

June Prompt War – Drafting for Water in the Desert

Setting: Keramidian, long after the Storm Plagues scourged the land into glass.

The desert in which this story takes place is simply called the Keramidian – a truly lifeless, barren waste with no native life, no plants, not even insects. Apart from sand and rock, scars remain from the Storm Plagues in the form of bizarre geological formations like molded glass.

The Scribe is searching for a place described in a book in the royal archives - and she needs to know for herself if it's real.

(Her destination is a dream not realized in the confines of this story. What IS realized is her need for guidance - her need for understanding. She's chasing something she doesn't even understand - why she's chasing it or what she's chasing. Her harrowing experience here hints at what she's really searching for - life in a barren reality. The bustle and comforts of home are not only remote, they are offensive to her - but the water gives her peace and comfort in the desolation, and the strength to carry on.)

Her name – Esther? Essera? Essa?

Characters:

Female Wanderer (Scribe) – obviously heavily veiled to deal with the brutal sun. Human? Or Khoveshi? (Probably should keep it human – we're already complicating things by having a fantastical setting)

Supposedly In search of a city of her people (develop more), across the scorching Keramidian. Her specific reasons? She won't disclose. She trusts no one.

The Guide — a tall old man, again heavily swaddled in cloth to protect against the desert. Originally, she paid him to guide her after she decided to break from the caravan's path, and he seemed to be oddly content despite the danger. However, he is far, far too curious about the contents of her bag...

Arc and Symbolism –

Scribe is lost, searching for something without knowing what she's really looking for. While she doesn't get to her destination in this story, she discovers hints of what she really needs through the vehicle of water. The water she drinks along the way is cloudy, murky, and bitter, symbolic of disappointment with the world's comforts and securities; the poisonous water in the dragon's cave being the mortal danger of sin; and the clean, pure, sparkling water of the oasis / fountain at the end being a reflection of the water of life and true satisfaction.

Outline

V1. - Guide shows up in crisis

The Scribe Essera has been separated from the caravan for several days. Her guards abandoned her last night, leaving her with only her books and papers and pens. Stranded in the high desert, she despairingly realizes that she is as good as dead - her destination is at least two weeks away and she has only one day of water (In long version revise to three; Journey is six days)

Then a mystery man appears out of the desert, apparently from a cave in the valley which she failed to notice. Initially fearful of him, she readies her light staff to blast him, but he dismisses her aggression.

He shows her the oasis they must reach - she doubts it's really there - and explains that the fastest path is straight forward, following the ridges. The journey is four days, but they only have water for two - and the sun is brutal.

She disagrees with the straight and harsh path, and consulting her maps and looking around, points out a lower formation - a series of arroyos and warrens which will provide much shade over a six day journey, and make survival actually possible. He warns her against going into the Warrens - that which lies beneath the Keramidian ought not be disturbed - but she dismisses his fear as myth and superstition, and insists on going that way. Sighing, he follows nonetheless, which she is puzzled by and highly suspicious of, demanding to know why he's so interested in accompanying her.

"Scribe, my grandchildren are older than you, so you can put that fear out of your mind. I am here to help. If I were not, we would not be having this discussion. Let us go, before the sun is high."

They travel, and after the first day, reach the arroyo. It doesn't seem so bad - she managed to conserve her water, and drinks deeply, relieved by the cool breeze blowing through the shaded warrens. Her guide is not so relaxed as she, and reiterates the dangers of the warrens - the dread powers which caused the Storm Plagues still echo here. They should leave as soon as possible. She laughs him off; if the Plagues were real, they were thousands of years ago. They can echo all they want.

They travel another day without incident, aside from a near tumble down a glassy slope - which the Guide saves her from, demonstrating a latent strength. She has a half-day of water remaining - she drinks half of it, still feeling parched, but reassured herself that they're halfway there.

"It's not about how far you've gone, it's about where you're going to."

"Oh be quiet, you're just bitter that I was right and you were wrong."

"Bitter? Hardly. Disappointed? Yes." He shook his head at her and laid down to sleep.

On the third day, they are faced with an unexpected detour; either emerge onto the high desert over the collapsed ceiling, or venture deeper into the warrens to stay in the shade. Tempted by a cool breeze blowing from the darkened tunnel on the right, she ignores the Guide's warning and ventures into the tunnel.

That night - or at some point in time - she grows too exhausted to continue, dreadfully thirsty, and turned about in the darkness, to the point where she cannot even see the way back. She has delayed using her staff to light her way, wishing to conserve its power for a time of need; but then she hears the sound of splashing water. She lights the staff dimly and follows the sound - then stumbling into some pool of liquid, a beautiful emerald green, greedily drinks - only to discover that it tastes acrid and slimy, like sulfurous oil. It is then that she feels the breeze again, blowing like a gale, and she glimpses the terrible creature which dwells under these sands - a dragon of metal malevolence - one of the Iron Gods who brought the Storm Plagues. She leaps back, but the Dragon snares her leg and breaks it. As it prepares to finish her, the Guide swoops in to save her, blinding the dragon with her light staff (maybe switch it up, give him the light staff in the beginning) as he sweeps her up in his arms and runs for it. The dragon slashes his leg but he keeps going, shielding her with his body as it breathes fire after them, cursing them in abyssal tongues, "I am the dark! You cannot hide!"

(Additional scene - develop more for long version.

"I told you; you cannot hide, for I am the night itself."

"And you cannot run, serpent, for I am the Light!")

Ending

(version 1)

The Guide sets her down at the mouth of the cave to the surface, winded from his mortal injuries. He tells her to follow the sun - it will lead her to the fount. Still very much in agony over her broken leg, poisoned by the foul oil, she breaks down in tears - she can't make it, she's too far gone, her stubbornness has cost her everything - it can't be fixed.

The Guide presses his staff into her hand and stands her up and commands her, "I am a good shepherd. I have not lost one yet. Now, walk."

He goes back into the cave to face the Dragon (off-screen), while she limps onward, leaning into his staff. After

(version 2 (shorter))

The Guide carries her all (or almost all) the way to the oasis while she's dipping in and out of consciousness; when she awakens, she finds herself alone in the desert, and almost begins to curse the Guide for abandoning her again when she hears the sound of trickling water. Turning around, she sees the fountain of which he spoke, sparkling and beautiful - she drinks her fill, and reflects on the cost of getting here (develop further) - the preciousness of this water - and renews her determination to find the city from which this water flows (or something like that, figure out the connection between all the symbols, themes, and motifs).

[*Idea for ending moment* - the Guide's son approaches her, and asks where she's going. She asks in return why she should go anywhere - the water is here. He replies that no one can wander the desert forever.

OR he replies that in his home, this water flows from waterfalls and runs in the streets - won't you come and see?]

Assorted Samples

(First meeting of Essera and the Guide; insert intro to story)

"What, will you kill and eat me? I am old and weathered; you'll get two day's water and food off me and no more. Put your weapon away. I am your friend. Trust me."

"Really now? Y'know, I've done that a lot lately. Funny how that's worked out?"

"And you have been failed. Your books have led you into a desert, and your friends and soldiers have all abandoned you to your madness. So what does that make me?"

"Mad too, I guess. What do you want?"

"As I said before." He pointed up to the crest of the valley's eastern hill. "Follow me. I will show you."

"Show me what?" She watched the man climb the hill, leaning heavily into his staff as he negotiated the slope. She clutched her light-staff to her chest just waiting for his bandit friends to spring their trap. Instead the old man surmounted the crest, and seeing her still standing where she was, threw a pebble at her.

"Can't find water standing still!"

(Or "My eyes are good, but even I can't see through a hill! Come on!")

Sighing, she scaled the slope after him. When she had reached the top, he pointed his staff at

The air tasted of salt. So did what was left of the water, sandy and sludgy in its sadly deflated skin. Essera drank it nonetheless, washing the sand-grit from between her teeth as she and her guide split the last of the salted meat.

"Well, this was your idea," said Essera, gesturing to the winding paths of the arroyo they had been wandering for the past three days. "Could have taken the easy way west, but noooo, have to wander these blasted warrens— well? What're you going to say?"

Her guide examined his share of the meat, and offered it back to her. "Eat. You will need it."

She reached for it - then pulled her hand back. "No, you. I'm fine —"

"You are skinny as a fish in a desert. Eat."