

A small cluster of dark, unidentifiable figures stands quietly in a crooked line a few feet away from a shadowy form, where it lies motionless on a narrow, desolate beach just before the arrival of twilight. The heights of the shapes vary, ranging in staggered sizes. Not far away, a larger group of odd-looking creatures stands like statues slightly behind the group of human shapes in respectful silence.

As the sun continues to set in the west, the unidentifiable group of friends stands in a mournful, wordless huddle around the horizontal object lying on the firmly packed sand. It remains where it fell, cold and motionless on the grainy expanse of earth not far from the place where the water meets the land. The shape is that of a once vibrant yet now lifeless corpse.

A colorful blanket of darkening clouds litters the sky above them as a soft, cool breeze caresses their bodies after a long, life altering day. The rippling edge of the nearby lake licks the shore in a rhythmic, gentle cadence as it whispers liquid condolences to those who grieve. Other than those surrounding the corpse and the repetitive back and forth motion of the waves brushing the shoreline, the rest of the beach is deserted. The eerie growls heard the previous night have fallen silent and the fog that covered the lake earlier that morning has since transitioned upwards with the rising of the sun, evaporating into the sky above them like a ghost. Even the previous day's spinning, fish-spewing funnels are nowhere to be seen across the horizon of what had been a dark, menacing body of water the night before.

The mourners watch in quiet disbelief as the surrounding shoreline suddenly comes to life, giving birth to dozens of sand crabs as they erupt from their hiding places like lava from sleeping volcanoes. The emerging hard-shelled creatures of varying shapes and sizes have oddly-shaped, spine-covered, spindly legs, and pay no attention to those huddled near the body where it waits like a stone. The well-armored platoon of crustaceans works quickly, as if driven by a single mind, each taking a place next to an empty location alongside a sling brought by a newcomer. After working in unison to spread the sling out like a flattened alia leaf, the crabs turn and make their way toward unmarked, yet unquestionable, locations next to the last body from the battle.

The group of mourners watches the scene in silence, somehow knowing what was happening - what MUST happen - to their former comrade, each of them struggling with their own flood of emotions - stifling cries that begged to be released...

Each one understanding that grief is both a powerful emotion and demon that everyone must face...

Each one hoping the demon from this particular day is one that can be overcome with vigilance, time, and a little bit of luck.

The only sounds heard as the sand crabs take their invisible stations alongside the corpse are the gentle lapping of the waves against the shore, restrained liquid cries for the loss of one so special, one so young, and the *click, click, clicking* of the sand creatures as they speak to each other in their foreign tongue. Perhaps the crabs are sharing tales of other senseless deaths? Perhaps they are asking each other why something so unfortunate, so *wasteful*, had to happen to this particular human on this

particular day? Perhaps they are offering sympathies in a strange language that, no matter how hard the humans try to understand, will remain forever misunderstood?

Once the sand creatures have completely surrounded the fallen hero, many of them move in harmony to raise his body off the sand. As they work together, countless other crustaceans rush beneath the body to help support the weight. Then, inch by slow inch, they move together, carrying it toward the laid out material like a group of peasants bringing offerings to a king. The clicking sounds intensify as the sand creatures transport the body to the sling, where they finally set it down on the thickly woven fabric with indescribable grace and gentleness.

The two largest of the non-human creatures watches the proceedings in silence. Once the body has been moved, the crabs shuffle into a scattered, broken line at the border of the lake, just shy of the water's edge. As the tide rhythmically pulls away then returns, small waves lap at their armor-covered legs. Although the water is cool, the sand creatures seem to not notice.

The sound of a sniffle breaks the silence as a trail of tears cascades down one of the mourner's pale, thin cheeks.

Today they have lost a friend.