. The vapor filled his lungs and the crystal's glow faded from the pipe, Clint's pain sloughed off of his body like a molting shell. The tension his muscles have grown to learn from his month-long desert hike seemed to melt away; and as he exhaled, the smoke bellowed outward and swirled with colors. Green, then purple, then pink and blue, twinkling like a hundred vagrant stars.

Mara took in some of the aftermath and silently thanked the Great Mountain.

Clint lay on his back, completely absorbed in his ecstasy, and Mara got to work on the Sand Hag's hand, still gripping tightly.

Using the knife, she gently cut the first barb from Clint's flesh. Careful not to stick her own skin, she removed the finger, and moved it to a recess she had dug in the sand, and continued onto the next.

It wasn't long before Clint's skin began to turn blue, then dark purple, then black, as the toxin began to settle out of his rotting veins, and into his flesh. She gasped and attempted to squeeze the venom out in a panic, but it was too late. Clint's flesh was being digested by the thick acid.

Mara shook with fear. This was much worse than she had initially thought. The poison was spreading fast, and the Silver City was still a half-day's walk away. However, with a leg like Clint's, they were not going to get anywhere. Especially not in the middle of the night. Mara had no choice but to hold out until morning and hope for the best.

"Is...everything okay dear?" Clint mumbled from his intoxicated state.

"Oh, of course, darling... nothing to worry about. How about you have some more." Mara tried her best to disguise her whimpers in confidence, as she fumbled with shaky hands to refill the pipe with more Mana.

"Oooh, the Mount wouldn't appreciate this.." Clint sat up and giggled, completely oblivious to his rotting leg. "...but I won't tell if you don't!" He took another drag from the pipe, and as the stars escaped his mouth, he fell back to the sand asleep.

Chapter III

The next morning, Clint was dead. His leg collapsed in on itself like a rotten carcass, and the rest of his body was not far from the same fate.

Mara didn't understand. She never knew Sand Hag venom could move so quickly, and be so powerful. She grieved, but only shortly, as her grieving was halted by a haunting discovery.

Sores began to develop around Flint's lips, and his fever was not letting up. As the morning died, and the blistering sun began to beat down on the Mother and Child, Mara began to realize that she had no choice but to continue on. She quickly came to accept Clint's fate, which came as a shock to Mara, but she had little else she could do.

Without so much as a proper burial, Clint's body was left to the sands, as the mother stumbled onward. Struggling to carry the burdens of her pack, her newborn, and the thoughts of her husband she left behind.

The heat bore down onto her as she moved farther south. Increasing in intensity with each step. Hours passed with nothing but the barking coughs of young Flint to keep her company.

Her canteen taunted her. With only a sip of water left to slosh inside. She pondered her choices. Without so much as a landmark or a shady spot to stop, she tossed her bag down and unscrewed the cap.

"I don't need much..." she thought out loud.

She touched the hot steel of the canteen to her lips and took in just enough to coat her tongue, then proceeded to give Flint a drink.

The boy's mouth had begun to swell since she last checked, and she was unable to get him to even notice the canteen, so she splashed the rest onto his forehead.

And ever so slightly, if only for a moment, the young one looked relieved.

Throwing the bag back onto her aching shoulder, Mara continued her trek across the desert. The sand swallowed her feet with every step as if walking through a thick swamp.

She walked for hours. With nothing to take her mind to. Just sand.

She reached the base of a large dune.

"Surely I can see the Silver City from the top..." she said to herself. Her dry, crackling voice echoed across her head, for aside from the occasional hot wind, and the stridor of young Flint; it was the only sound she had heard all day.

She began to walk up the steep hill. Finally with something to look forward to. She knew if she could just see the glittering city on the horizon, she would have the will to make it the rest of the way. She couldn't allow Clint's death to be for nothing.

At last, she reached the top of the dune.

There was nothing in sight.

Not a single plant, nor animal. Not a hut nor a sand ship. Just the same searing hot sand for as far as Mara could fathom. She felt a pit in her stomach as her knees fell to the sand.

Overlooking the vastness of the Southern Desert, Mara screamed.

She screamed for her husband's death and her own pain. But most importantly, she screamed for young Flint, who she wasn't even sure was on her back anymore. She had gone as far as she could.

Numbness. Regret.

Mara fell down the wall of the dune. Tumbling through the sand until she landed Flint-side-up in the scorching silt.

Chapter IV

It wouldn't be long before they were found by a Phraxian Scavenger, scouring the desert for foolish travelers who underestimate the Southern Desert. A practice that has proven to be highly lucrative for traders in the Silver City time after time. Some even claim that's where the city gets most of its "exotic imports".

The Scavenger stepped off his glider and approached the woman.

"Odd." the Trader muttered to himself. His voice distorted through his gleaming silver rebreather.

"Farim never travel alone. I wonder what could have happened here..."

As the Scavenger looked over the body, he noticed movement under her cloak.

He carefully lifted the torn fibers to reveal a small child, tightly bundled on her back.

Flint let out a wheeze as the sun hit his swollen, sore-covered face.

The Phraxian Scavenger jumped back.

"Razormouth!" he exclaimed as he quickly checked the seal on this rebreather.

A perfect seal all around. He let out a sigh of relief.

"Aether, take me..." he cursed under his breath.

While the Razormouth plague was only just reaching the Western Mountains, the people of the Southern Desert had experienced this before. He knew that the Silver City guards would not allow him in with a plagued child, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the child to die like his mother.