

The old reliable mobile home made its way across the landscape with admirable poise.

Eight stories tall, the hermit geist that had taken the apartment building trudged forward through the Sands of Salt.

The residents of the apartments, those that remained, were as impermanent as the landscape. Some of them would find stable homes when they came to new vistas. Some would keep traveling, in love with the shifting paths and changing world. Some would die on the journey, their victories and secrets fed to the geist to keep it content, while their coin went into a communal pool and their letters were added to the Record.

The mobile home had a growing Record. No one had meant for it to happen, but it had gotten to the point they'd attracted a Librarian, and no one could dislodge them now.

A plume of sand rose into the air as the hermit geist took another step forward, the structure of ancient world concrete and rebar held together with impossible old truths, the residents now accustomed to the vibrations of their advance.

The Mechanic slept through it. The old half- knew the sound of a misaligned leg, and that wasn't it. The tilt of their room with the step didn't move anything that they weren't fine with moving.

Steam hissed out of a metal joint as the geist stepped again, ten minutes later. The leg of the complex had been produced in the Realm Of Forgotten Wires, replacing a damaged part the geist had been struggling with. It struck the sand and sprayed salt away in a wave of force.

The Gardener sipped her tea. She sat on the roof of the building under an umbrella salvaged from the last Broken Zone, among a riot of plants. They were coming up on a tall dune, and soon she'd need to employ her broom to keep her garden clean.

Metal and worked wood protested as a leg was moved too quickly. The geist slowed down, taking its time with the next step. Eventually it landed on the slope with a thud eaten by the sands.

The Tourist sat in his room and watched out the window, observing every time a leg on his side of the building was puppeted. He wasn't planning to stay. Next populated space they came to, he was off. Well. The last one hadn't been good enough. But he'd find one.

The next step was mechanical perfection. The leg moved like it was alive. The geist was almost happy as it climbed the dune.

The Officer sat in her room and scowled at the tilt. This place was always tilting. She could never get things to stay straight in her space. She poured a small victory into her desk to hold it steady, and went back to working on her gun.

Plumes of salt and sand marked steps, one by one across the desert. Overhead, a burning sun of grey-infected orange fire lit their way. Each stomp was a soft impact that resonated in the hearts of the building's residents, each of them in turn becoming more familiar with the resonance of this terrain.

One resident didn't have a room the same way everyone else did. The Courier stayed in a small alcove, out of the way, out of sight. Its silver skin and furnace organs made it feel like it wouldn't fit in with the others. Unlike them, it was traveling with a purpose. At least, that's what it told itself. It lied to itself often.

Another step brought the apartment a quarter mile up and over the dune. As they crested it, the residents got a view of the Sands of Salt stretching out to the edge of the vision fog.

In his room on the top floor, through a strange tool that broke the fog range, the Reporter saw the ambush ahead of them.

Three skirmisher cars, one massive sand sled. The people were still wrapped in fog, but they'd be there. Other travelers, maybe. Or natives to the Sands of Salt. It didn't matter.

Maybe they were coming for the geist's core. Or the Record that had become large enough to attract a Librarian, even if only a small one. Maybe they wanted the working faucets in the apartments, or the pile of victories they'd take off the corpses if they won. It didn't matter.

The Reporter told the others, one by one. They had time, the fog range here was two score miles away, and his tool let him break even that.

By the time the ambush came, it was too late for them.

The next step was with one of the shorter ancillary legs. Bone, not steel, but flexible and self-repairing. It sent up a spray of sand salt all the same, as it bore the weight of the building.

The raiders did not try to parlay. They opened fire as soon as they were within range. The resident travelers, perched behind barriers and rooftops, returned it.

Attrition favored the home.

But it was attrition all the same.

Afterward, as adrenaline faded and the lingering cost of bullets spent drifted onto the wind like smoke, they took stock.

The Reporter and the Mechanic used old victories to move before the next step, the two of them taking everything of surviving value off the carcasses of the ambushers. They'd split the secrets later. The gears and coin they kept for themselves. The bullets were for the communal pool.

Three steps later, after saying their goodbyes, they fed the Tourist's victories and secrets to the hermit geist, passed their letters to the Librarian, and dropped their body to the Sands of Salt to mummify.

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To Whom It May Concern;

I find myself in strange company these last few days. Days in this region, I should say. We've picked up a new stray.

The Gardener acts like she's always been here. But she's new to traveling, and she sips her tea like a ward against the unknown. I know she is afraid, and I know that launcher she has that consumes bullets like water is dangerous, but I cannot help but want to befriend her.

Her garden flourishes within her presence. I don't know the how or why. Some boon or deed or victory I have not yet seen, perhaps? I want to know. Curiosity is my vice, but I shall temper it with compassion. I could be her friend in truth, and still get my answers.

I admit, despite her appearance startling me at first, she is quite beautiful. Her scales glitter in the sunlight, while we have it. Small rubies that accent the deep brown of her eyes and the fangs she smiles with. Her smile entices me most. It is so earnest when she gives it, when she forgets her fear.

Yes, I think I shall be her friend. I would like to see this new traveler smile more. I would like to be the reason that she finds to embrace the new, and set her worries aside.

At least, I could be a good companion until the next populis. I had meant to stay at the last one, but found myself napping too long. Alas. But not much alas. The people of the Old Sinking City were not quite so kind as the travelers here, or so beautiful as our new stray.

Ah. The call to the evening meal. The joys of having an Officer who knows the knife and stove. Until next time, then, future reader.

Traveler's Word,  
Tourist.

