

Divisions

Kyle Constantin

He awoke to a pair of naked men standing over him, their hair and ruddy skin dusted with dirt. Branches like great, twisting arms hung over all three of them, winding back over his head to the old, gnarled tree at his back.

A terrible headache was pounding against his skull, and he found it hard to remember anything. It seemed he could not answer his mind's most basic questions. Who was he? Where was he? Who were these two men? Why were they naked?

Nothing was coming to him.

Perhaps it was the pounding headache, the heat, or his eyes adjusting to the light, but the two men appeared identical to him. Maybe there was only one man, and his eyes were projecting his double, but then, which was the real one?

"Look," the one said to the other, "he's awake."

The other man bent down closer to him, examining him more closely. Now he could tell for certain that they were, in fact, two separate individuals.

"Yes," the other said, "he's awake."

"What do we do now?" the upright twin asked, clutching his genitals.

"Talk to him, I suppose."

"About what?"

The twins looked up past the tree with its puckered sores oozing out a translucent sap, trying to find the right words.

The man on the ground groaned and shifted up onto his elbows, his legs stayed stiff and unmoving. He found that he too was undressed, but was pale as the moon, not red like the twins before him.

He looked around at the plains around him. Huddles of naked men and women were shaped across the tawny horizon, their backs turned to him. A labyrinth of dirt was etched along the ground under their feet, outlined by small patches of dry grass, which were bleached yellow by the sun. There were no trees, save for the one which shaded him now; just a flat expanse which seemed to have no end.

"Where am I?" the man on the ground asked in a hoarse voice, looking above them so as not to stare at their members.

"You are here," the one twin said.

"In our division." the other added.

"Where is that?"

The twins looked at each other, puzzled, shaking their sunburnt faces at each other.

“We don’t know how else to answer,” one of them said, releasing his genitals. The man on the ground tried not to watch as it swung from side to side like a pendulum.

“Do you know why I am here?” The man asked, leaning his back against the tree.

“No,” the twin closest to him said.

“But we know that you are important,” the other chimed in.

“Yes, very important.”

The two of them were nodding in unison. He became unsure again as to if they were genuinely both there; he wondered if either of them was real, or if they both were conjured up in his head, in a dream, a delusion, something of that nature.

“How do you know that I am important?” the man asked, rubbing his dirt-stained elbows clean, revealing the angry red sores beneath.

“Burke says that you are important.”

“Who is Burke?”

“Burke is the leader of the divisions.”

“Can I speak with Burke?”

The twins’ eyes widened, then, they crossed towards each other.

“You can speak to Burke-” the one started.

“But Burke cannot speak to you,” the other finished.

The man had his head in his hands, which was still pounding from the migraine swelling in his brain.

“Why is that?”

“Burke is dead,” the one said, eyeing his brother.

“He says that you are important before he is dead,” the other added.

“Of course, Burke cannot say that now that he is dead.”

“But before he did.”

“Yes,” the one said, as if he had a revelation. “Before, for sure.”

The man on the ground stared at them with dead eyes. How can they speak so much without saying a single thing? He thought to himself.

“I’d like to be alone for a moment,” he said, looking up at the branches, which were webbed out like long cracks in the sky.

The twins nodded at him, “Of course,” they both said, bowing slightly.

“We will be back,” The one said, as they both turned and walked ten feet away into the hot gaze of the sun, then stood looking over their peeling shoulders, waiting for when he would call them back over.

The ridges in the tree’s bark were slicing into his back as he sat and tried, unsuccessfully, to remember anything which would help him understand his situation. He felt he had a name; he just didn’t know what it was. When he

closed his eyes and tried to pull a name from the darkness, he found nothing but Burke, which was not his name but a dead man's name, unless they both shared the same name, but that was unlikely. It was more likely that was the only name he knew. He considered asking the twins what his name was, but decided against it, thinking that it would only confuse things more. He could not shake the feeling that, even though the twins did not seem to know much, they were withholding something from him.

All he knew at that moment was: the heat, the twins, and that there was a dead man named Burke, who for an unknown reason, found him important. None of this was helpful.

He tried to stand but found he had no command over his legs. He struck his right leg with the base of his fist, causing searing pain to build underneath his skin. He was not paralyzed, at least not completely, but still he found himself unable to move his legs. He pushed himself up the tree, leaning his back hard against the blades of bark, trying to anchor himself with his hands, but collapsed once his arms were fully outstretched.

"We know that you want to be alone," the one twin said, moving closer to him and into the shade, "but we know that your legs don't work."

"We wanted to make sure that you know too," the other finished from behind his brother.

"Understood," the man said through his teeth, clenched from pain.

"We can teach you how to walk again," the one said, sitting cross-legged in front of him.

"But we'll need something in return," the other added.

"Can you tell me your names first? Or anything about where we are?"

"Yes, we can do that."

"Maybe that is what we should have said first," the other twin said, taking a seat beside his brother.

"Yes, these things always come too late," his brother said, staring at him.

"No, just in time, he does not know yet."

"You are right. You are right," the twin seated closest to him said, peeling a large cluster of skin from his boney shoulder. "I am Rutt."

"I am Sutt," the other said, bowing his head. "Burke calls you Him, is Him your name?"

He did not think that his name was Him, it did not feel right when he repeated it in his head, but he couldn't be sure.

"I don't know," he said.

"If Burke says that your name is Him, then it probably is," Sutt said.

"Yes, you are Him then," Rutt followed.

"Do you know how I got here?"

"You have always been here, in this division. That is what Burke says," Sutt replied as Rutt nodded.

"So I've been under this tree for as long as you two have been here?"

"No," Sutt said.

"Longer than that," Rutt added.

"According to Burke."

"According to Burke," Rutt mirrored his brother. "Now, about walking."

"Yes. Do you accept Sutt and Rutt's deal?" Sutt crossed his arms, his brother did the same.

"What deal? You haven't told me what I need to do."

The twins looked at each other, trying to read each other's faces.

"I'd say a week of service to the land is good, wouldn't you?" Rutt asked his brother.

"I was thinking the same thing."

Him sat in disbelief, still trying to will his legs into action.

"I suppose I don't have much of a choice anyways."

"No, but the best deals give the illusion of choice," Rutt said as he stood, a cloud of dirt dispersing behind him. "That is what Burke says."

Sutt stood and moved to the left side of Him, while Rutt positioned himself to his right. They grabbed ahold of his arms and bent over, preparing to lift him.

"Burke seems to have taught you both a lot," he said, anxious of the incoming pain.

Sutt and Rutt loosened their grips. "Taught is teach, just before, right?" Sutt asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Ah. What is it called when you are dead before, but now you are awake?" Sutt questioned.

Undead he thought, but kept it to himself.

When he didn't answer the two twins lifted him by his underarms and all he felt below his waist was pain. They walked him into the dry grass, and began bucking him up and down, dragging and clapping his limp legs against the ground, forcing him to gallop. The twins dragged him ten feet in a straight line then back towards the tree. His head bobbed and the whole world quaked. He yelled for them to stop, but they kept on until his shins were soft and bloody. Then on the fiftieth lap, he felt his toes twitch, and they released him.

At first, he crawled, using the newfound mobility in his legs to slide his knees up to his palms, then reach forward, dig into the earth with his hands, and slide his knees forward to meet them. Then, he stumbled, propped up on his feet, toppling back and forth, feeling the scrape of the dry grass in between his toes.

His back was slick with sweat and heavy with heat. It stung when he fingered the gashes the tree bark had dragged into him, trying to shoo away the insects which swarmed the open wounds. When he reached the tree, he collapsed face down atop its swirling roots. His back was cooling in the shade, relief was washing over him.

“Look at you,” he heard one of the twins say. “What was it Burke says?”

“Good and new?” his brother offered.

“No. Oh, good as new. That’s it. Good as new.”

Both twins laughed. He imagined them nodding to each other in unison.

“Get up, your service starts now,” Sutt nudged Him with his foot, splitting his skin with his long, yellowed toenails.

“Can I have some water first?” the man spoke into the dirt.

“Water doesn’t grow on trees,” Rutt said.

“And we’ve only got one tree anyways,” Sutt joined in. “We don’t choose when we get water, it just comes.”

“There’s no lake, or well, or reserve?”

“Burke never told us any of those words, so no, I figure there’s not,” Sutt responded.

The man struggled to his feet, leaning his shoulder against the old tree while his legs solidified.

“What is it that I have to do?” he asked.

“Follow,” Rutt said, “just this way.”

Rutt and Sutt lead the man across the dry grass as the world started to cool. They walked no more than twenty feet and stopped in front of a small mound of dirt, like an ulcer on the skin of the earth.

“This was Sutt’s dirt,” Rutt said. “Now, it is yours.”

“Okay. Now that it is mine, what do I do with it?” he asked, looking at the cracked earth below him.

“Dig,” Sutt said, from behind his back. “Free up the dirt. Stop it from cracking and breaking our fingernails.”

“Are you planting crops here?”

“We don’t choose when the crops are planted,” Rutt said.

“We just prepare it for when it comes,” Sutt added.

“But how can it come if you don’t bring it here?” he turned back to look at the twins, their breathing was heavy and unsteady. They shrugged.

“It just does,” Sutt said.

So he crouched down onto his knees and clawed at the soil with the twins at his back. The dirt was solid like stone, only broken at the very center of the mound where there were small cracks like spider legs just beginning to form. He sunk as much of his fingernails as he could into the cracks and tried

to pull them apart, but they would not give. He tried smashing the top of the mound with his elbows and his fists, but the mound would not crumble. He stood and tried to stomp the hardened crust away but lost his balance and slipped into the dry grass beside the mound.

The twins gasped and dragged him by his legs back to the mound.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Sutt said as he dropped the man’s leg and began to pace back and forth.

“This is not good,” Rutt said, still clutching the man’s leg.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“This is not fine,” Rutt said, releasing the leg. “You crossed out of our division.”

Rutt looked to Sutt for support, but his brother was still pacing, still muttering, “no, no, no, no, no.”

“What do you mean division?” he said, picking himself up off of the ground.

“That grass is not in our division. We are never to cross over our division,” Rutt spoke gravely.

“Never. Not ever. We are set in one division. One! Not two, not more, just this one,” Sutt was hysterical. “We should not have had his dirt so close to the other division. Did anyone see?”

“I don’t know,” Rutt said. “Calm down Sutt, we will figure this out.” Then he turned to the man, “Leave, we must be alone now.”

Not wanting to cause any more trouble the man raised his hands, nodded, and turned away from them.

Having nowhere else to go which he was certain was safe and, in the division, he returned to the tree, where he sat, watching Rutt and Sutt’s spines and shoulder blades dig through their backs as they spoke. They looked like two starved coyotes, hunched over as they whispered into each other’s ears. He tried to make out what they were saying, but found Sutt’s speech too erratic to follow, and Rutt’s too low and measured to hear.

Rutt placed his hand on Sutt’s shoulder, which Sutt took, crossing his arm over his chest to squeeze, draining it of all its colour.

Then, for a long time, they turned and looked at him without saying anything. Their eyes were harsher than the sun, and no matter where he looked, he felt their beating gazes.

So he stood and circled to the other side of the tree, hoping to free himself of their stare, but when he looked up he found something which disturbed him much more.

Atop the tree, skewered upon the highest branch, was a head. The skin had all but peeled away to reveal the bloodless, greying flesh below. Thin sprigs and branches coiled out of the eye sockets, which twisted up and around the

exposed bone of the forehead, then tapered out to form what looked like worms, squirming in the slight breeze. Boughs overflowed through the ear canals and flat snout which had sloughed away in the heat, coming together to form a cage around the shrivelled head.

Burke, the thought burst into his mind as the head swayed in the wind, nodding.

After the sun had set, and he built up the courage to look away from the head, he saw that Rutt and Sutt had stopped watching him. They had turned their backs and looked in a direction that he thought was east, but he was so unsure of anything at this point, that he could not be certain. Across the way, just to the left, or in a more certain world, the west, he saw two women and a man. They were plum coloured and wrinkled with age, sat in what he assumed to be the closest division to his, plucking what was left of the dry grass from the dirt, and placing it upon their outstretched tongues. After they grew tired of this, they laid on their backs, and let the sun pare their skin away, shifting every once in a while, to let the others know that they were still alive.

“Do you like that division better?” one of the twins asked him.

He turned to face the twins and found they were already beside him, arms crossed, squatting down to sit cross-legged beside him.

“I fell. I was not trying to leave this division. I don’t even know where the divisions are.”

“Is it not clear to you?” Sutt asked, his voice pitching up with each word he spoke. “How can you not see?” he exhaled, began talking in a lower register, whispering anger. “We thought of punishing you, the way Burke does.”

The man looked at Sutt with newfound rage, and began curling his fingers into balls of cracked skin.

“But we are not Burke,” Rutt jumped in, “it is not for us to do.”

“So what will you do then?” the man asked Rutt.

“Nothing,” Rutt shrugged. “If Burke wishes, he will punish you.”

He thought of the head hanging in the tree up above him, watching him through scooped eye cavities, as it rocked back and forth. He thought he felt the tickle of branches, grazing his neck.

He turned to Rutt, now able to distinguish the twins by their demeanours.

“Was it you who put him in the tree?” he asked.

Rutt’s eyes expanded, “No. Sutt is the climber.”

“This is what Burke wants. He said this is what we do.” Sutt began to defend himself.

“Yes,” Rutt said, “this is true.”

“What happened to Burke?” the man asked, shifting his gaze between the two twins.

They both stared at each other. Worry dripped off their huge eyes, their mouths were hung half open, waiting for the other to speak. Rutt looked up above his head staring, no doubt at Burke, for permission to speak about him.

“Burke was before Sutt and Rutt,” Rutt started, then stared up again at the head. It rocked back and forth, glowing red hot like coal, nodding for him to go on. “He taught Sutt and Rutt, and everyone else.”

Sutt’s eyes were tethered to the severed head, drawn back and forth with its slightest movements.

“Burke is different,” Rutt was nodding, staring off into space. “Burke is,” Rutt started to chew his fingers, staring at the ground, processing what he was saying. “We will show you. Sutt, you pretend to be Burke,” Rutt said to his twin.

“I am nothing like Burke, why can Him not be Burke? He is more like Burke than Sutt is.” Sutt protested.

“Because, he does not know what Burke says.”

“Could we not taught him?”

Rutt shook his head, unsettling his unkempt dustball of hair.

“Fine,” Sutt spoke, looking up to Burke. “But not the last part.”

“Yes, we will not pretend the last part, just teach,” Rutt said, nodding.

“Taught?”

“No, teach. We teach now what before is taught. Understand?”

“Yes,” Sutt said, unconvincingly.

The twins began the reenactment of their time with Burke as if it were a stage play, projecting their voices to their audience who had no trouble hearing them, and running back and forth to their starting points, behind invisible curtains to end or start scenes.

Rutt played both himself and his brother with ease, so well that Him had trouble determining who was who. Sutt stood taller and made a great effort to lower the tone of his voice, for his role as Burke.

Sutt pretended to teach Rutt what they knew, simple anatomy, a few numbers, the names for each distinct part of the landscape: tree, grass, dirt, rain, sky, etc.

There was a portion of time devoted to the punishments which Burke had inflicted upon them, though Sutt did not pretend when he tore out clumps of Rutt’s hair, or stood Rutt on his head and dug his long yellowed nails into his genitals.

With tilted heads they mimicked how they drank when the rain fell, how Burke taught them to look up with their hands cupped around their mouths like beaks to catch as much rainwater as they could.

They stomped the ground below them, displaying how Burke tutored them in loosening the soil for crops. Though, this is where Sutt-Burke, became unhinged, completely different from the man who tortured Rutt with indifference.

“My people are starving,” Sutt-Burke bellowed. “I have done all that I can and yet, there is no food and there is no order. Everyone wanders without aim, bellies hollow, without any structure at all. Have I failed this miserably Sutt? Do not answer, I do not know why I asked.” He was pacing back and forth, crossing in front of Rutt, looking down at his feet. “I have brought life here, but that is all, and that life will not last. What good is life without a structure, without the motivation to continue, without orderly conduct? I have done nothing to encourage growth. I have allowed starvation, and it will not end. I am tasked to cultivate a barren fireball. Nothing but the forsaken heat grows here.” Sutt-Burke looked at Him with a crazed look in his eye. “I will foster prosperity, I will not fail in my task. I will soak the heat from this wasteland with my own blood. I will feed its inhabitants with my own flesh if I must. Sutt! Rutt!”

Rutt appeared before Sutt-Burke, looking up at his huge stature.

“You will divide me for the land and for the tribe, it is my divine will.”

“Divide?” Rutt said.

“You will pull me apart and eat me. And when you are done, you will place my head above, so I may watch over as the land and my people bloom.” Sutt-Burke smiled. “Then you will see Godliness.”

“If we can eat you, you are not God,” Rutt said.

Sutt-Burke laughed, “Perhaps that is exactly what will make it so.”

“Now is when the pretend stops,” Rutt leaned forward, whispering to Him.

Sutt’s fake smile vanished from his face as he hunched back over and shook the Burke character off of himself.

They both sat cross-legged, their knees knocking against his.

“This is when Burke says we divide him, for everyone to eat. That is how Burke divides the land, and is always a part of it. Burke lays down under the tree, and says Rutt and Sutt must break him apart, like the dirt. He screams, but if we stop, he says continue. So Sutt and Rutt break him apart, stepping and smashing, Burke crunches. Sutt and Rutt bite to loosen his arms and legs, which hurts our teeth. Sutt grabs one arm on the other side as the one leg Rutt grabs, and we pull. After a pop, Burke’s arm and leg come off. Sutt and Rutt grab the other side and pull again. Burke says, Sutt, slap my face, as he leaks,

he wants to stay awake. So Sutt slaps and I grab Burke's head, laying on my back. Rutt's knees touch Rutt's chest as Rutt stands and pulls Burke's head with Rutt. The screams stop, Rutt can hear leaking, like rain moving through grass. Sutt and Rutt take an arm each, this is what Burke says. The rest go where Burke says, but to eat, you must stay where you eat. This is the divisions."

Stars spread across the darkening sky like a rash as Sutt and Rutt laid down to rest, back-to-back, knees bent, hands together as if in mid-prayer, right at his feet. They appeared, their heads and backs conjoined, with not even darkness stitching them together, as a singular form: one great butterfly of twisted limbs.

He was careful as he stepped over them and moved away from the shadowy tree, with its tendrils cut from the darkness curling back, beckoning to him.

Sleep was not something he would find this night. He was terrified of shutting his eyes, knowing that whatever dreams he would encounter would be hellscapes, torn straight out of Rutt's story. So instead, he looked out at the huddles of people, laying exhausted and starving, in each of their divisions.

He could not help, as he watched the ground, bubbling with the dark outlines of bodies, which swelled with air then smoothed out again, in guessing where each portion of Burke's body was consumed. By his count, there were eight groupings of tribe members, including himself, Rutt, and Sutt, so eight divisions. This left him to wonder if there was an order, some sort of meaning to which body part was consumed. If there was then it was instilled by Burke himself as he was quartered, which seemed unlikely. But Rutt and Sutt were not capable of such thinking, so was it all random? Nobody but Burke must have cared which part was eaten, only that it was eaten.

If he could leave his division, he could claw into the dirt under each other division and search for the bones which could not have been consumed, that could inform him. But why did any of this matter to him? Did he really believe Burke to be a God and not a man driven mad by the sun's unrelenting heat and the arid land's refusal to provide? And if he himself was like Burke, what exactly did that mean? How was he important?

Nothing but questions. His mind and body both depleted.

He knew that he would die if he did not eat something soon, all of them would. The rains would fall, but the ground was sterile, nothing more than pricks of dry grass to be seen, and the rotten tree adorned with Burke's head was not one which bore fruit. Burke's proclamation was made in vain. He fed the people once, then trapped them there with a false promise, one which they do not have the faculties to understand. To them, if they broke the borders set

around them by the mad man that they worship, they would starve. But this land to which they belong is unforgiving, it cares not for where they come from, or how loyal they are to it. This land only cares to suffocate with indifference.

If I am to survive, he thought, there must be no divisions.

By morning he had determined there to be only one way to break the divisions. A way which he had pondered the whole night, but had hesitated to act upon. Though he knew now, as the sun crested the sky, that he needed to act before the twins had roused.

So he began his ascent of the singular tree, stretching his arms up to the lowest branch and scrambling up onto it, dragging long tally mark scars onto his legs as he mounted it, then stood, reaching for the next one.

By the time he was halfway up the tree, the branches began to tangle, crossing each other in a way that made it impossible to slip through. With one hand he followed the closest branch to its origin, then parted it from the tangle, and hoisted himself through the gap. When he released the branch it swung and struck him in the back, lashing a long crimson groove across the width of his back, causing him to cry out in pain.

He could not help but think that Burke was fighting back.

He passed through all the knots in the wood until he stood atop a branch thinner than his skeletal feet, face to face with the putrid grimace of a self-proclaimed God. The flesh left on Burke's head was soft and gooey, sloughing off his skull into a pinkish sludge which coated the branch running through what was left of his neck.

Branches had started to come through Burke's gaping mouth, wedged against the inside of his cheeks and creeping out the corners of his mouth, as if to pull him apart from the inside out.

Starting with the eye cavities, Him broke apart all the branches which had burgeoned through Burke's crown, using Burke's skull like a guillotine to rend each twig. Once this was done, he tugged the head free from its place, letting Burke's watery skin fill the gaps in his fingers as he pushed against the skull. Squinting at the sun, he lifted the head up above his own, and though his body did not cooperate at first, refusing to let him part his lips, eventually it gave in, opening up to allow the sludge to run down Burke's skull, for him to quaff and choke down.

He gagged and he choked, but he let no part escape him. He had convinced himself that it would not work otherwise. When a wad of skin and plasma leaked over the skull and past his hot stone lips, boiling as it slid down his neck, he would catch it and cup it right back to his mouth; letting the sharp, vile stinging taste of rotten flesh invade his body.

When the meat stopped coming off freely, he shook the head and scraped the bones clean, sucking the inside of the mouth through the yawn in what was left of Burke's neck.

The tongue he had saved for last, pinching it free from between the teeth that had not fallen or been pushed out by the growing branches. It was shrivelled and sandy, shaped like an arrowhead. He looked down and ensured that Rutt and Sutt watched him as he dangled it above his mouth then let it sink, wiggling down his quivering throat.

He fought every urge as he stood above, watching Rutt, Sutt, and all of the others who watched on in horror, to vomit. His stomach swirled with pain, he felt all the hot ooze melting his insides, rising through the back of his throat and threatening to crawl out, but he held it all in. He let Burke sit and wail inside his stomach, for no matter how much pain he inflicted, no matter how sick he made him, he would keep Burke inside of him. He would not stay a prisoner in Burke's world, Burke would stay a prisoner in his.

The skull shattered when it struck the ground, spitting up brittle bone shrapnel which Rutt and Sutt dove to avoid.

They were still face down in the dirt when he reached the base of the tree, stepping off the roots as if they were the last rung of a ladder, and though his insides screamed, he felt rejuvenated.

"Get up," he commanded.

The twins obliged, hurrying onto their feet.

"Why?" Sutt asked, his eyes bouncing between Him and the cloud of dust he and his twin had kicked up.

"Why get up or why did I eat Burke?" he asked, stepping closer to the twins. "Both have the same answer."

"What is the answer?" Rutt asked.

Him smiled as he looked up at the tree lunging into the morning sky. "Do you remember when Burke said that you would see divinity, that you would witness God? He spoke not of himself."

"He divided himself and fed you all, but in being consumed he proved that you were right Rutt. He was no God. He was a warden and a shepherd, though he could not lead his flock, so he imprisoned it. This is the purpose of the divisions, and this is why they must be broken."

Rutt and Sutt began to panic, shaking their heads and shivering, they fell to their knees.

"But Rutt and Sutt cannot leave this division. Him cannot too," Rutt whimpered.

"This is where Burke says we are," Sutt stuttered.

“No. Not anymore. Let me show you the way.” he said, grabbing Sutt by the throat and dragging him, taking slow deliberate steps towards the edge of the division.

“No!” Sutt screamed and coughed.

“Please Him, come back!” Rutt called.

But it was too late, he had crossed over the border, was breathing in free air, no longer confined to the swath of dry land he had been designated. Sutt laid at his feet, gasping. He examined his hands, only now realizing what he had done to Sutt.

“Now you see. Both Sutt and I have broken through and nothing bad has happened. Will you not join us?” he called to Rutt.

Rutt crawled his way to the edge of the division, sobbing. He reached one long cracked finger out towards his twin, skirting the edge of the division. He looked up at Him with beggar’s eyes.

“Please no Him. Please no.” Rutt pleaded.

“This is the only way forward, Rutt. If you do not join us, you will die. You must tell the rest of them the same.”

“Then I will die,” Rutt began hyperventilating. “They will die. We cannot leave.”

“This is your choice?” he asked, picking Sutt off the ground.

Rutt nodded as with so little moisture left in his crisped body, he began weeping blood.

“Will no one else join us?” he called out through the empty expanse. “You will all die if you do not follow me!”

Nobody moved, their huge eyes were fastened to Him as he stood over Sutt.

“This is your last chance!” his voice echoed. When again no one moved he began walking, in what direction, he did not know. “Come Sutt. We must go.”

Sutt looked back at his brother and the impenetrable wall in between them for the last time as Him dragged Sutt away, into the untold world.

They wandered through desert and dune, steppe, and moor, but there was no other life to be found. No fauna or flora, nothing vibrant which had not been blasted with sun until it withered and browned. Him and Sutt walked, not a word exchanged between them, through the same parched lands, over and over until the sun wore them down.

Fallen deep into skin-melting sand, Him smiled at Sutt who had already shut his eyes and resigned himself to death.

With no divisions, I have him all to myself, he thought as he squinted at Sutt, able to see nothing but his head sunken in the golden sand.

That should last me a little while longer. Just enough to continue. He began to think of what fresh meat would taste like, but would not have to wait long to find out.

Does Sutt taste like Rutt, or will he taste of Burke? He wondered, then grabbed Sutt's arm and started to gnaw, but still couldn't quite figure it out.

When he was finished consuming Sutt, leaving his bones in a pile to be lost in the shifting sands, he stood and began walking again.

There will be something else. Not all the world can be like this, he thought. You have done the right thing.

Remember, you are important. How else would you have such knowledge without having lived a life?

You are important.

Rutt said so. Sutt said so. Burke said so.

You are alone and important.

Alone and important.

Alone. Important.

The words repeated in his head as the landscapes repeated around him. Rolling hills of sand and flat scrublands. Hard dirt, then soft sand. The tickle of grass, the grate of crusted earth. The world recurring around him as he stumbled, half-blind through it.

This is it, there will be something soon.

But still, there was nothing.

As his body gave out and he lay there, caught in the bright glare of the sun, with nothing and nobody around him, he wished he had never left at all.