

Left Behind

by 6121

The world changes. It changes itself, changes the environment, changes people. New challenges arise. Some, people, animals, manage to adjust, thrive again in the changed environment. Under new conditions. Some refuse to change. They try to change the world so it will fit them.

The world does not care.

Those who don't adjust die out. The others move on. The world moves on. It feels slow, but what are millions of years when you've been around for billions. Species go extinct and evolve within the blink of an eye.

IV

Chapters:

The Request

V

The Crawling

XVI

Chapter I
The Request

The mid-day sun burned on the dry sandy landscape. Few places along the trampled path were shaded by pale white trees that bore no leaves. A quiet breeze made the heat somewhat more bearable. The only sound to be heard was the creaking of metal joints, the hissing of pistons moving back and forth, and the chatter of the people who accompanied the machine talking. It was a caravan. Traders who made the long and difficult journeys from one town to another, transporting food, materials and other resources to sell to the populations of other settlements. Few people were willing to do this kind of task. The desert had become more dangerous over recent decades. The heat was too much for anyone who wasn't prepared enough, and the creatures that roamed the wasteland between unpopulated areas were more than most could handle. Towns struggled to expand as their populations grew since no one was willing to work outside the established walls that protected their communities. However, caravans were essential. Few towns could produce all the resources needed to live, be it food, water or building materials.

For decades traders had to carry their goods themselves or get animals to bear the weight, but recently those who could afford it and had the right connections used walkers. Large machines with multiple legs and platforms on their backs to hold the load. There were many different types. The number of legs differed, how much weight they could carry, how long they could go before needing to be refueled. But the main differentiator was how their owners treated them. For some groups they

were like a home. They decorated their walkers, painted their metallic limbs, tents or even more expansive structures built on the backs. For others, however, they were simply a tool for their work.

Graf was the latter. He led a small caravan group that was on its way from the small town of Gratow to Brigginda, the biggest settlement in the area. Their walker was plain metal, the only modification made to it were the four wooden struts attached to the four corners of the platform, with a sheet of dark brown cloth fixed on top to shade the cargo. The six legs moved forward slowly, one after another lifting off the ground and back down again, making creaking, screeching and stomping noises as they did. It was old, having been passed down to Graf by the previous caravan leader who had retired not long ago. The machine was operated with a small device that had buttons and levers on it to steer the mechanical beast. Faro, one of the younger members of the group would often call the walker Broogery, saying that the front of it looked like the head of a Brooger, a bug-like creature they often encountered on their travels. Graf and Nuro, who operated the machine, thought he shouldn't get too attached to the walker. They had been saving up to replace it sooner or later and giving it a name now would only make it hard for some of them to part with it. The other three members didn't mind, however. The younger man's banter made their journeys more entertaining than they had been before he had joined them.

They had been on their trip for a few light cycles and could already see the towering gardens of Brigginda in the distance. They would reach the settlement before the dark enveloped the desert again. Faro was unwrapping some of the food he had packed, peeling the shiny golden foil that kept the meat from spoiling. His gloves made of animal hide made it slightly more difficult to open it than it would have otherwise been but taking them off wasn't an option. The sunlight would burn his skin within minutes. He brushed some long strands of curly hair out of his face and pulled down a piece of cloth that masked his mouth to take his first bite. Crumbs of fell from the buns that the piece of meat was wedged between

VIII

onto the long ragged cloak Faro was wearing to keep himself protected. He brushed them off onto the ground, his hooved feet stepping over them.

“Careful,” Graf called over to his younger companion. “We don’t want to attract any attention while we have this cargo with us.”

Faro wrapped his food back up and slid it into one of the pockets on his mantle. Graf was harsh, but rightfully so. For a while now they had been transporting more specialized materials alongside their usual loads. A client had been paying them handsomely to go out and find mechanical parts, papers, and other artifacts from the old world. Losing this job would mean losing their main source of income, so they took as few risks as possible whenever they worked on these tasks. The smell of food could attract animals. The crumbs could serve as a track for bandits to follow their caravan. Faro’s stomach grumbled. He hadn’t eaten recently for these exact reasons and couldn’t wait any longer. But he would only have to wait for half a light cycle until he could eat in peace and safety. He was excited to return home.

The walker moved onward. Nuro was constantly pressing buttons, pushing the little control sticks back and forth. The other members of the group had no idea what he was doing. Controlling these machines was like an artform. Graf knew a little about it, thinking that a leader ought to, but far from enough to be able to steer it himself.

“What does that mean?” Creg asked Nuro. A small light had just started to blink on the remote.

“Resyncing,” Nuro answered dryly.

Creg had been fascinated with walkers for as long as she could remember. It is why she wanted to join a caravan in the first place. Nuro, however, had little interest in teaching her about it. He wasn’t very talkative in general. The group knew it was a waste of time to start conversations with him. Creg was the only one who still held onto hope.

On the side of the path that had been created by the many people who walked between settlements, alongside the many white trees, laid the ruins of buildings, metal boxes that once housed machines but had since been cleared out by scavengers. Other people were a rare sight on these trails between towns. Once in a while they would find broken down walkers and the remains of their caravans, dried up in the heat, raided by the few clans that dared to live in the desert, unprotected by walls and disconnected from the settlements that were home to most.

The sun was setting. The light cycle neared its end and the caravan group stopped before the gate to enter Brigginda.

“Anyone there?” Graf shouted, waiting for a guard to answer him. No one did. They waited outside the walls, becoming more nervous as the dark enveloped the landscape around them. It would be hard to know if danger was approaching if they couldn’t see it. Many animals with a thirst for blood could see in the dark.

What was going on in there? Why were they left alone in the dark? Even Graf grew anxious now. Though he knew he could not show it, else it would put the rest of them even more on edge.

“Light’s down. You can take off your coats. Relax a little,” he said to the others, slightly turning his head in their direction while keeping his eyes on the gate. None of them undressed, including Graf.

“What’s going on here?” Creg asked nervously. No one responded. Faro, without saying a word, offered her a bite from his sandwich that he had unpacked again. He always ate when he was nervous. Nuro leaned against one of the walker’s legs and sighed.

It was pitch black around them. Only the small flashlight on the face of the walker illuminated the ground in front of it.

The gate creaked open.

Slowly the two halves slid apart, pushing the sand under it, and the caravan group could finally see two guards waiting behind wall. Nuro

stands up straight again and starts fiddling with the walker's controller, making the machine move forward again. Faro packed the rest of his food up again and followed the others through the entrance.

"What took so long?" Graf asked the guards, making sure to sound as annoyed as possible. They seemed confused. As if they hadn't known that the group was waiting outside.

"The system only just alerted us to your arrival," one of them said.

"The system?" Graf said.

"We have recently changed our security measures. I think your client will be able to tell you more about it."

"Right. Where is he?"

"I'm afraid," the other guard chimed in, "that Redding has already retreated. You'll have to meet him tomorrow."

Graf looked clearly disgruntled. Arguing with the guards was nothing new to him. He even considered that they may have left them waiting outside for so long out of spite. But if the client said he was no longer available until the light returned there was nothing he could do. Redding was a smart man, generous with his money, but he had a short fuse, and disturbing his peace was a sure way to light it.

"Fine," Graf said, his voice sounding more defeated now. "Let's find a place to rest ourselves," he said to the rest of his group.

The gate closed behind them as they moved further into the settlement. The paths had large cloths suspended above on spires on the sides, shading the people underneath from the light of the sun. By now most of the caravan members had taken off their coats and enjoyed the light breeze and cool air. Only Nuro kept his on. The walker had to be left near the entrance. Guards were active during the dark, so the group didn't have to fear someone stealing it.

The group moved along the paths until they ended up at an inn not too far into the town. Graf pushed the white wooden door open and was immediately greeted by two friendly faces.

"Their back!" Lora shouted when she saw the caravan come in.

"You're drunk," Graf said.

“No, we’re not,” Brud butted in. “And even if we were, you can’t blame us. What are we supposed to do when you guys leave us alone here for eight whole cycles.”

They were the newest members of the group. Usually, caravans only consisted of three or four members. Larger groups ran the risk of drawing more unwanted attention. Graf and Nuro were the only ones who never took breaks, only ever taking one or two of the others along, unless they had especially big cargo and traveled along known safe routes. Since they had something exceptional to transport, Graf liked to rely more on the experienced members instead of taking newer ones along.

“Go unload the walker. Everything except the special request will go to the market,” Graf said.

The two got up and grunted to show their displeasure. The others took their belongings into the rooms they had perpetually rented in the inn. While they were nomads in a way, Brigginda had become their home long ago. Most of them came from other settlements, but anyone who could afford life here didn’t say no.

Nuro immediately left the others so he could rest.

Faro and Creg went to the bar to pick up where Lora and Brud left off. Drinking there was a staple for them after every successful journey. They finally had time to talk and let lose a bit.

Graf also drank but preferred to sit by himself. An isolated table in the far corner of the room was the ideal spot for him. The inn was quiet. Most people went home before the dark falls to spend the time with their family. Others used it to work without having to worry about the light poking through the overhead cloths. Few people spent this time at a place like this.

Graf’s head was filled with thoughts about the upcoming meeting with Redding. The special delivery was still on the walker and would remain there until the sun rose again. It was a fairly heavy part, and they would have to transport it through half the settlement to meet with the client. He should relax.

“Careful!” Graf barked at the others while they carried their special cargo through the town. He walked backwards at the front while the others

grabbed onto the sides. They all grunted and breathed heavily. The paths were rather crowded since many other people were on their way to the market nearby. The town's center was always busy. The caravan group would have rather done this later, but their client was demanding and they could not deny him.

"There it is," Faro said, out of breath, as he saw a glimpse of one of the high gardens Brigginda was known for. Massive towers reaching above the clouds, made of gray stone pillars and metal. Remnants of the old world. The tops were overgrown by lush green foliage. These towers were the only places left where plants would grow, the taller the better. High gardens existed in other settlements too, but Brigginda had by far the most, and they had the best caretakers around who made sure that plants grew healthily and that their fruits and vegetables were harvested properly. Redding, the main caretaker and the group's special client, had been achieving miracles that many thought were impossible. He had brought back vegetation that had been deemed extinct, combined fruits and vegetables to create completely new ones, and, thanks to him, Brigginda's food was known to be healthier and of higher quality than any others.

"Calm down now," Graf said. He let go of the cargo, letting the others carry the weight. The door they stood in front of was almost as big as the gate to the settlement and had just as many guards around it. Graf walked up to it and knocked on the pale wood it was made of. Unlike the gate, it opened almost immediately. Two guards pulled it open from the inside revealing the blinking lights and people working on mechanism few could properly understand behind it. One man working on some kind of large machine in the center of the room turned around to face the caravan.

"Ah, my delivery," he said. The other workers turned to see what he was talking about.

"Redding," Graf said. "Hope this is what you were looking for."

The caravan entered the room. It was taller than any other in the settlement. The walls and pillars that held them up were lined with pipes and wires, some had paper labels on them describing what they did and connected. Most workers, about thirty in total, were gathered around the

big contraption in the center. It was hard to tell what it was. The large cloth draped over it obscured most of the mechanical monolith. Whatever it was, however, it was impressive. Almost as tall as the room itself and wider than anything the team here had ever worked at. This is what all the parts the caravan had been gathering for Redding were for.

“Broda, bring something to drink for our guests,” Redding said to another worker, “and what we owe them of, plus a little bonus.”

“That’s not necessary,” Graf said humbly. Of course, he and the others wanted that bonus.

“Now, show me what you brought,” Redding said as he approached the group. They set the heavy mechanical part down on the ground and especially the younger members sighed in relief. They looked clearly exhausted. Redding crouched down and observed the cargo closely. He was pleased, mumbled something to himself that no one else in the room could quite understand, and finally got back up again.

“Perfect,” he said. “You and your group have really earned that bonus this time Graf. And my continued patronage as well. If you would come with me for a moment, I’d like to already discuss another request I have for you.”

Graf nodded and the two walked into another room and closed the door behind them.

The other caravan members, except Nuro, sat down on the floor and looked at the workers getting back to their respective tasks. They reminded Faro of a hive of Strilla, working together as if they were operated by one mind.

“What do you think is under there?” Faro asked Creg.

“No clue,” she replied. “But whatever it is, Redding is willing to pay a lot to build it. How long have we been running errands for him now? Over a hundred cycles at the very least.”

“Must be important,” Faro said.

“Here’s what I need,” Redding said. He sat down on a cushioned chair behind a desk and pulled some sketches and a map out of a drawer.

“I have gotten word that this Piece has been found out in the desert. Some scrapers dug it up and brought it to a small settlement called Loiad.

Graf looked down at the drawing. It looked like another big machine part, similar to the others the caravan had transported for Redding. Also similar in that he had no clue what it was.

“Those scavengers then sold it off to a trader at the local market there,” Redding continued. “I need it. And you will get it for me. Of course, I’ll Pay you back however much it will cost to buy it from said trader. And you’ll get a handsome amount on top of that. More than usual, to compensate for the long journey I’m sending you on.”

“How long are we talking?” Graf asked.

Redding pulled out the map, showing the location of Brigginda and Loiad, as well as a few other settlements and landmarks in between.

“Thirty-six sectors,” he said.

“Thirty-six sectors?” Graf repeated. He took a step back and looked up at Redding. “I don’t think you know how much you’re asking for here.”

“Thirty-six for what should be the safest path. It leads through two other settlements, Bromir and Figora. If you were to take the most direct route it would be twenty-seven sectors, most of which are largely unexplored desert.”

“Still, even twenty-seven is too much. The cargo looks big, so I would need to take my whole group along. Managing such a big caravan for a journey as long as this is too much.”

Redding got up from his chair and put a hand on Graf’s shoulder.

“We both know you and your group could really use this payment. Never mind the reputation this would bring you. You’re helping the people who are creating a better world for all of us,” Redding said.

Graf could not deny it. They were already well known in Brigginda for doing these special deliveries. Free drinks, food, cheaper prices for their rooms at the inn. And they needed the money. With how big the payout on this job would be, they could finally afford that new walker, new equipment, anything they needed and more.

“This is the last task I have for you Graf,” Redding said. “Don’t let me down now.”

Nuro was walking back and forth in the main room while the others still sat and waited. He was nervous. What was taking so long?

“Everything alright?” Faro asked.

Nuro didn’t respond.

Finally, Graf came back out of the small side room. He looked defeated. Nuro immediately walked over to him to talk. The others stood up and followed behind.

“What happened?” Nuro asked.

Graf sighed, lifted his head up and looked at his group. “We have a new job.”

