



Prologue

Jim's Awakening

Jim peeked over the dune, careful to keep most of his body concealed behind the hot sandy ridge. The sun was starting to set, casting a brilliant cocktail of orange and rust-red hues upon the land, save for the tract which lay beneath the berth of his anchored landship below, its shadow gradually crawling eastwards.

He muttered sourly to himself. As he had suspected, there lay an overturned sloop in the distance, its tattered sail fluttering in the breeze. His eyes darted cautiously around the unmanned vessel. *It's probably a trap*, he thought, but the growls of his stomach protested against this assessment.

Four days prior, a starving suahim lizard had attacked him in his land cutter, nearly destroying his ship and what remained of his supplies.

The enormous creatures, sometimes up to three meters in length, typically avoided humans, instead preferring to feast on giant scarabs and other desert insects. However, when hungry enough, they could be a dangerous foe. Through the struggle, he'd managed to kill the beast, but not before it shredded his mainsail and snapped the mast in half. Since then, the wind had pushed his ship along on its lone jib sail at a limp as he pointed the bow in the direction of Freeport.

Drifting northward in his small land cutter, he had delicately sailed the rusty vehicle across the sands of the Great Dune Sea. With each new dune, he would dip, temporarily picking up speed, and then crawl up another. The Dunes offered little in the way of food or stops and it had already been days since a drop of water had touched his burning throat.

Smacking his cracked lips together, he crept along the perimeter of the rocks, looking for hidden threats. Jim's face was the only part of his body not covered by the heavy desert jubba, a loosely worn full body suit meant to protect its wearer against harsh desert sands. Scattered across the ashen surface of his garments, darkened spots of dried blood flaked off.

Pushing the lingering pain aside, he fixed his eyes on the downed vessel and turned an ear toward it. The sloop's sail continued to flap and the wind whistled through the wood railing. Jim sniffed the air, but he was upwind of the shipwreck, and the action was more out of habit than utility. Finally, he scurried his last few meters from the rocks to the steeply sloped deck.



The landship was similar in size to his own but in much better condition. He had to remind himself: food and drink before salvage.

As he shuffled quickly from the bow to stern, Jim made a hasty inspection of the small cabin through a broken window. The inside was empty, save a small bedroll of handspun desert cotton.

The creaking boat shifted in the sand as Jim made his way to the cabin door. Its port side pushstone lifted the ship at an odd angle, standing it slightly on its side railing before a new gust of wind brought it to the ground with a thump and a spray of sand.

In all ships, 'pushstones' were installed at forty-five degree angles within the hull to literally push the sand outward with their invisible force and prevent the ships from capsizing. Few things were powerful enough to knock a ship over in such a manner.

The fiery sun drifted into the haze of the western horizon, spreading upon the foothills.

It'll be dark soon. Gotta hurry, Jim reminded himself.

Carefully, he cracked the aged door to the cabin. Gravity did the rest. Free from the lock, the door flew open and broke off its hinges. It bounced across the tilted deck with a THUMP and fell flat onto the sand. Jim cringed. No explosions came though. He examined the frame. No wires; no booby traps. *Lucky,* he thought. *Let's see just how lucky...*

He forged on, careful to keep his footing on legs weak with hunger.

Crawling through the slanted room, Jim made his way to the bedroll. It was unimpressive and contained no hidden food caches. The room around him was a galley and crew quarters combined in one, common in small ships.

Jim rummaged through the cabinets but found nothing. No empty tins. No dehydrated fruits. Worst of all, no water. His belly protested in disappointment. Hope was giving way to despair.

Suddenly, a tingle began to crawl up his spine. A sense of danger as old as instinct. A growing feeling of doom was gathering in his gut. *Where is the captain of this vessel?* he wondered. It looked to be in fairly good shape. Little dust, nothing broken. Recently abandoned, he realized. Why would someone leave it here in the middle of nowhere, and where did they hope to go? The nearest city was days away by sail. Weeks on foot.

His eyes widened. *This is a trap.* In the desperation and mental fog of his full-bodied hunger, he had walked right into it.

His lower back muscles tightened and his hands shook as adrenaline shot through his system. His practiced calm was no match for millions of years of evolution. The animal part of his brain was shouting "danger!" and his body was responding.

Get out. NOW, his instincts warned. Outside, the wind had quieted. It was replaced with a *crunch crunch crunch* of footsteps on dirt. More footsteps, and then silence. A pair of bronzed legs came to a stop outside the crooked cabin glass.



With the dehydration setting in, Jim knew he had to act while he had at least some strength. He grabbed the bedroll and wrapped it around both arms. Shielding his head, he took few calming breaths before sprinting for the front window of the cabin. The thin glass shattered around him as he burst outside onto the still burning sand and barreled into the unseen threat.

The man stumbled backwards in surprise. Tossing off the bedroll and rolling to his left, Jim pulled a jagged hunting knife, still covered in dried suahim lizard blood from his last encounter. His offhand pulled a single shot pistol from a belt holster on his left hip. He was on his feet in a flash, moving quickly despite the nagging exhaustion.

A few paces away, an imposing man stumbled back, eyes wide, teeth bared. The hulking figure was adorned with armor fashioned from sun-bleached bones.

Oh gods, a cannibal. Probably an alpha.

The man was huge. Jim was of average height, but this man was at least a head above even the tallest Alliance soldier. The cannibal's body was built like a steam room boiler, but there was a hungry, hawkish look to him. There was little time to think.

The cannibal was nimble, especially given his size. Despite stumbling, he had remained upright and recovered his balance. With a frightening roar, he lurched toward Jim.

Leveling his pistol, Jim fired his single shot. *CRACK!* The gun kicked back, belching a cloud of black smoke. The musket ball found a gap between the rib armor and burst through the behemoth's chest with a sickening wet *thwap*.

With a crooked femur knife in hand, and apparently ignorant of his mortal wound, the cannibal threw his momentum into a final leap. Rolling to the right, Jim avoided the majority of his mass, instead sending his left foot sailing into the giant's chest, further traumatizing the bloodsoaked hole. Giant or not, a point blank shot through the heart was deadly, and quickly so.

The cannibal gurgled once and fell face first to the ground. A small cloud of dust shot out from under his crumpled body. Jim wasn't sure if he'd imagined it, but he could swear the ground shook a little with the impact.

Shouts and sounds of shuffling footsteps arose from behind the fallen sloop, robbing Jim of any hope of rest. The lack of water was sapping away his strength, threatening to push him to total exhaustion.

One, two, three, five bodies leapt over the overturned ship with predatory speed. These cannibals were smaller than the first. In fact, they were easily a few hands shorter than Jim. They looked a fair deal younger too; Most no more than teenagers.





Wearing little more than loin cloths, and painted head to toe in unfamiliar black and red patterns, they were gaunt with the same look of desperation he'd seen in the first. Maddening hunger was heavy on the face of each of them. And with their spears in-hand, tipped with black crystal, their glares were especially menacing.

They were in a fury. Their champion was dead, their trap had failed, and their dinner was escaping. With only a few dozen paces head-start, Jim sprinted for the edge of the sandstone outcropping back toward his anchored ship. The group gave chase, although a few stopped to feast on their comrade.

Waste not, I guess, Jim thought.

The first spear whistled by to his left, missing him by only a few inches. The next missile found flesh, cutting into his right calf and opening a gash. Mercifully, his body dulled the pain as he focused on escape.

Jim ran up the gangway and dove into the hold of his ship, rolling into a run. He crossed the small space as quickly as his legs would allow. Grabbing two pistols, he scurried to the starboard forward porthole. Shoving the first through the hole, he risked a single breath before squeezing the trigger.

The nearest cannibal doubled over a fresh stomach wound. His blood-curdling scream hastened his friends' run as they leapt past him. They did not show the same interest in eating their fallen comrade, instead shouting incoherent curses in their strange guttural language full of clucks and gargled words.

Tossing the smoking pistol behind him, Jim grabbed the second. Taking aim at the nearest cannibal who was now scrambling up the gangway, Jim shot again.

Click. Nothing.

Dammit, he thought with frustration.

Taking one last peek, he spotted four more of them scampering across the sand, only seconds behind the others. They too had no interest in eating their fallen friend, instead opting for the fresh meat of an outsider, now trapped in his rickety little boat.



Jim shuffled to the far end of the hold, hunched under the low ceiling, and pulled a worn canvas off of a nearby barrel. The torn fabric fell away and revealed a wooden barrel nearly as tall and twice as wide as Jim. On its front, in bold white, hand painted letters was written: *Go to Hell*. A small frayed wick hung from a pinhole in the top of the barrel.

With a thud, the first cannibal dropped through the entrance. Despite his hunger, this one moved slowly, eyes never leaving his prey. He'd witnessed the felling of his leader and knew to treat this quarry with more caution.

He crept across Jim's small cargo hold, eyes stealing a glance left and right, searching for dangers unseen. His breathing was heavy and his gaze fixed with hatred as he raised his spear to strike.

Withdrawing a small match and board from his belt pouch, Jim struck it. The small flame lit the hold in the dying light. Jim intended to make sure that the last thing the cannibal saw from behind his dirt blackened face was a feral grin and a lit fuse.

Jim rolled out a side escape hatch, specially prepared for a situation such as this one. He turned back to see the cannibal's eyes go wide with shock. The creature had just enough time to register what had happened and shout a word of alarm up to the others.

With only a few seconds on the fuse, Jim spent the last bit of strength he had remaining, his body still fighting him with each step. As he dove for a small indentation in the ground, the blast ignited.

One hundred and twenty pounds of packed black powder made for a spectacular explosion. Suddenly, the world was white, and a terrific sound shook his bones. For a moment, the noise and light was beyond his ability to fully comprehend. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, or at least that's how he would later recall it.

The blast thrust his body downward into the desert sand, cracking a few ribs in the process. Trying to control his ragdolled form, he tucked himself into a ball with hands behind his neck. Finally, rolling to a stop, ears ringing and vision blurred, Jim looked back.

The gunpowder had done its deadly work. Where a ship once floated, a smoking crater remained, littered with splinters of wood and mangled metal. Heavy clouds of black smoke drifted lazily into the sky as the remains of his life's possessions burned away before his eyes.

Somehow, luck had continued to accompany him. He was alive, aside from a few scrapes, a few broken ribs, the damage to his ship, and a slowly seeping spear wound.

When his hearing began to return, the sounds of crackling wood, howling twilight winds, and shouts reached him. From behind the growing wall of smoke, two specters lumbered toward him.

Against the burning firelight, the cannibals were horrific, nightmarish creatures. Covered head to toe in soot and hunched over, with spears held at the ready, they approached like wolves, moving in for the killing blow.

The wind wailed across sand and rock, buffeting Jim's back, staggering him. His legs shook and his eyes blinked slowly... so slowly. He tried to will himself to awareness, recognizing that he was falling into a waking sleep.

His energy was spent. He had no more tricks. No more strength but all the will in the world to survive. He shook violently, half from terror, and the rest from utter exhaustion. *This is it then*, he thought as anger replaced all traces of fear.

"Time to work for your supper, boys!" he growled through bared teeth.

Jim limped out of his landing spot. Wheezing and concussed, he calmed his heart and steadied his breathing.

Ahead of him, the end to a life spent in the wastes, of barely scraping by on the bottom rung of society. Filled with regret and anger over such an ending, he would give them something to remember him by.





Too close now, they could hold back no longer. The bloodthirsty scavengers charged at him. He mustered a hidden strength, surprising even himself as he shouted his last dying breath. It felt as if his very soul was being thrust open and poured upon them. The rage filled him. Then, it consumed him.

The howling wind crescendoed to a deafening roar.

Charging in utter desperation, he was upon them in an instant. What happened next, Jim would always recall as something between a dream and an out-of-body experience.

He saw the terror fill their eyes. He watched from above a familiar body — his body — as the wretched remnants of a man swung his arms and hit air. No, he wasn't swinging. He was wielding the earth itself. With each swing, giant pillars of sand erupted from the dune beneath him and tore the cannibal's flesh from their bodies. At each desperate shout, a mighty torrent of earth would rise and crash into them.

Jim knew that what he was watching made no sense, yet he was oddly unsurprised. He simply observed what was happening as he floated above his body.

The cannibals attempted to flee, but it was too late for them. The shifting sand soon ran red with their blood. In seconds, their screams ceased. Their skeletons were tossed across the bloodied landscape and landed in a heap of gore.

Still floating above his body, Jim's reasoning seemed to return. He thought for a moment and realized he knew what was happening. In a book, or perhaps an overheard conversation; he wasn't sure where he'd learned the phrase. *I'm an awakened!* he thought.

Suddenly, he was in his body again, and the world around him was darkening. The released power had quickly escaped his control, and now he watched, helpless as his awakening took its deadly course.

The rushing wind intensified and swirled into a terrible maelstrom. Lost now to the power swimming through him, he could only hope that he would survive the immense explosion of power.

An intensifying earthquake engulfed the remains of his vessel to the depths and turned the world around him a glowing ember red. Every nerve was on fire. Every inch of his body was in agony. The sky was filled with a deep roaring column of sand that spun around him.

The pain was simply unbearable. When the darkness came, he welcomed it.