

The old reliable mobile home made its way across the landscape in rapid retreat.

Eight stories tall, the hermit geist that had taken the apartment building did its best to run through the Valley of Sparks.

The residents of the apartments sheltered behind defensive positions, counting bullets and wondering if the raider attack would finally be too much.

A step sounded, one of the geist's metal clawed feet screaming across the metal of the ground before the claws found purchase.

The Mechanic the their best to urge the building on. They stood in the building's central boiler room, as close as they dared to the creature's core, keeping an eye on pressure levels and whispering words they'd picked up from an old traveler. But they were no Guide, no Friend. This wasn't what they were good at.

On the outside of the ancient structure, a licking tongue of lightning arced from the top of the cliff to their right. Blue and white energy discharge seeking purchase, splitting off small thorns when it passed windowsills or exterior staircases. Indestructible stone blackened and cracked under it.

The raiders had salvaged something from the area, and they spent bullets like water to turn the old world machinery into a killing weapon.

The Courier reloaded its rifle with soft precision. It didn't like to kill. Technically, it wasn't in what its original design documents would call its programming. But it had gotten very good at killing. The lightning stopped, the Courier popped up on one knee in a smooth roll, electric eyes sighted down the rifle in a flickering instant, and an unfortunate raider fell.

It was already through with the roll before the return fire found their window. It would use a different room for the next shot.

A step sounded, the building's foot slamming into something green and brittle in a spray of sparks as the ground buckled. The building tilted ever so slightly.

The Officer's aim fouled as the building moved, but she adamantly refused to blame the conditions. A good shooter didn't blame her conditions, her terrain, her tools, or anything but her own eyes and hands. If the shot hit, it was her. If the shot missed, it was her. She had missed six times today, and hit thirty four, and still the fight waged on.

The Officer loved this. The fight, the violence. She was one with her weapon, so much so that she could substitute victories for bullets sometimes. She took the opportunity and punched a line of death through the raider's salvaged weapon when the step pitched them just right.

The geist moved, clearing a quarter mile and several low barricades of fused scrap electronics in a pair of rapid steps from its mid legs.

Inside, unsecured belongings tilted and spun across floors. In the traveler's communal kitchen, the hanging knives appeared to tilt forty degrees as where the ground was pointed changed underneath.

The Librarian wasn't awake enough to care about the fight. The Record would survive either way. The symbiotic entity perused the letters entrusted to it while violence rattled around them.

Another step, another spray of sparks. This one was fast, but steady. The travelers were used to this kind of step.

Travelers didn't fight often. Not really. They hunted, yes, and they brawled, certainly. But fights like this were rare in the Gardener's experience. She hated them. A shot pinged off one of her plants, and she screamed in fear and anger, cowered under the edge of the roof.

She could return fire. She had the twenty bullets it would take to pull the trigger on her canon and erase several of the raiders from reality. But she couldn't move her hands. They didn't fight often. She wasn't made for this, like the Officer was.

The building stepped again, and almost got clear of the ambush. But the raiders were doggedly determined, and pursued on induction rail sleds across the metal.

There were oh so many reasons to attack travelers. Perhaps they wanted the building, or the geist itself. Perhaps they wanted to harvest the Record. Perhaps, as it was known that travelers accumulated tools and secrets and spirits and so many other things, they just wanted the loot. Perhaps they had a grudge, or had stumbled onto a lingering dread Quest that they couldn't shake.

It really didn't matter. They hadn't come to this cold place that tasted of copper and ozone, where nothing like the Gardener's plants grew, to skirmish; they had come to kill. And so the fight was joined, and the travelers fought.

Another step, then another. The sleds gained on them, but the hermit geist was heading for open ground. Once they hit that stretch of uninterrupted metal panels where the biggest obstacle was gently sloping hills, there would be no catching them.

Behind the building, the raiders began shooting cannons that tethered unnaturally magnetic projectiles to the concrete and brick of the apartment's exterior. With practiced moves, the killers began to crawl up the lines toward the building overhead, aiming to board and continue the battle.

The Mechanic yelled a command as they and the Refugee ran down the lower floor halls, ducking into rooms and tripping over scattered objects and shifted furniture as the two leaned out windows to shoot or cut away the grapples.

One dropped, and a dozen of their attackers dropped with it, bodies in only the lightest of armor dropping fifty feet to be cooked and cut by the ground below, leaving only marks of red and black behind.

The Mechanic felt the mild influx of a victory, and ignored the grim reminder, moving on to the next grapple. The Refugee felt it, and couldn't look away, watching with widened diamond eyes as their hands caused death.

It wasn't like hunting, or even dueling. It was something different. A dark flood of regret and pain alongside the rushing of more literal power that accompanied it. They couldn't break away, half propped out the lower floor window of the apartment as it lurched across the landscape, trying to get away.

As the Mechanic took down the other tether, a shot from one of the sleds took the Refugee in the shoulder. His body was indistinguishable from the others as they hit the ground.

The next few steps, the hermit geist hit open ground, and the sleds couldn't keep up. Their tethers gone, they fell back, leaving their dead, their objective failed.

The survivors went through the logistical ritual silently. Coin in the communal pool, victories and secrets split, letters to the Librarian. The Refugee had even possessed an ailment, somehow, which went to the Gardener to try to alchem. It was always grim, this needed ceremony, but it hurt more when it was someone so young, and so new to their home. He could have been a great traveler, he could have seen more. But in the end, he met one of the traveler's three fates; it didn't matter how long he was with them, he was one of them, and they would remember him as such.

To Whom It May Concern

It took my entire life to make a letter the first time, to be able to make myself a traveler. A whole life of being too small, too slow, too unimportant. Too useless to even use as ritual fuel, too dumb to die to the hives.

How long have I been here, now? The days blur together. There's so much that needs doing, so much I must keep up on. The days don't blur because it's empty, but because it's so full. I cannot take the time to measure how much I sleep. I measure in landscapes, instead.

I have been here for fourteen landscapes. The Unbroken Tower was my favorite, so far. I wished we had stopped longer, I wanted to see this other settlement, wanted to learn how many things my origin was doing wrong. Maybe they did different things wrong, and I could take those secrets and run with them.

But yes. Fourteen landscapes, and I've made another three letters.

When the soldiers or couriers told stories in the bistro, I didn't understand when they mocked travelers for wasting letters. How could anyone *waste* letters? You got one, maybe two. You never had enough to waste.

Now I am a traveller, and I am wasting a letter, to say that I can waste a letter. I feel... warm. Brilliant. Smug, is the word that Reporter would call it. But I know that I am making true art. Who else but a traveler could spend something as valuable as a letter to simply make something they wanted to?

Reporter says that letters are to be a lesson for those that come after us. But Reporter doesn't like talking about things like victories or maps, so I think he might be biased. He believes in some things I don't understand.

Officer says that letters are for cowards. But... I've seen her, after settlements. She sits on the wrought iron ladder, hanging from the outside, and drinks what she's bought or stolen, and cries as she writes her letters. I don't know if she's a hypocrite - another word Reporter taught me! - or if she's more honest than she wants us to think.

I will ask the others what they think of letters, I think. I want to know what everyone uses theirs for. It's supposed to be private, but you're also not supposed to use them to make art.

Traveler's Word,
Refugee