



Nomad

The lonely nomad walked, usually forward.

Of course, sometimes he went back to check something. Or in circles, on the occasion when he forgot his end goal of *getting there*. Sooner or later, he saw his own footprints in the sand, and would continue on his way. If he happened to turn, he'd see the wind covering his tracks with more sand, as if he had never been there.

He wore a motorcycle helmet, leather jacket, and torn blue jeans, with boots on his feet. He carried a staff on his back as a rudimentary weapon. A big dog followed him around, and he shared some of his food with it. He rested infrequently, and dreamed of the sky when he did.

He took off the orange helmet only rarely, but he did now, on this warm evening. Sweaty hair fell in his wild eyes, and he peered into the distance at a large, unidentifiable shape. He decided to investigate, and for the next forty minutes he headed in a straight line for it, the rattlesnakes and cacti his only company other than the dog.

It was an airplane engine, jutting up from the dune. He walked in a large circle, examining it, and found a portion of the cabin exposed to the elements. He crawled into it, scraping his ribs against the aluminum frame, and grunted at the tight fit. Then he mumbled his appreciation at unearthing a box of freeze dried food after digging for a while.

“Eat good later, Dog.” His language had deteriorated from disuse but he didn’t care. He suspected that Dog didn’t care, either.

He was almost finished packing up the food he’d unearthed when a shadow flitted across the sky, briefly passing over the man. He froze, then slowly looked up. It was them, again. The Aliens, in one of their bird-ships. If they saw him, they’d circle like buzzards, savagely hunting him.

He was afraid of two things in life. The first was that he would fail to achieve his father’s legacy. The second was the aliens.

He burrowed partially into the sand, still shielded by the carcass of the plane. The dog meandered through the wreck, unfazed, rooting about for bones. The man whistled sharply. The dog turned to look at him. The shadow passed overhead again.

The man lay still, watching as the ship landed. It was a spiky contraption with no visible windows. They were in there, he knew.

The dog eyed the ship, but showed no panic. A hatch swiveled open and one of them clambered out. Humanoid, yes, but its entire head was shaped like a coral-tinted eyeball, with grey armour covering its roughly two-meter-tall body. The dog barked sharply as the invader drew a massive sword from a hidden sheath on its back.

The man closed his eyes, not wanting to witness the carnage. He heard a yelp, then there was silence. He winced as a high-pitched whine split the air. The ship was lifting off. He opened his eyes and gazed up at it, seeing it hover for a second and then hurtle into the heavens. He watched it go, expressionless, mind far away.

The child laughed, making airplane noises while shoveling the toy plane through the air. "Look, daddy, look!" he shouted. Sitting at the table sipping coffee, his father smiled, turning from his newspaper.

"Son, one day...one day you could learn to fly in real life."

The child looked adoringly up at him, a paragon of everything he wanted to be, pilot uniform and all.

"Well, I'm off to work." His father hugged him goodbye, then kissed the boy's mother, who'd been watching with a smile on her face.

The child picked up the airplane again and lifted off, dreaming of the sky.

He was dragged back to the present by a mouthful of sand as a warm gust of wind swirled through the airplane cabin. Spitting angrily, he staggered to his feet, grabbed his rucksack, and stumbled back into the open desert, momentarily blinded by the sun. Vultures squawked at him, a row of them encircling the dog, as if about to enjoy a twisted thanksgiving feast. He kicked at them savagely, then pulled on the helmet, face now obscured by the expressionless lid. Not unlike a giant eye.

He shouldered his bag and walked toward the sunset, an orange-purple explosion over the dunes. He needed to find water. He walked for a long time.

Thank God, he thought, as the oasis shimmered into view. Too often, these images dissipated and teased, memories of a gentler climate, leaving just desert behind. This time, trees wavered through the heat, a green mass at total odds with the surrounding sandy biome. He walked towards it, empty waterskin dangling from his belt. He'd almost made it when he stopped

in his tracks, noticing the bird-ship hidden in the shrubbery. Kneeling, facing the water, was one of them. It was cleaning its sword.

He hid behind a cluster of bushes and considered the situation. He needed water desperately. He needed to kill it.

The alien sheathed the clean sword but stayed on one knee, apparently deep in thought. It reached down and plucked a small yellow flower from the water's edge and held it up, contemplating it. A slight breeze came off the water, whispering through the undergrowth and rustling the flower. The creature's body seemed to relax.

Crack. It was an awful sound, like many bones snapping at once. An eerie wail left its mouth, instantly lost in the still-swirling wind. The alien pitched forward, splashing into the water, broken. The man stood over it, brandishing his weapon, but the creature lay still. He filled his water-skin, flipped up his visor, took a deep drink, filled it again, flipped down the visor, and hastily walked toward the alien aircraft, almost running. *Now I can fly.* He could almost hear his father's voice on the fading breeze: *"My boy, you will be a great pilot, one day."*

Luckily, the cockpit was twisted open, and he contorted himself to get inside. There was an array of glowing panels, but no levers or switches. And when the cockpit closed on him, he could see nothing. He began hyperventilating. *This is nothing like they trained me...*

He again heard the voice. *"A good pilot adapts to any situation."*

He tapped one panel hesitantly, and it glowed white, then dulled to blood-red. A clunk came from the ship's underbelly. He pressed the same one, then another in quick succession. One of the landing struts folded into the ship, tilting the vessel onto its side.

There was nothing else for it. He placed his hand on the first panel, and dragged his whole arm across the board. It lit up white in the bizarre pattern he'd formed, and he felt the ship move sideways with incredible speed. It did not, however, lift off the ground.

The ship, scuttling along the sand like a demented crab, crashed into a partially submerged rock and exploded, debris flying in every direction and forming almost a perfect circle around the man's prone body. Knocked unconscious for untold hours, he dreamed.

He'd been so close. Top of the class, in fact, a mere day from being able to fly the jet in a practice run, after thousands of hours of simulations. He'd been so excited, he didn't sleep the night before, imagining the feeling of lifting off, leaving the ground behind, free, free to achieve his dream to fly, free from it all. He spent much of the night on the phone with his parents. His mother cried. His dad kept telling him how proud he was. They hung up after making him promise to phone them again right after his flight.

He'd been in bed, mindlessly checking the alarm clock as morning crept closer. So he knew exactly when it had happened. It was 4:47 A.M. when the alarms went off, signaling emergency. It was 4:49 A.M. when the military base fell to the invading aliens. He'd leapt out the window to escape them, and landed in a courtyard, breaking multiple bones. He huddled in a tiny nook for days.

When he recovered, he had completely lost his old life. But he held onto his dream of flying, held onto it like a life preserver in a billowing sea. Finally, after walking for weeks, he reunited with his family. They had lived together, survived together, and he'd never felt closer to them. Until...

His subconscious mind swirled into madness briefly, a horrible blur of aliens, ships, a faraway planet.... He thought he heard his mother's voice over the wind, but couldn't make out the words. He remembered her death with a stab of pain. An alien, standing over her body, their makeshift house destroyed around them and snow swirling in, silhouetting the dark creature in white. His father had picked up a knife, and rushed at the alien, trying to avenge his fallen wife, to no avail. And he had watched his father die too, as he turned to rush into the wilderness, the forest muffling his sobs in the cold emptiness. The only thing he had left was his relentless pursuit of his father's legacy.

He stirred, and blearily opened his eyes, looking straight into the sky through a shattered helmet. It was so much brighter than he was used to. So *beautiful*. He heard a slight movement near him.

There were three of them, arrayed in a perfect half circle around him. Their swords were pointed downwards, stuck in the sand, and their bird-ship was behind them. A fourth carried some sort of rudimentary stretcher out of the ship, and the second alien helped roll the man onto it. They solemnly walked towards the aircraft, gently guiding the stretcher into a surprisingly roomy cabin. His body was broken, he knew, but his mind felt clearer than it had in years. Two of the aliens sat cross-legged on the floor near his stretcher, the other two tending to the cockpit. He heard the whir of the ship, and realized: *I am about to fly, Dad.*

The ship lifted, and he craned his neck to look for a window to watch the ground recede. One of the aliens, possibly realizing this, pressed its hand into a hidden screen and the entire side of the craft became translucent, like a window. The man gasped, seeing the dunes disappear far

below. He was going to the sky. He began laughing, a sound of pure joy, and everything faded to white.

He awoke, lying on his back in the midst of the wreck. He felt a touch on his face, frigid, gentle as a winter wind. A metallic smell rested in the air. An alien, with a wound renting its strange head almost in two, was holding a finger, pale as death, to the man's forehead. Blood streamed down its head and side, red as a human's, dripping into the sand.

The man felt a sort of presence resting on his mind, vast and foreign. He had nothing in common with it, and yet they were so close. He met the creature's gaze, and turned away, not wanting to see its pain, pain he'd inflicted. It understood him fully, and that was the worst part.

Seeing him awake, it drew back, and after a long look at him, placed a withered yellow flower on the man's chest, then turned and walked away. A bird-ship screamed overhead, the sound a grating, industrial squeal. It landed, and the injured alien boarded. The man, dizzy and in pain, stared at the sky, wincing at how horribly bright it was without the tint of the helmet. He stared at a place he now knew he would never go. He accepted it now, remembering and cherishing the Sky Vision the alien had given him. *That's as close as I'll come. I'm sorry, Dad. I tried. I really tried. But I couldn't. I hope you understand.*

He'd rest now, and then carry on as before. He'd done it in the past, surviving horrible injuries only to recover and begin walking anew. He needed a break.

He closed his eyes, and the world faded to black, like a curtain closing.