

A vast, sandy wasteland. Low dunes stretch for miles and miles in an ever-shifting blanket of dull greys and browns. The only constant here—near the north pole of E1—is the cold. This part of the moon is stuck in a permanent winter. Days only last a matter of hours, and the polar nights can last for months. Anyone unlucky enough to be stranded out here can only expect to live hours at best.

Thirteen sets of tired feet trudge down the fine dust that blankets the bare landscape. Thirteen weary heads and tails are bowed to the frigid gale that cuts across their path. Starving, tired, sore and dirty; there used to be twenty-seven of them, but twenty-seven had dwindled to twenty-one before they had left the walls of the outpost. Then eight more had succumbed to their wounds, or exhaustion and hunger. So now, only thirteen remain.

One of the more injured of their party—Lobo—drops to the sand with a pained cry.

The leader stops in his tracks. Dread closes its claws about his heart as he fears yet another loss is upon them. He doesn't dare look back, but he cocks an ear to listen.

A few hushed voices of encouragement. Some barely audible grunts of pain. But in the end, death has spared this one... For now.

The leader looks up for once; not caring about the blown particles that blur his view. The ragged protogen heaves a relieved sigh through his visor's nanite filter.

They are going north; that is all they know. There had been stories of a safe haven in some abandoned region near the pole. They had nothing to lose now; either to die on the way to see what lie in the north, or be captured by the primogenitors and reprogrammed. Perhaps even a fate much worse. They all bore the scars of years of primogenitor abuse; they had only barely escaped such torment with their lives.

"The sun will set soon."

Was that Leader's voice? He could hardly hear it. He was scarcely sure the others had heard it at all.

Yet, the sorry column limps on through the murk. Some support their companions, while others limp along on their own dwindling strength.

They had already traveled farther than any of them could have hoped. Across abandoned battlefields pocked with holes and bones; through vacant cities and outposts which once housed protogen or primogenitors... Now, all they can see for miles is a vast sea of dunes and the perpetual blizzard of polar sand. Be it a blessing or curse, they are entirely alone.

Leader glances over his shoulder at the distant orange ball that is their sun. It is dangerously low to the horizon. Its dying rays turn the chalky sky to fire. What they all wouldn't give for a fire's warmth.

"We only have an hour left before the light is gone."

Yes, this was definitely Leader.

"We need to try to go faster."

Try as they might, the straggling thirteen can only manage an amble.

Leader bows his head and folds his ears. Not the first time since his awakening, he dares to pray. Not to anyone or anything, but he so desperately wishes to the universe that there is something—ANYTHING friendly out here! Something that at least wouldn't make the deaths of the others worthless.

Leader's ears flicker as an all too familiar sound carries to him. The distant puttering of a scanner drone.

"Get down!" Leader rasps to his companions, "Cover your armor in the sand!"

Nearly as one, the thirteen drop to the ground. Claws scabble at the fine dirt to hurriedly dampen the shine of their armor plates. Their coats are already caked in the dust and therefore mostly invisible. Now all they can do is wait and hope.

Leader keeps an ear cocked to the sound, even as his visor is half-buried in the sand. He remembers all too well the swarms of such craft that had alerted the primogenitors to their escape. He remembers then how blaster shots had rained down upon their heads; some were from primogenitors who guarded the wall, but far too many were from protogen like them whom hadn't yet been blessed with the awakening.

Leader's arm burns at the not so distant memory of one of those laser bolts. It strengthens his resolve.

"Heads down! No matter how close they get, don't move a muscle!"

The order is muffled by the sand, but there are a few muffled beeps of confirmation. Narti, Owen, and maybe even Lobo are among the distinctive calls.

The low puttering grows steadily louder. If any of the protogen were to look up, they would see the tiny craft and its dusty jetstream tacking back and forth in a tactical zig-zag. It combs the area with a yellow search light preceding it. Its beam passes dangerously close to the troop of barely camouflaged protogen.

Leader waits. His breaths are shallow. It takes so much of his strength to not leap up and try to run. But he knows if he brakes, the others will as well. That would surely get them all killed.

The drone disappears over a distant mound of grey sand, but the sputtering of its tiny engines still carries to them.

"Hold." Leader says; barely over a whisper, "Wait until the sound is gone."

No answering beeps, and no movement. They are a cluster of silent, grey humps in a vast ocean of grey humps. They are invisible.

The drone's engines grow closer again. It passes quickly overhead with its light now deactivated. There is a loud popping sound as its thrusters engage. The drone rockets away from the protogen in the direction they had come. Then it is gone.

Leader dares lift his head to investigate the drone's swift departure. That is when he realizes truly how much time they had wasted lying in hiding.

The sun is only a dim ember of red on the horizon.

"Get up! We have to go!" Leader barks.

Slowly, the rest of his party rise to their weary feet. There's Owen with his torn ear. Narti and Rue are the smallest. Ester, Gohbi, Giya, Papu, Lio, Kai, Taro, and Bao make 11. And yes—with some effort and a grunt of pain—Lobo rises to prop himself against Narti. They are all still hanging on, even if it is only by a thread.

It is by this time that the drone's reason for leaving so quickly becomes apparent. The wind has drastically picked up speed. What little visibility they had before is now gone; they only have internal sensors to tell them where to go now. The chill bites through their fur like it isn't even there at all.

"We... have to keep trying." Leader rasps over the howling gusts.

Leader takes the first step toward what he blindly believes to be north and the others halfheartedly follow. Up and over a shifting mound of powder, and down into a bowl-shaped valley.

Leader is almost over the rim of the dusty bowl when a ping from Owen gives him pause. He turns back the way he had come.

The other 12 are huddled up together in the meager shelter the valley provides.

Leader can do nothing but trudge back to join them.

"Come on. We have to keep trying." Leader croaks out, "If we don't keep moving, we will die here."

Only one of his party lifts their head to acknowledge what he had said. This protogen has the distinctive torn ear. Owen sorrowfully shakes his head, and then lowers it once more onto the back of one of his companions.

Leader's tail lowers to the sandy carpet. He resigns himself to pacing slow circles around the rest. He does not know what dwells out here, but he must try to protect them from it. More halfhearted prayers are sent off into the ether.

It is not long before the desert's residents make themselves known to the protogen. A lull in the keening wind brings a new, more haunting sound to their ears.

A chattering scream carries to them from a downwind direction. The sound is answered by croaks and eerie cries. There is something out there that is alive... And it is hunting them.

Leader's ears stand up to their fullest as he pauses in his circuit to listen.

Yet, another biting gale whips against his back, drowning out the sounds and causing him to shudder.

Leader shakes his head to clear it. Perhaps it was just the wind? Maybe there's an old antenna array the sand is battering.

But no. Another ebb in the wind's deathly song, and the sounds come again. They are louder now; nearer.

Leader's hackles stand on end. He does not like this. He does not like it at all!

Leader rushes to his companions with what feels like dreamy slowness. His exhausted limbs just don't want to move.

"Everyone up!" he coughs, "Come on! We have to move!"

There is a halfhearted shuffling from one or two of the huddled protogen, but none of them have the strength to rise.

A screech pierces the howling of the wind. The first of the creatures presents itself at the crest of the next dune. In the darkness, only its vague shape is visible. The rough impression of a stocky body, low to the ground. Its head moves back and forth as it sniffs the dusty wind, and then it tips its head back to let its deathly cry.

Leader catches a brief glimpse of spiked mandibles against the dull light of the charcoal sky, before the animal disappears over the looming hump of the dune.

"Please! Get up!" Leader tries to shout to his party.

But all he achieves is to collapse in a fit of coughing. A work of engineering magic it may be, the fine sands prove to be too much for the nanites in his visor to completely filter.

Leader drops to his knees before his huddled friends.

"I'm... sorry..." he whispers; the wind snatches the words away.

The lumbering animal is only meters away from them now. Through the murk, Leader can make out four stumpy legs with paddle-shaped feet; a long, fatty tail; a short, insectoid head bristling with twitching feelers, and giant mandibles fit for crushing bone.

The animal parts its mandibles now, and lets a rumbling, hissing growl that Leader can feel in the shifty grit beneath him.

"Go! Get out of here!" he tries to shout, but he can only manage a faint whisper.

The beast works its mandibles open and shut. Its approach is slow, constant, and purposeful. Clack, clack, clack go those wicked mandibles.

Now more of them come plodding down the slope on their odd, webbed feet. A whole pack of woolly scavengers who think they smell death.

Leader raises his arms up to mimic the clacking mandibles. Perhaps he can convince them he is one of their own, and frighten them off?

Oh, how wrong that idea is... As soon as leader's clapping claws make contact, the lead scavenger parts its mandibles and lets a deafening screech. It thinks it has come upon a rival, and so it lunges forward. It pounds over the sand with its wicked jaws held agape. It is about to leap on leader's knelt form...

But the impact never comes. The beast is thrown aside with a choked scream and a spear in its heart.

Something crests the dune and charges down at them. There is a wild clanging of metal, and a deep, woofing bellow. A bipedal something races into the very midst of the scavengers and beats at them with a long staff.

The startled scavengers yip and cry out in fear or pain. Their rhythm is destroyed! One of them turns to run, and the others follow. They fall over one another in their desperate struggle to escape the unknown attacker.

Leader had watched all this transpire in stunned silence; unable to move from that spot.

Once it is certain the monsters had gone, the biped moves to retrieve their spear, and salvage some meat from the side of the dead scavenger.

Leader's ears perk up as he recognises the distinctive round visor, plated joints, and upright posture of another protogen. His relief soon turns to worry. What if this is a scout sent by the primogenitors to find them?

With their spear and a slab of scavenger meat strapped to their back, the protogen approaches the group. They use their staff like a cane; stabbing it into the dry grit with a rhythmic thudding.

"Who are you?" the protogen barks.

The voice is distinctly female, and commands respect.

Leader bows his head and tries to answer.

"TG-1320." he manages to choke out his designation.

The protogen halts in her approach. Her form is stiff, stern... Intimidating.

"No. Who are you? What is your name?" she nearly shouts the challenge.

Leader folds his ears and cowers.

"Aram! My name is Aram." he rasps.

The protogen is silent and still for a moment, but then her stark features soften. Apparently, that was all that she needed to confirm they were not primogenitor spies.

"Well, good thing I found you, Aram. Those scavengers almost had you and your guys for lunch."

Aram dares to relax and look up at the protogen. He nods slowly.

"Who are you?" he asks in return.

The protogen fans her ears and scratches her chin thoughtfully.

"Well, it looks like I'm your saviour, and your guide to the safe house." she replies, "You may call me Hunter."

The wave of relief that washes over Aram is nearly indescribable. He bows in gratitude to Hunter.

"Thank you..." he manages to squeak out.

"Don't thank me yet. We have a long way to go to get you to safety. And from the looks of it, you and your companions aren't in great shape."

Hunter clangs her staff against her thigh plating—that metal sound they had heard before.

Three huge animals lumber over the hill to meet Hunter. All three brilliant white—even in the murky dust storm. Each sporting eight sturdy legs, humped backs, and curly tusks that extend

outward from their pudgy faces. They stop beside Hunter, placidly lowering their heads to the sand to graze on the fine sands.

Aram is in awe of these creatures and the protogen that had tamed them, but he is snapped out of his thoughts by Hunter's next question.

"Aram, do you believe you have enough strength to help me get your companions onto the backs of my mounts?"

Aram gives a silent nod and gets unsteadily to his feet. He isn't short by any standard, but Hunter towers head and shoulders over him.

Hunter looks Aram up and down, nods, then carefully gathers up the fallen protogen.

Drowsy and beaten as they all are, there is no mistaking the relieved smiles traced out on their dimmed and dirtied visors. The near indescribable looks of bliss that overtake their features as they are tucked in between the thick, fatty segments in the animal's hides.

Last is Owen whom is hobbling along side Aram. As Aram helps his friend into a seat on the animal's back, he dares to lean out to hug his leader.

Aram returns the hug with an emotional sigh.

"We should hurry. The scavengers will be back soon to get at what's left of their pack brother." Hunter says.

Aram nods, disengaging from Owen's hug and wiggling himself between the segments of one of the wooly beasts.

Hunter leaps nimbly onto the shoulders of one of her animals. With a shake of her reins, she sets it into motion.

The other two creatures lift their heads and turn to amble after.

Aram is finally allowed to rest. The dust-coated protogen lays his weary head back on the thick wool. He allows himself a moment to bask in the warmth and the relief that at least something had gone right today. Well, in the last weeks, or months. He hadn't felt this comfortable ever before in his awakened life. It fills his heart first with relief, but then with sorrow. There were fourteen of his friends who never got to experience this.

The three lumbering mounts make their way over the dusty wastes. They seem tireless. The miles are eaten away under their steady, insulated paws. Only the faint lowing and grunting of the tardigradous beasts can be heard over the hissing sands.

Aram looks around at it all. Never in his life could he ever imagine freedom. He couldn't really believe he was experiencing such a thing. He is once again shaken out of his thoughts by Hunter.

"Hey, Aram! It's your lucky day. Lookup; over that dune!" Hunter calls.

Aram lifts his head off the woolly hump behind him to see. And he is taken aback by the view that greets his tired eyes.

Over the next dune, a single, pinkish orb seems to levitate in the murky sky. Its light cuts right through the haze and seems to fill Aram's heart with... Joy? Yes, joy!

"Pretty, isn't she? We call her the Wishing Star. She is only visible once every three polar nights." Hunter says.

Aram is in awe.

"She's beautiful," he murmurs.

"We are almost there. Then we can get you all cleaned up and fed. How's that sound?"

Hunter turns her bright, amber gaze and upright ears to Aram.

"It sounds incredible." Aram says, "I can't even remember the last thing we ate."

"Well, then let's pick up the pace, shall we?"

And with that, Hunter rattles her reins. First her mount, then the other two animals burst into a rolling bound.

Aram grips his mount's wool tightly. On either side, the flying sand from their mounts' paws gives the illusion of movement. Perhaps it is the exhaustion, but if Aram looks at it just right he can barely see the shapes of a dozen or so spirit protogen racing alongside them. This fills his heart with a deep sense of peace.

Aram smiles softly and closes his eyes.