

Chapter 9 -- A Sky Black with Smoke

Cyrus

Cyrus, we're fucked!

Was the only thought that went through my head as I fell out into empty space filled with black smoke. The darkness had consumed everything in a perfect sphere out from the epicenter and I, somehow delivered from my own death, was left with nothing to do but obey the laws of gravity.

It was of no will of my own that I was saved by a surging wave as the water from the harbor rushed back in to fill the empty crater, hitting me from one side like a massive flyswatter and sweeping me towards what had been the Port Authority.

I tumbled and bounced in the rushing water, stomach dropping as we crashed down the edge of the crater and only surviving the rush of small watercraft, dock parts, and harbor-floor rubble through sheer dumb luck. My movement was restricted by my hands, still bound tight behind my back, and it was all that I could do to wriggle towards the surface as best as I could before the wave smashed into the other side of the rim, shooting up the curve of the crater and cresting back towards the churning water. I grabbed a second of breath as I was shot into the air by the crashing waves, coughing, inhaling black smoke, and then bracing for impact against the swirling water still beneath me.

Through dumb luck I broke through the surface and dodged the worst of the damage, instead shooting through the rushing water and into the calm depths beneath the inflowing current. Meanwhile, the crater kept flooding.

I finally spun to a stop in the dark water, searching for the surface. The black smoke had mixed in with the water and the air above, turning everything a shade of bruised-black, and if the explosion had gone as far down as it had towards me, I might soon find myself under water hundreds of feet deep.

Bubbles Cyrus, bubbles!

Of course! I let out a small breath of my precious air and felt the bubbles whip past my face down towards my feet. I was upside down.

I flailed awkwardly until I had flipped right-side up, letting out a quick second breath to confirm that I was pointed correctly.

Just as I prepared to kick up towards the surface I sensed something coming towards me, and wriggled out of the way as a jagged piece of scrap metal came crashing down into the mud, kicking up dust from the ground.

The ground? I was close to the bottom. I could use that! In a decision that went entirely against all of my natural instincts, I pushed myself down towards the bottom, brushing against the scrap metal and cutting my leg as I did. I powered through the pain, pushing up and kicking towards the surface as hard as I could. It was hard work with my hands still tied down, but with a titanic effort I broke into the inflowing current and was swept towards the crater again. This time I kept kicking towards the surface even as I tumbled, my only goal being to hit that updraft that had carried me up the first time.

Just before I was smashed against the edge of the crater I was pulled upwards, bouncing against the hard rock. I screamed in pain and let out my precious breath, almost inhaling water before I was shot up into the air again. This time I inhaled as deeply as I could, biting down hard on my lip to fight the pain. I needed to float, to ride the water back up to the surface no matter how long it took.

I crashed back down again, but this time I floated towards the top, spinning back and forth in the churning cauldron but cresting the water more often than not. I had no sense of direction in the still-thick black smoke, but with each passing moment I could feel more and more air flowing into the space, making each breath easier than the last.

And as the top of the churning water calmed, water still rushing down the side but with less violence than it had before, breathing was all I did. I just closed my eyes and floated there, overcome with the feeling that I shouldn't have been alive. But there I was, floating to the surface in the middle of the smoke, saved by a miracle.

Who knew how many had died on the shore, or in the aftermath.

I began to feel very cold, a feeling that had little to do with the bitter chill of the water. I was soaked to the bone twice and back again, my clothes were cut up and worn ragged from the fights and the water, and I was worn down, tired of running.

How had things all gone wrong so quickly? What had I done to deserve that?

Nothing. But neither did the people on shore who are dead now. Sometime shit just happens.

I felt a sudden surge of guilt as I thought about the bustling docks and the people on them that had been taken off of the face of the earth.

I had been saved, and for what? Why? I thought back to the looming figure that had appeared to save me. I had done nothing to deserve that. Everyone else on that ship had been turned to smoke, I had seen them. For what reason had I been saved?

I let out a breath, and for a moment I began to sink beneath the surface.

Cyrus, don't be stupid. Whatever you're thinking right now, whatever self-hating, self-pitying thoughts are running through your head, stop. Get us out of this fucking hole.

My eyes snapped back open and I kicked up to the surface, finally taking the calm water as a chance to wrestle my hands out under my feet and around in front of me. Then I started to gnaw on the ropes. As I did, I began to hear commotion above me, slowly growing louder. The water was beginning to fill the crater, and I was being lifted to the top, although I still couldn't see anything in the thick black smoke. There were lots of voices, all calling out frantically -- some shouting names, some crying, some even fighting and arguing with each other, now seemingly only few dozen yards away from me.

I had almost reached the rim when I finally wrestled the ropes free, trying to get a sense of direction in the void. I needed to get back to Bram. Where was Bram? We'd come from the south to get here and the harbor had been west so... southeast?

I looked up at the sky, trying to track the sun, and only finding the slightest glare off to my left through the clearing smoke. Seizing on what I had to assume was west, I began to swim towards what I hoped was Bram, arriving at the edge of the crater as the water continued to rise, almost to the top. The darkness had cut a faultless sphere out of the city, leaving everything else intact and cross-sectioning anything that it had hit -- from cellars and docks to the fronts of buildings. I finally escaped the crater as the water met a canal, hopping out onto

the side of the docks and crouching down. Next to me was the side of a café that now read *Mar-Ca-*, cut in half right at the edge of the blast radius. Through a window I could see the floor cut perfectly in half, a bar at one end untouched but no door except the water that was now lapping against the wooden floor. There was even a single, four-top table that had been cut in half and toppled back onto the floor still covered in food.

There was blood on the floor at the edge of the blast, and two half-chairs.

I had just begun to retch when C yelled at me.

Stop staring and get back to Bram!

“I... I-”

Shut up! Get us out of this city and we can cry all we want.

I gritted my teeth and stood back up, nodding. I pushed everything else out of my mind and began to jog again, legs screaming from exhaustion and throbbing from the gash on my left calf. I would head to the south and the east until I hit the main strip or the city walls, and one of those would get me back to Bram.

Just push through kid.

And I did, weaving through the twisting alleys until I raced out onto the cobblestone streets and into chaos. People were calling out for loved ones and for help, pushing and shoving each other as they asked for what had happened, looking for soldiers as they tried to make their way through the crowd on horseback, and all made worse by the smoke that had blown in off of the harbor and filled the streets. I was caught by elbows, knees, and grabbing hands as I ran by but I didn't stop.

Just push through.

The crowd and smoke began to thin as I got further down the street, panicked throngs of people changing into smaller groups obeying shouted directions from the same horse-mounted soldiers. There were more people running now too, in all directions. As I continued, I outpaced the smoke and broke onto a street that must have run parallel to the one Trandel and I had taken to get here. I could see that the sun was now falling in the west to my right, which told me that I was on the right track. The same process of winding and weathering that I had taken on the way here happened in reverse, as the smell of salt and sea disappeared and were replaced with the growing din of the main strip. People here were starting to see the black smoke drifting in from the harbor, but business still was going on as usual just as bustling and busy as it had been apart from a few scattered looks.

My lungs were screaming and my legs were exhausted by the time I made it anywhere close to *The Fat Traveler*, and by the time I reached the door to the bar -- now full of incredibly drunk farmers and other merchants -- I was stumbling, ready to collapse. I got a few looks as I fought my way up to the bar, soaking wet, bruised, and cut up, but it was only when I slipped up and leaned on it that anyone finally paid attention to me.

“Good god kid, you look like you just got jumped,” Sam said, as if that was a normal occurrence.

“Where's Bram?” I gasped.

“Bram?” she asked. “Hmmm. Hey! Rick! Where'd Bram get off to?”

One of the men we'd been sitting with that morning turned to us, slurring his words.

“Just went off to find that kid,” Rick said, looking at her and then doing a double take. “Wait, he's right here! Hooray.”

Rick started to turn back away, but Sam called at him again.

“Rick! Where did Bram go?” she asked.

“Said he was going to check his section and come back,” Rick responded. “Think Trandel left too, was gonna head back and check the port.”

I breathed a sigh. So Trandel had survived the attack.

“Just wait here honey, Bram’ll probably be back soon,” Sam said. “You look like you’ve been through hell though, have a drink on the house.”

“Thank you, but I have to go,” I said, pushing up from the bar and limping towards the door.

“You in a hurry?” she asked.

“I just need to find Bram,” I said.

“You do need a change of clothes...” she observed, as I walked. “Be safe!”

I nodded as I reached the door and stepped out into the street once more, head spinning as I tried to remember where Bram’s little... place was. 14B. That had been his number, but I hadn’t really been paying attention to where we’d gone on the way over here.

I was about to walk back inside and sheepishly ask about the way to actually find him, when suddenly I heard Bram call out.

“Cyrus!” the old man shouted, from further down the street. He looked exhausted, but ran up to me and gave me a bone-crushing bear hug anyway, ignoring the fact that I was still soaking wet. And honestly, despite the fact that I could barely breathe, I felt tears forming in my eyes and did my best to hug him back.

“Boy, you done scared me to death!” he growled, as he finally put me down. “When Trandel said that you’d gone missing I thought you was a goner!”

I nodded, still unable to speak, and finally Bram put me back down.

“Hell, boy, what in the world happened to you?” he asked, finally realizing how beat up I was.

I blanked for a second, not knowing where to start, before finally speaking.

“We need to leave this city,” I said. “We need to get out of here... right now.”

Bram’s eyebrow raised.

“What are you talking about boy?” he asked, before his eyes squinted. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t- there was an attack,” I said. “Do you see the smoke over there?”

Bram looked up.

“Damn, looks like a fire in the port,” he said.

“No, not a fire!” I said. “There was a barge, it had this... this crest on it and there was some sort of bomb on it -- it destroyed the Port Authority and half of the harbor. It’s gone, they just wiped it off of the map!”

“Holy shit boy,” Bram said.

“I... I don’t know how I’m alive,” I said. “I was right in the middle of it... and there was this thing... it all happened so fast...”

Bram stepped back, sensing the fear in my voice.

“You don’t think it was... one of *them*, do you?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what ‘they’ do, but the Port Authority is gone, and I don’t know when or if there’s going to be another attack.”

Bram’s moustached lips turned down into a frown, and he nodded.

“I’d rather get out of here and hear that it was nothin’ than stay and get caught up in some real

bad shit," he said. "I done had a bad feeling ever since you was gone, maybe this was it. I'm gonna say a quick goodbye to Sam and the boys, give them the news, and we can make tracks."

I nodded, waiting just outside as Bram stopped by to close out his tab, give his words of warning, and then lead me down the street.

"Are they leaving?" I asked. Bram nodded.

"This kinda bullshit ain't good for travelin' merchants. As soon as we was done drinkin' in there it was time to go anyway, so this is just a damn good reason to head out early," he said.

As we left, I could see that word of the disaster was continuing to spread. A few shopkeepers were starting to close up shop, and I could see whispers and gestures towards the scattered people heading towards the city walls.

"I ain't forgot that you're pretty shook up what with everythin' you've been through," Bram said suddenly, putting a hand on my shoulder. "But let's figure out all of that once we're out of the city and on the road back home."

"Sorry to keep bothering you," I said.

"Hey, no worries about that stuff," Bram said gently. "Let's just get out of here."

I wish that it had been that easy.

The entire city was starting to rumble with unrest as we quickly saddled up the horses and the wagon, packing up a few things Bram had purchased. People were talking about the black smoke in the air, the military presence moving towards the harbor, the people that were missing. The road that we'd taken into Bram's section of the city wasn't full yet, but there was still a commotion, people trying to get out of the city as quickly as possible and shouting from line at each other to move up, for others to move out of the way and clear a path. It seemed that the gates were understaffed, men having been reassigned to deal with the growing issue at the port, so things were going twice as slow to deal with double the amount people.

"Damn, never seen the line this long to get out," Bram said, as we rolled up towards the line.

"Everybody must have the same idea we do."

I was sitting in the back of the wagon again, somehow still soaking wet after all of this time, and leant against the divider between us.

"I'm just ready to get out of here," I said, hugging my knees to my chest for some warmth in the cold autumn air.

Bram nodded.

"Yeah, we'll figure something out," he said. There were a few more minutes of slow movement towards the gates before I heard Bram call out.

"Oh good, some more men are showin' up," he said. "Should get goin' a little quicker."

And for three more carts it did. Then, there was a commotion up front, too far ahead to see, but I heard a lot of shouting and cursing. Bram hopped off the front of the wagon, peeking up ahead.

"Hey, what's going on up there?" he asked the man in front of us.

"Not sure," the man said, as the wagon at the very front was suddenly pulled away to the side, crawling with soldiers. The line began to move again.

"HmMMM," Bram said, as he returned to the front of the seat and hopped up, bringing us a little closer again. The cars continued to move quickly, and soon Bram and I were about five

cars back from the gates.

“Next!” A soldier called, and we all moved ahead as they went through the checks that Bram had told me they’d need to do for us to leave the city. Quick inspection to make sure there was no contraband, a quick look at the ledger for a documentation of business, and then we’d be on our way.

“Oh, look what we got here!” the soldier at the front said. “A little dirt-dick bastard!

“Excuse me?” the man being inspected asked. “Who the hell do you think you are?!”

I heard Bram grumble.

“We’re your fuckin’ judge and jury boy!” the soldier at the front yelled. “Why you trying to leave so early, darkie, market’s got two more days.”

“We heard that there had been some violence!” the man said. “And we will take our business elsewhere for this season until we can be sure that this city is safe again!”

“I’ll thow you thome violence you damn thwarp!” A second voice called, sounding like a drunk man speaking through a badly broken nose, and then there was the sound of a fight breaking out.

“Goddamn it,” Bram swore, recognizing the man in the fight just as quickly as I did.

Rand. Again.

How the fuck?!

Up ahead, men were swarming the cart at the front, but the men inside were fighting back, followed by a few of the men from the cart behind them, who seemed to be their partners. Men were being called out from the other parts of the gate, and suddenly they were charging in with weapons drawn.

Moments later, I felt our cart shift, backing up and to the side so that we were facing one of the roadways through the gate.

“Cyrus, hold on,” Bram said, eyes on the men still moving in on the carts in front of us. There were screams coming from the commotion now, but not all from the men in the carts. It was turning into a battle.

When four more men left the unused roadway to charge into the fight, Bram cracked the reins and shouted for his two horses, who surged forward towards the sparsely guarded gates as fast as they could. The men in the fight didn’t even notice us until we punched through the wooden barrier in the roadway and out onto the road at full speed, followed first by one wagon driver, and then more. People began to charge the gates trying to get out, and as I looked back the first dozen did, but then I heard a great wrenching of metal as the massive gates were slammed shut from above, smashing the back of a charging wagon and locking the near-rioting people behind in heavy iron. When that had finished, I caught the sound of a horn going out, and in the fading distance saw men rushing for horses to mount up.

Bram and I continued onto the full road at top speed, weaving through the traffic towards home, followed in part by the others who had broken through. The first and second forks in the road brought us up into the winding hills and away from the masses of people heading to the towns along the peninsula and elsewhere. In about ten minutes we had almost reached the top of the hills. The sun was setting again in the late afternoon, but from above we could see what had changed in the city, and it made Bram bring the horses to a screeching stop.

The black smoke hadn’t yet lifted, but instead had blown across the city from the sea. There

were fires burning everywhere now, and where the darkness had come in the harbor there was now a chunk taken out of the city, filled with water and now dotted by shattered and burning ships.

“Good god,” Bram muttered, hopping out to take a look. “The whole city’s going to hell.” He turned to me.

“Boy, you were *in* that?!” he asked.

I nodded silently, and Bram looked back at the city.

“Goddamn,” he murmured, and then rushed up towards the front of the wagon. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

I agreed, leaning back against the edge of the wagon and taking one last look at the city.

What a shit show.

Bram was busy checking the horses as I closed my eyes, ready to be not afraid for the first time since we came down these damn hills.

But as I breathed in and out, nearly ready to collapse, I heard the faintest sound of a thunder of hooves.

No. What did I have to do?!

“Bram! I think I hear people coming!” I said.

“What’s that?!” he asked from the front, jumping into the driver’s seat again.

“I hear horses coming, we need to go right now!” I said.

Bram swore.

“We can’t outrun them hauling the wagon... and the horses are hooked up already,” he said, looking back and forth. He then gestured to the hills to the side of us. “We gotta try to sneak off. Yah!”

He cracked the reins and the horses reluctantly turned the wagon away from the road and onto the grass of the rolling hills. With another crack of the reins we were off, charging through the dirt.

“Would they really chase us this far?!” I asked.

“I don’t want to find out,” Bram said. “What I saw at them gates is worse than anything since the war, and with you well... I think we mighta both been toast.”

“Then...” I started, and then shook my head. Why hadn’t he left me?

“Were you saying something boy?” Bram asked.

“No, nothing,” I said, and then after a pause. “Thank you Bram.”

“For what?” he asked.

He really was a good man.

“Thanks for everything,” I said, turning to the back of the wagon again, eyes on the road with heart beating faster. The thunder of hooves had grown louder, and as we peeled off into the hills we had left an easily followed trail in the grass.

Suddenly, a squadron of men appeared, maybe a dozen of them on horseback, stopping only briefly at our bid to escape before following the tracks of the wagon onto the hills behind us.

“Bram, they’re coming after us!” I said.

Bram swore again, looking to the left and right. The hill that we were on was slowly flattening out into a long grassy plain, which was alright for our wagon, but left us with nowhere left to hide.

Nowhere except the forest.

I almost hadn't realized as we'd been riding, but we had gotten closer and closer to that dark forest, now almost calling out to us in the dying light. That ancient primal force that had come from it hung heavy in the air, and grew thicker with each passing moment. Suddenly, Bram started to veer.

"Bram, the woods!" I asked. His warnings about the forest echoed in my ears.

"It's our only chance boy, they won't dare go in there!" Bram said, through gritted teeth. "Stay close to me when we're in, I don't want you lost!"

"I understand!" I called back, turning to face our pursuit.

But they were too close. Too close, and gaining. They were only about thirty yards back, and now two of them were holding bows.

Get down Cyrus!

I hit the floor of the wagon as the arrows flew by, one falling short, but the other splintering the wood above my head.

"They're here Bram!" I called out, as another pair of archers lined up and fired. Suddenly, the horses cried out, and Bram swore again.

"What is it?" I asked, poking my head back up.

There was an arrow sticking out of the back of the right horse. Two had raced around the side, and were firing towards us.

"Come on Telly, Kaya, give me a little more," Bram insisted, cracking the reins again. The horses pushed on, continuing to veer towards the woods. The men in pursuit shifted course to follow us, still gaining.

"Bram, they're getting closer!" I shouted.

"I know boy, we're pulling a little more behind us than they are!" he shouted back.

The wagon hit a bump and I took flight, hitting the back hard.

"You alright Cyrus?" Bram yelled.

"I'll be fine!" I winced, getting to my hands and knees and looking out the back.

They were right up on us now, at least six behind and the others in a pinsir formation on each side. Three of the men fired, and wood splintered as the thick arrowheads lodged in the wagon. Bram urged the horses faster, shouting a stream of curses at both of them, but I could tell that the cause was lost. The men's horses, unladen, were far faster than us, and starting to close in alongside.

Another volley went out, with three more thunks as arrows lodged in the wood.

Bram screamed. The fourth was sticking out of his shoulder.

"Bram!" I shouted, and instinctively vaulted over the divider to help him.

"No, get down, they'll hit you too!" Bram gasped, still trying to lead the horses.

"Someone has to drive!" I insisted, reaching for the reins

He started to complain, but eventually nodded and moved over, carefully them to me.

"Come on girls, give us a little more," Bram said, leaning back and closing his eyes as he put pressure on his shoulder. "Just a bit further."

The men alongside were even closer now, only ten yards or so, and now locking in their point of aim on the horses.

Of course, with nothing to pull us they could take their time killing me and Bram.

Cyrus do something!

Before they had a chance to shoot I yanked the reins to the side, peeling the horses out of the line of fire and blocking the men's arrows with the wagon, making the two of them peel away to avoid getting crushed and setting them back.

"Hell yeah boy," Bram said through gritted teeth.

Up ahead of us, the forest was looming, its uneven line bringing us onto a direct course to it. If we could just buy enough time to make it there, only a couple hundred yards away, we could escape. We just had to stay moving. But still, the men were coming closer, now on either side of us.

"Where are you heading boy?" Bram murmured, before he saw the same thing I did, the forest way up ahead of us. He gritted his teeth.

"Come on, just a little faster," I whispered to myself. "Come on girls."

Bram took a huge breath in, and then with incredible force he bellowed at the horses, calling their names and urging them forward. They whinnied and kicked but still surged ahead, an extra burst of speed putting us past the horses of the charging men, in front. A volley of arrows went loose, but the soldiers nearly caught themselves in the crossfire, almost bringing them to a stop as they veered to avoid each other.

For a moment we were clear. And in the next moment, one of the wheels gave out, tipping the wagon violently to the side. On the uneven ground Telly -- the horse who'd been shot -- finally collapsed, sending Kaya crashing down with her and flipping the wagon off to the side as it broke free of the reins.

I hit the ceiling, floor, and walls in quick succession before being catapulted out of the tumbling wagon. For a moment I was airborne, before crashing down into the dirt where I rolled a half dozen yards before stopping, facedown.

Everything hurt. Everything hurt, but through some miracle nothing was broken, at least nothing that I could tell. To my left I could hear the approaching thunder of hoofbeats. They were still coming, closing in on us much faster now. We had to go.

I fought to my hands and knees, breathing heavily, and looked for the horses, but Kaya was spooked, running wild off towards the hills, and Telly was down. We were on our own.

Bram, I needed to get Bram. I'd lost him in the fall, but he couldn't have gotten far.

There. Slumped amongst the remains of the wagon. He hadn't gotten thrown from the wreckage like I had.

He wasn't moving either.

"Bram!" I shouted, ignoring that the men had caught up and encircled us, now herding us in. I struggled to my feet and stumbled over to him, leaning against the remains of the wagon.

"Bram!" I repeated, crouching down.

Nothing.

"Come on Bram!" I shouted, pulling with every ounce of strength in my body to try to free him from the wreckage.

He slid out onto the ground, blood from his wound and a few others already staining the sand around him.

"Come on, don't leave me now," I whispered, pulling my shirt over my head. The arrow hadn't broken off in the fall, so I could still get it out and wrap the wound.

"What happened boy?" he mumbled, eyes flickering open.

“They’ve got us trapped Bram,” I said, pulling the arrow from Bram’s shoulder, quickly wrapping the bleeding wound with my shirt and tying it tight.

“I’m gonna try to wrap that but I don’t know where we’re gonna go,” I said.

“Make it to the forest boy, and keep runnin’. They won’t go... they won’t go not even a foot in there,” Bram whispered, in obvious pain.

“Bram, I’m not leaving you!” I said.

“I can’t run,” he said, trying to give me a smile. “Can’t even feel my legs. I’ll just have to face the music, I know a few people that can get me out of stuff.”

“Bram, they’re gonna kill you!” I whispered. “You saw them shooting!”

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them I could see tears running down his face.

“Don’t you think I know that boy?” he asked, shaking his head with gritted teeth. “At least let me go out pretending I got some pride left.”

Arrows took flight from the men in the circle behind me, exploding into the wood past us. There was no chance that they would miss again.

With shaking hands, Bram reached into his pocket, pulling out a piece of paper.

“If ya can... won’t you give this back to Salwae for me?” he asked. “It’s money from that sale, a banknote for half of it. Kaya knows where to go if you can take her... just tell her ‘go home’ and she’ll get you there.”

His eyes were drifting closed.

“Bram!” I shouted, “Bram no don’t go! Please!”

Arrows whistled and I threw myself down over Bram’s body. I wouldn’t let them get him. I wouldn’t leave him.

“Run...” he whispered.

Two arrows exploded into me, one in my leg and one right in the center of my back, sending a cold pain shooting up through my spine and out into my entire body. I slumped over Bram, but he hadn’t been hit. He was still breathing.

And the pain was gone. Every feeling in my body was gone.

“What...” I tried to say, but even my mouth was locking up.

No! NO! FUCK! Cyrus!

I tried to move my arms and legs but it was like my body wouldn’t listen. They must have hit something vital.

Move something. Come on! A finger, a toe, ANYTHING! Cyrus move!

I couldn’t.

*It is **not** going to end like this! Get up! GET UP! Please get up!*

“I’m trying,” I murmured, tears of frustration falling down my face. To even speak had taken everything that I had.

Two more arrows flew, but only one of them grazed me, cutting a line across my arm that I saw, but didn’t feel.

The world was falling away from me. I was an observer of my own lifeless body, trapped inside a living corpse.

I tried to scream, but I could not.

After another volley, one that hit my shoulder, the men finally moved in even though I hadn’t moved in more than a minute. I heard them coming, blood pounding in my ears as I begged the

world for mercy. Anything to not die like this.

Finally, the men reached us.

“Hey Rand, look, thwarp’s still breathing,” a man laughed, kicking one of the arrows still sticking out of me.

A sick laugh came from Rand’s lips. Of all of the people who had died in the attack, why couldn’t he have been one of them?

“Oh, look at what we have here?” Rand said, stepping on the arrow in my back. I felt the iron arrowhead burrow deeper into my spine, turning the blank cold in my body into boiling fire. I writhed in pain. There was nothing else in my world.

“Drag him off,” Rand said, motioning to two men. I felt Bram’s body slide away as the men pulled me onto the ground, flipping me over.

My world went entirely white as my own weight pushed the arrow further into my spine, punching through into my stomach before it snapped off. When I whited back I had vomited on my bare chest and pissed myself, and still could do nothing but look up at Rand, who crouched down, hovering over me.

“Live like an animal, die like an animal thwarp,” he said, and spat in my eye.

I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him! I’LL KILL HIM!

I let my good eye drift towards the forest. We had been so close.

“Hey Rand, what do we do with the old guy?” a man asked.

Rand stopped, looking over at Bram, who was being inspected by two of Rand’s men.

“Isn’t he dead?” Rand asked.

“No, he’s breathing,” one of the men responded.

My eyes flashed open. At least Bram might have a chance to survive.

“Isn’t this the one that’s friends with Danny?” someone asked.

“Yeah, he’s been around a long time,” someone else responded.

Good! Good! He’s not me! He’s not me! Just let him go.

“You think any of that matters for *shit*? Put a fucking arrow in his head,” Rand said, turning to me and drawing a sword.

No.

Not Bram.

He hadn’t done anything. Nothing except help a stranger lost on a beach, nothing except what any decent man would do.

That wasn’t fair. That wasn’t worth a death sentence.

I strained every muscle in my body, trying to get up and fight, to dive in front and save him, but not even my eyes moved. There was the distinct sound of an arrow growing taut, and for a second I prayed.

I pleaded, and I begged for the gods to show up, for some hero to arrive and save the day. For some semblance of justice to exist in the world.

Instead, all I heard was the sound of an arrow exploding through six pounds of flesh.

My eyes welled up with tears, and something in me gave up.

Rand laughed.

“Look, little bitch is crying,” Rand said, as he adjusted the sword to aim it at my heart. “Don’t worry, you’ll be joining him soon.”

He raised the blade, but before he could even start to bring it down the world slowed to a crawl. I could see every microscopic movement of Rand's face, hear each tiny shift in the wind. Slower, and slower, until it seemed like he had stopped completely, like the whole *world* had stopped completely.

For the second time.

And then from the space in between moments, those four notes echoed out.

High, High.

Low, Low.

And this time I recognized him. The watcher in my dreams. The stranger out in the dark, who I'd woke up looking for. The one who had saved me when the darkness had come.

And yet I cowered in fear. I had prayed for heroes, and I had prayed for gods, but they had not answered.

Only the monsters had been listening.

Bram's body exploded into a column of flame, instantly killing the two men next to him, and time began again.

Rand stopped. All of us stopped, turning towards the vaporized soldiers. They were gone, completely gone, as if erased from the world and replaced with ashes drifting past us on the wind.

"Darren?" Someone asked. "Where'd Darren and Trevor go?"

They turned and turned in the sudden silence, but the two men were gone.

Rand fell upon me, eyes suddenly wild.

"What did you do thwarp?!" he demanded, picking my limp body up with one arm, holding the knife to my throat.

"What did you do?!" he shouted in my face, but I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything.

He swore and drew back the knife, but it was not my time to die. Right before he cut my throat out, the sun disappeared, flicked out as if by a switch, and we were plunged into total darkness. I couldn't even see Rand's face in front of mine.

High, High. Low, Low.

An enormous ring of fire erupted around us, fifty yards across and twelve feet high, casting a roaring red torrent of light across the remaining men. But with the fire came thick black smoke, descending upon us like a tightening noose. Men began to vanish, and as they did their calls and cries started to seem impossibly far away.

In a last ditch attempt to survive I spat in Rand's face, twisting my neck muscles just enough to smash my forehead into his nose. I suffered a gash along my throat for my trouble but he dropped me into the smoke, disappearing above me as I hit the ground, bouncing off of my shoulder and rolling a foot and a half away.

A foot and a half that saved my life. Even paralyzed, I could feel Rand driving his blade into the ground a dozen times, searching for me. He was yelling again, swearing that I was dead, but he was lost in the smoke just like I was.

Finally he roared, an animalistic, violent sound, and began to hurl curses through the air, calling his men to him, commanding them that they needed to find me.

And that was when they started to die, screaming out in pain before bursting into flames, tiny lights in the suffocating smoke snuffed out in an instant. A few started to realize what was

happening. They tried to run, tried to call out or pray to their gods for mercy, but all were silenced in seconds. Save one, one that reached Rand.

“Something’s out there!” he screamed frantically, as he grabbed for his leader, scrabbling for a hold, for some security. “Something’s coming! I saw it take Chance! What are we gonna do?” “You fucking kill it!” Rand shouted, and I heard the *thud* of him punching the man, pushing him away.

“No! Please! Help me-” the man started, cut off halfway through as he screamed, exploding into flames and leaving no one left but Rand and I.

Rand growled, drawing his longsword and running his knife along the blade. He had lived his entire life believing himself a thwarp hunter, the predator.

And now, backed against the wall, he still had no understanding of what it meant it to be prey. “Show yourself!” he roared, turning a circle in the dust. “Show yourself and fight like a man thwarp!”

As he turned, roaring his challenge to the world, it seemed as if there would be no answer. But then one came.

The smoke vanished in an instant, leaving Rand in the middle of the enormous ring of fire.

There were no remains of any of his men, just scorched marks on the ground.

“Where are you?!” he demanded, eyes flitting back and forth. “Where?! Show yourself!”

High, High. Low, Low.

Boots crunched in the sand a few feet past my head, as if someone had just arrived. I tried to look for him, but he was in my blind spot, the one place I couldn’t see.

But somehow I could *feel* him. He was pumping heat out into the air like I was standing next to a bonfire. In a few steps he was past me, never close enough that I could see his face, and began to approach Rand, dressed in that same black cloak lightly swaying in the wind.

Finally, at the very center of the circle, he stopped, silent.

“You think I’m like them?!” Rand laughed hysterically. “You think you can kill *me*?! They’re pathetic, they’re nothing without me!”

There was no response from the black cloak.

“Yeah...heh... yeah that’s what I thought! You’re dead!” Rand roared, and with tremendous speed he swung the sword, cleaving a whistling arc through the silent air straight towards his opponent.

Again, there was no response from the black cloak. Just... nothing.

Rand’s blade dug deep into the black cloak’s chest, lodging there, sticking halfway out his back like someone had half-chopped a block of wood.

And still nothing from the black cloak. Or that was what I thought, until blood fired out into the air and Rand fell away screaming like a trapped animal. Both of his arms had been completely severed from his body, and disintegrated into fiery ashes just like the rest of Rand’s men.

It happened so quickly that the black cloak didn’t even seem to move.

There was a hiss like water on hot steel, and the black cloak reached for the handle of Rand’s blade, wrenching it free from his body and out into the air, leaving behind a visible gap in his side.

Bright red glowing blood covered the bare steel, eating the sword away like smoldering paper until it vanished, handle dropped on the ground and discarded. The hole in the black cloak’s

side started to fill, shining brightly and then cooling into a black husk.

Rand screamed louder, if that had been possible.

When his body had finished reforming the black cloak stepped forward, a thick boot coming down on Rand's throat and silencing the mutilated man, who thrashed under the pressure.

Rand kicked out, throwing his body around, but without arms he was helpless. A gurgling, choking sound filled the air as Rand struggled, punctuated by the quiet thump of his feet in the sand.

I tried to look away, but I couldn't. Part of me refused. Part of me had to see him die.

And in time he did, kicking out one last time before he either bled out or suffocated, and finally fell limp. Only then did the black cloak step back, pointing a gauntleted palm towards Rand, who burst into flames and disappeared in an instant, returning the world to silence once again and leaving only he and I in the ring of fire.

Inevitably, the man turned, walking a slow path towards me. I couldn't make out a face under the hood, obscured even from the firelight, but for some reason I could tell our eyes had met. As he grew closer, those gauntleted hands came out from underneath the cloak.

"W-what... do you... want?" I found myself able to mumble.

He bent down to one knee and flipped me over onto my stomach with little effort, examining the arrow still sticking out of my spine.

"Who... who are you?" I asked, forcing the question out through my sand-filled mouth.

He only laughed, putting his hand on the back of my neck, pushing me down into the ground, and then putting the other hand on the arrow in the center of my back. Slowly, I felt a power seeping from him into me. It began to move through my body, filling my veins like crawling worms under my skin.

The fire around us died, leaving the world in total darkness, and then his hands turned to molten fire, forcing a scream out of my lifeless lips. Before everything faded to black, I finally heard him speak.

"I am the fire of the world's ending. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust."