

## Chapter 1 -- Gatekeeper Magic

The pebbled surface of the cylinder glittered as Aaron turned it over in his hands. It was perfectly symmetrical, and seemed too lightweight for its strength and hardness. Like some sort of steel, but light as the air. It was cool to the touch, and remained so even under the glaring sun. The boy glanced down at the half-moon shaped dent in the sand that had cradled the cylinder until just a moment ago. But there was nothing unusual - just normal roadside sand with sharp blades of yellow Spidergrass poking through at odd intervals. Nearby, a half-flattened waterkeg stuck out of the sand at an angle. Tiny scraps of paper. A bottle top was being dragged away by a Sandurchin, which had hooked his front legs around the lid, and was wresting it in stages back toward a thumb-wide dark hole.

The white tarmac of the bikelane rambled off into the sand and scrub, revealing nothing. The boy looked up and down the long highway stretching off into forever. Perhaps the cylinder was some part of a long range freighter, broken off due to fatigue.

Aaron flicked his eyes up, squinting into the sun. If the cylinder had fallen out of the sky, it would have made a bigger mark when it landed, and probably look burnt up and damaged, like a meteorite. He looked back down, turning the object in his hands first this way, then that. Barrel-shaped, with a neck near one end, it looked like it had just been made. No scratches or dents of any kind, the surface was unmarred. In addition, there were no obvious seams or connection points. Aaron wondered what it could possibly plug into, and how.

The boy looked back down at the dent in the sand he had picked the cylinder from just moments before. A small but steady breeze was already filling it with sand. Soon, even that minimal clue to the object's origins would be erased.

"What you got?" Ham skipped up, looking at Aaron's hands. "Woh! What is that thing? Let me look..."

Aaron turned his shoulders to avoid Ham's sudden reach. "Dunno, but it's mine. I found it first."

A well-rounded nine year-old boy, Ham accepted his brother's pronouncement as incontrovertible; as binding as the sternest tenet ever carved into stone. He jammed his hands into his pockets, resigned to merely looking at the mysterious object. "What's it do?"

Aaron turned it on its long axis, watching it in the bright sun. Ham was fascinated, "It's green, but kinda gold, too, when you turn it," he observed. Aaron had noticed that, too. He assumed that the cylinder's head, above the tapered neck, was the top of it. Holding it top-up, when he turned the cylinder clockwise, the pebbled green turned very golden. When he turned it counter-clockwise, it turned immediately silver. He had been experimenting turning the object one way and then the other, at various speeds. The faster he turned it, the more pronounced the color change. The boys studied it for several minutes, seeing how the speed of the rotation affected how gold or silver it would get. Aaron found that rolling it quickly back and forth between his palms as fast as he could, he could make it flash gold-silver-gold-silver in a very satisfying way. But after a few minutes, the boys were bored with this, and eager to find some new property of the strange cylinder.

"Try it end over end. Flip it, like," Ham offered, nearly dying to try it himself, and exercising every ounce of self-control within his young body not to reach out and snatch it himself. But he knew he wouldn't get away with it for long - his older brother would easily reclaim the mysterious cylinder, and he would only earn a bruise or two in the transaction.

Aaron tried spinning it end over end, but it was hard to do, and nothing seemed to happen anyway. The boys were temporarily defeated, deprived of any new discoveries. Aaron thought for a minute, then strode purposefully over to his bike. He pulled his waterkeg off the frame, then released the smartclip from the side. He snapped it outward. Feeling his touch, the smartclip chirped once then complied, unfolding back to its default shape. The smartclip was intended to adapt to any two objects, and hold them together until released by touch. They were indispensable, and everyone owned a dozen of them or more.

Aaron pushed one end of the smartclip against the bottom the cylinder. After an instant, fingers sprang forth and grabbed the cylinder base, holding it. Aaron tested the grip by waving the whole thing from the other end of the cylinder. It held fast.

"What now?" Ham wondered what his brother was up to. Wordlessly, Aaron knelt by the rear of his bike and pressed the other end of the smartclip to the center of the wheel. Fingers sprang out and grabbed it dead center, quickly establishing some kind of molecular bond that was nearly impossible to shake loose. Aaron let go tentatively, glancing at Ham to make sure that his younger brother wasn't planning on snatching the mysterious cylinder for his own examination. Aaron pressed down on the other end of his treasure, making sure that it held. The bond was perfect. Satisfied, he stood up and held the steering bar, motioning for Ham to mount up. "You ride."

"Me?" Ham was amazed and pleased. "You want me to ride your bike, with that thing on it?"

Aaron was already moving toward Ham's smaller bike. "I'm going to ride behind you on this side and watch what happens. I'll tell you how fast to go."

Now Ham understood. Riding the bike, he would not be able to see the cylinder spinning. Aaron wanted a good view, which he could only get by riding behind. Happy nonetheless with his important role in the investigation, and the chance to ride his brother's newer bike, Ham jumped on and thumbed the collective, rolling deftly onto the bikelane. Aaron pulled out behind him, quickly adjusting the seat a few centimeters up to account for his height. He was more than four years older than Ham, but not especially taller. Mom said it was something to do with nutrition back in the early days, when he was little. He would probably always be small for his age.

Ham rolled faster, trying to stay to the right within the bikelane so that Aaron could ride up just behind him and to his left, where he could get a clear view of the cylinder. He stole a glance himself at it, but the noonday sun was making him squint already, and the glare coming from the bright white tarmac was making seeing any color change next to impossible. From what he could see, it was just a golden blur.

"Anything yet?" he shouted back over his shoulder at Aaron.

"It's just gold. No more changes. Yet," came the answer after a moment. And then, "Go faster!"

Ham obliged, pushing the collective lever up a full notch. He enjoyed the feel of this larger bike. The press of the increased speed was gratifying, and the breeze cooled him off. It was torrid today, hot enough to bake a rockflit, his dad would always say

"Hey, it's..." Aaron started, then trailed off, looking for the right words. He was usually stymied by language, never able to put the words together the way he felt them. Ham had always been much better at that.

"What?" Ham shouted over the rushing wind. He tried to steal a look back at the cylinder, but he couldn't do it without riding off the path. He pulled the bike back from a sandy patch, almost side-swiping Aaron in the process.

"Ride straight!" Aaron protested, swerving back into position. And then, "Can you hear it? It's singing or something!"

Ham strained his ears but could hear nothing over the wind. Behind him, Aaron cocked his head toward the bike in front of him, trying to make sense of the sound. It was like voices. Many voices, rising and falling in pitch. Voices tumbling and rolling over each other in rich, sonorous waves. Aaron marveled at the complex sound. This was no simple whine or whistle made by the air.

"One more notch!" he shouted, and Ham quickly complied, thumbing the collective up to the next speed setting. He looked up as the first spire from Paradise wavered into view. They were heading back toward home, and at this speed it would not be long before they rolled up to the Gate. The slender towers at the center of town grew inexorably taller, swimming up through the heat coming off the white road. Now Ham could hear the cylinder, too. It was truly odd; something between a blur of radio transmissions and music. There were voices too, but they were indistinct. Some male, some female. Maybe

some children mixed in. But so many of them it was impossible to pick out a single thread, or to know even what language was being spoken. Perhaps it was many languages, he couldn't tell.

"Faster?" he shouted back toward Aaron. At this speed, the sandy edge of the bikelane was dangerous scabble, and he was afraid to divert his eyes from dead ahead. Another veer and they would both fly off into the swale, breaking something for sure. It was still a long walk back home with a broken limb. Time ticked by. Ham suddenly developed the disturbing thought that maybe his brother had pitched off his bike, and was lying on the lane, bleeding. Or perhaps he had stopped, and was standing back on the high crown, laughing at him. Scared, Ham tried to look around but the heavy bike pulled immediately toward the edge. He wrestled it with some difficulty back onto the lane, and kept his eyes forward.

"Aaron! I'm gonna stop now!" the younger boy was getting desperate. He didn't want to stop for fear of ruining the experiment and bringing on the wrath of his moody brother, if he was still there. More seconds went by. It would be just like Aaron not to answer him, to let him be scared for this long. To make matters worse, the singing from the cylinder had changed. It was denser sounding; more chaotic. It wasn't soothing any more. Or was fear coloring his perceptions? Ham knew that he should stop. The wind was giving him an ear ache. His older brother's bike was heavier than he was used to, and his arms were tiring. He shouted twice more, but heard nothing back. "I gotta stop, Aaron!" he cried out finally, giving his brother one last chance to respond. "I mean it! I'm gonna!"

Nothing. His eyes welling, Ham thumbed the bike back into neutral, and it dropped back to an unpowered coast. The cylinder song abruptly stopped as the speed fell away. Ham could hear the crunching of sand against the wide tire again, and he put out one leg to steady the bike as it rolled to a stop. His hands were shaking, and his trembling voice betrayed his panic. He didn't care. His brother had really scared him this time.

"You jerk, Aaron! You weren't supposed to –" Ham stopped mid-sentence, looking around. He was completely alone. His older brother was nowhere in sight. Ham squinted up and down the long desert roadway. Carved as straight as an arrow for hundreds of kilometers, and as flat as the world would allow. Not even a glint from the other bike in the distance. Now Ham was truly frightened. He wrestled the heavy bike around and shot back away from town, the way they had come, to find his brother. He thumbed the collective up to four, the highest setting, and the big bike shot forward. His tears dried quickly against his face in the wind, and he barely heard the cylinder song this time. Aaron must have fallen off into the weeds, he insisted to himself, wishing that they had comms like some families. Then he could just think of talking to his brother, and the system would find him anywhere, establish a link, and let them have a conversation as easily as if they were in the same room.

He saw the bike then, far off the lane, half dug into the sand. The tire was still spinning; the collective still stuck in the second notch. Ham bumped Aaron's bike over the curb and shot across the sand, clumps of spidergrass and pointy plants noisily slapping his sandals and the bike frame as he rattled across the scabble. Reaching the wreck, he stopped and jumped off, looking around frantically.

"AARONNN!" he yelled across the desert. Then turning to the east, yelling again. And again south, then west. There was no vegetation to hide behind. No rocks big enough to shield even a landcat from his eyes. The fine sand was impossible to dig through without special equipment. Aaron had to be here, and yet he was not here. No freighters had passed them the other way, or had overtaken them from behind as they rode. Why had Aaron ridden off the road, and where had he gone? It was impossible.

Tears poured from Ham's eyes as he reached down and notched down his own crashed bike. "Where is he?" Ham half cried. The big wheel rattled a small protest and stopped. Ham wrestled the frame out of the sand and righted it, rolling it back toward the bikelane. He was going to race back to Paradise, and he didn't even want to look at Aaron's bike with the strange cylinder still sticking from it like a rude joke. No, he was taking his own bike. Ham trotted, jumped onto the saddle and thumbed the collective as high as he dared.

The trip back to the Gate seemed to take forever, and he had composed himself by the time the Arch rose out of the desert. As he neared, tall windows swam out of the walls, and Gatekeepers most certainly watched him from behind the black glass, binoculars and imagers pressed against their gaunt faces. Proximity buzzers would have already told them that he was coming, and they had no doubt zoomed him. They would know exactly who he was already, and how long he had been gone. They would also know that something was wrong when he came back alone.

The Highwall ran completely around Paradise. There was only one road in and out of town, and only one way through the Highwall - the Arch by the Gatehouse. The job of Gatekeeper was passed down within families, who kept strictly to themselves. It was the way of things, everyone knew - *Gatekeepers stay apart from the rest*. Within fifty meters of the road on both sides, buttresses from the Gatehouse jumped straight up, forming an Arch over the Gate. The Arch was tall enough to let any vehicle come in or out, although no one had ever seen anything high enough to reach more than halfway up. Even the biggest farming equipment slid below the Arch with many meters to spare.

Of course, for anything to pass, the Gatekeepers had to let down the Gate. There was no traffic in or out after dark, except for a dire emergency. The Gatekeepers made the rules, and they had been this way as long as anyone remembered.

No one in Paradise could imagine how anyone could break through the Highwall. It was simply indestructible, as far as anyone could tell. The residents of Paradise felt good about this. Their city was safe.

Details popped from the walls of the Gatehouse as Ham rode closer. He was suddenly afraid again, as he imagined what he would tell the Gatekeepers. But they would know what to do. They always did. They would know how to find Aaron, he assured himself. They would know how to call his dad. The sun was really hot now, and Aaron needed help. The entire city would mobilize if necessary to find his brother. No one spent the night in the desert. It was just too dangerous.

Before long he rolled into the black shadow of the Arch. It was cool in the shade, and his pupils widened. Ham dropped the bike and ran over to the low window on the right side.

"Hammond Fielder..." cracked a speaker far over his head, and the sound reflected within the Arch. It was an automatic voice that identified everyone who passed through the Gate. Ham ignored it, running to the low window, waving frantically. The window sparkled and suddenly melted. Ham barely noticed the dark room inside, filled with glowing monitors and subdued, blinking controls. A blast of impossibly cool air washed over him as he stepped forward. A thin, pale man filled the window, looking down curiously at the boy.

"Hammond Fielder, where is..." the Gatekeeper barely glanced down at his monitor, "...Aaron Fielder?" he asked impassively.

"Lost! Gone!" We were just riding and he - I mean, we found a thing in the desert --"

"Lost? What did you find? Where is Aaron Fielder?" and in a blink there were two more Gatekeepers standing beside the first one, these just as thin and pale. Ham noticed the shock of bright red hair on each of their heads. Among all people of the world, red hair was a characteristic unique to Gatekeepers.

"A strange tube, or a can...like a rolling pin maybe...' the boy stammered. "We found it. Aaron, I mean, and it changed colors when we turned it around..."

Ham stopped as the glass abruptly reappeared, and he was alone again, staring at a black window. He was afraid for an instant that they did not believe him, that they were going to just leave him out here, when a razor of blue light screwed a circle into the wall before him, and a rounded doorway pushed out. The walls were at least half a meter thick, the outer sun-dried salmon skin of the Gatehouse blending easily into a shiny steel within.

"Hammond Fielder, Admitted," came the automatic voice again, indicating the door into the Gatehouse itself. Ham approached the door tentatively. He had never known anyone who had actually been inside the Gatehouse. Not even his dad. He lifted a foot and stepped up onto the circle. The air inside was deliciously cool and dry. Thinking of his brother out there somewhere in the desert, he summoned all the courage of his nine years and stepped across the threshold, blinking to adjust his eyes to the subdued lighting within.

He heard the short scuffling sound of the round door sliding back into the wall and screwing to a stop. He turned to look just as the seams disappeared completely. You would never know that there was a doorway there, no matter how hard you looked. *Gatekeeper Magic*, his Mom would say. Ham shuddered involuntarily as the cold air ran up his spine and cooled the sweat on his skin. Turning back toward the room, he saw that somehow his Gatekeeper had appeared in front of him, and nearly jumped.

"Hammond Fielder, come with me," the man said simply, and headed off down a dark hallway. Ham ran a few steps to catch up with the lanky figure, noticing his red hair illuminated by each passing wall sconce. Should he walk behind him, or move along side? There was no time to wonder as his guide abruptly stopped and entered the wall to his right. As he stepped forward, a doorway became apparent, but Ham could have sworn

that it was not there before. He nearly leapt through, afraid that the entry might close with him halfway through it.

Two more turns and they entered a large white room with four chairs in the center, but no other furniture. The room was brightly lit in the center where the chairs were, but fell off abruptly into shadows around the edges, casting the walls and doors in dark shadows. The source of the light was indeterminate - the room just seemed to be lit from within somehow. One chair faced the other three. Two Gatekeepers were already there, sitting on two of the three chairs. His guide glided to the center of the three and sat noiselessly, motioning Ham to the seat facing them. Ham slid up onto the smooth seat, his legs dangling off the ground in front of him. He cleared his throat nervously, unsure of what to do or say.

The Gatekeepers had, unconsciously or not, arranged themselves by height. The one to Ham's right was the tallest. The one who had guided him into the room was in the center, and a noticeably shorter Gatekeeper sat to Ham's left. The tallest of the three stood and spoke first.

"Aaron Fielder did not return. Was he the one who found the...object?" he asked in a voice like dry spidergrass. He looked right through Ham as he spoke, without a trace of emotion. Ham sniffed and nodded twice. He screwed up his courage to speak, "Can you find him? He's my brother and I..."

The tallest Gatekeeper did not seem to hear him, and interrupted immediately, "Where is the object now?"

Ham was brought up short. He was getting the idea that this tall Gatekeeper cared a lot more about the cylinder than about finding Aaron. "It's still on Aaron's bike. On the wheel..."

"How did it get on the wheel?" demanded the tall one, his eyes boring into the boy.

"Aaron stuck it there. With a smartclip. He, I mean - we wanted to see what it would do..." He glanced around at the three Gatekeepers as he spoke, instinctively looking for an ally. Had they done something wrong? Was there some rule about playing with scrabble trash?

The tall one looked dumbly at Ham and then returned to his straight-back chair, shifting his eyes from Ham to his partner in the center seat. Apparently he was turning control of the interview to the next Gatekeeper. Ham's guide reflected for a moment then stood, clearing his throat.

"Hammond Fielder. Tell me about the object. What did it do when Aaron Fielder rode the bike? Details, please," he requested firmly, "as many as you can recall."

"He didn't ride it, I did - but look, what about my brother? Who cares about some dumb old piece of junk anyway? Aaron is still out there," Ham's voice cracked again. Remembering about the smartclip brought back another memory: Aaron had removed it from his waterkeg, leaving the vessel in the sand. So he was without water, too. Ham

looked at the three strange men, pleading with his eyes. Suddenly he had enough of this. "I'm going to get my dad! We gotta take the City truck and go out there and..."

The boy jumped from his seat and bolted for the door. But it was no longer visible. Ham reeled around, "And what's wrong with this place? How can you find anything in here!" Ham kicked his chair in frustration. Suddenly he was overcome, and sank to his knees, sobbing against the chair.

The middle Gatekeeper sat back down. The shortest Gatekeeper slowly rose and approached Ham, then touched his shoulder gently.

"Your brother is gone, but I believe that he is safe. We will get him back, but we need to know everything that happened with the object," unlike the other Gatekeepers, his tone soft and reassuring. Ham looked up, blinking through the tears. This Gatekeeper was different from the other two. Why, he was almost smiling at Ham. Ham got himself under control. "Can you - get my dad at least?"

The shortest Gatekeeper motioned over his shoulder, and the tall one immediately stood and moved silently out of the room in another direction. Ham couldn't imagine where the door was now - maybe there were several unseen doors. Maybe Gatekeepers could summon doors from the walls at will. It was creepy, this place.

"We will bring Sampson Fielder to the Gatehouse. This will take some minutes."

Ham's dad worked all over the City supervising construction and maintenance jobs, and finding him could be next to impossible on the average day. When an emergency happened, like when Aaron broke his arm two years ago, Ham's mom Amelia just took care of the problem and waited for Sampson to come home.

The shortest Gatekeeper continued, "In the meantime, you can help Aaron Fielder, your brother," he emphasized, flicking his eyes to the middle Gatekeeper, "you can help him best by telling us everything that you saw...and heard."

He nodded and climbed back onto the chair. Aaron's disappearance had to be connected to the cylinder somehow. These Gatekeepers were clearly aware of the odd device, and must be working on a way to protect them from it. To protect their City and everyone in it. This was their job and they took it very seriously. Everyone knew that.

Ham started talking. They stopped him often enough to clarify something which seemed important to them, but mostly they just listened. Ham had a good memory and a gift for expression. He kept to the facts, but used his vocabulary to paint as clear a picture as possible for these strange men. The Gatekeepers took no notes, and yet they forgot nothing, stopping him once near the end of the story when he made the smallest mistake contradicting some nearly inconsequential detail that he had mentioned twenty minutes before.

Ham was nearly done when the tall one, having been gone for the entire story, reappeared again from yet another direction. He tilted his head toward the short one, including Ham with his eyes, and spoke impassively, "Sampson Fielder is at the Gatehouse. He would like to speak with Hammond Fielder." He announced easily, as if

finding Ham's elusive dad and transporting him nearly 100 kilometers in less than a half an hour was something that these Gatekeepers did every day.

"Gatekeeper magic," breathed Ham, not realizing that he was speaking out loud. All three red heads turned to regard at him curiously.

Gatekeeper Magic, indeed.

## Chapter 2 -- Flatbed Joins the Team

Ham knew that he would never forget seeing his father that day in the Gatehouse. Sampson Fielder was a large man who immediately filled any room that he entered. And he was loud, with jokes and slaps on the backs for friends and family. But Ham had also seen his dad at work a few times, and remembered how serious he could be there. Shouting orders to other men, arguing over large plans spread out on drafting tables, thumbing the comm and barking at whoever was on the other end, then disconnecting before they could reply. He was always in charge, always in control, always larger than life. Other men instinctively respected him. They also truly liked him because he treated them fairly, and really cared about them. The family would never let him forget that he had nearly missed Aaron's tenth birthday celebration because he was driving one of his workers to the Clinic one afternoon because the man's wife was having a baby, and he stayed there with him until the child was born. He really did like everyone, and they liked him. Even after he reprimanded a worker for being late or making a big mistake, they always seemed grateful to his dad for talking to them, for reducing their pay for a day, or giving them every clean-up job for five or six shifts. They accepted their punishment and tried even harder not to let the big man down.

Sampson would come home at night and talk endlessly to his wife about his day, the projects that he was working on, about the men and women that worked for him, and about the City Planners that he reported to. Amelia Fielder was very knowledgeable about her husband's work, because she worked in the City Planner office herself, and was involved with the projects even before Sampson got the order to start building them. Despite the fact that they both worked all day on the City, they never seemed to tire of talking about it at night, much to the chagrin of their sons, who were generally bored with the subject of buildings and renovation. The boys would typically half-listen at the dinner table, just picking out tidbits of information that were interesting to them - about new schools, museums, or parks that were going up, or what was going to be torn down and replaced.

Ham had seen his father under so many circumstances in nine years that he was sure he had seen them all. The time when Aaron broke his arm was especially fresh in his memory. Sampson had come home from work to find an house empty and a hastily written note in the kitchen, telling him to meet the family at the clinic.

His mom and Ham were in the waitroom when Sampson strode in ten minutes later, serious and worried, but already in charge. Like nearly every building less than ten years old in City, he had supervised the construction of the clinic, and he knew most of the staff. Normally the medics ran the place, but when Sampson moved through the halls, all attention was immediately focused upon him. It seemed to Ham that the medics must also work for his dad somehow, because they appeared from every room on cue, each reporting some element of Aaron's status to him without being asked. Even here, this large, loud man with little knowledge of medicine, was quickly escorted to the center seat. Effortlessly, easily. A natural leader of others, because others instinctively yielded to him that position. Ham envied that about his father, and wondered if he would develop this quality too, or if it was a special talent reserved for the few. A recessive gene that popped up every few generations, like all nines in a game of setbones - the odds against it happening were nearly impossible.

But this was different. The Gatehouse was unfamiliar territory for Ham's father. He was clearly awed by his surroundings, and he seemed smaller in here. It was just one more odd sensation for Ham, after a day that had already been rife with them.

Ham's eyes met his father's, and he ran to him, hugging around one of his muscular legs. Sampson dropped one hand onto Ham's hair and tousled it. He knelt in front of the boy and smiled at him. "We'll find him, Hammy. Don't you worry. We will."

He winked then, but Ham saw real worry around his dad's eyes. Again, he could not shake the odd feeling that he had upon first seeing him. Surely, Sampson was much taller and broader than any of the pencil thin, anemic Gatekeepers. His skin was blackened from long hours in the hot sun, and his short, dark hair had a zigzag of gray around the edges, fairly shouting his authority. But in this place, this strange lair of the Gatekeepers, Sampson Fielder was just an ordinary Citizen. Here, among these unlikely looking, pale, red-haired Gatekeepers, he was just a man. Without any special power or status. Only the Gatekeepers understood the odd magic of this place. Only they walked through walls, influenced solid geometry with a look, or appeared from blackness without a sound.

For the first time, Ham realized that his dad was really just a man, not a giant. He would eventually get sick and die, or simply wear out from age, like all other men. He would be very tired one day, smile and squeeze his wife's hand, then slip away from them forever. Ham hated that this revelation occurred to him on this of all days. Why did these thoughts come into his head right in the middle of a real emergency? His only brother was missing, evaporated right off the seat of his bike in the desert, and Ham could have killed himself for distracting himself with other ideas. Time enough for all that later.

Ham forced his musings from his mind and looked at his dad again, seeing him clearly this time. Dad was still strong as a bull ox, still young enough and full of fire. He would work with the Gatekeepers and find Aaron. Ham's brother would be rescued. Dad would see to that, or the Gatekeepers would find no rest from him, that much was certain. Gatekeeper Magic or not, Ham's father would bust in here and demand action. Even Gatekeeper walls could not deny him.

"They won't let your mom come in, Ham, but she's right outside," Sampson was still squatting in front of Ham, but he leaned closer to give him his information. He did not

want the Gatekeepers to overhear. Ham glanced around and saw that two of them were on the other side of the room, operating some sort of control panel. Unless their ears were like antennas, they wouldn't hear them from over there.

"She's mad about it, too. But mostly it's the worry knotting around inside her, tearing her up. When they wouldn't let her come in here, I thought she was going to make a new hole in the Highwall all by herself," Sampson squeezed one eye half closed, scrunching his face into broad wrinkles, trying to cheer Ham up. Ham smiled a little, but he still felt like crying or screaming. Maybe both. When would the Gatekeepers start looking for Aaron? Or had they already done so? He knew better than to start asking his father the crazy questions that were bouncing around inside his head.

"Dad, I'm –" Ham choked, unable to speak. His dad gripped his shoulders, glancing once quickly over at the Gatekeepers. But it was just emotion, and Ham waved at him that he was alright. He got back control, "- sorry that it happened. I never should have –"

His father cut him off, "Hammy! Look at me," he insisted, peering intently at the boy, "You found something interesting in the roadwash. And like any two boys in the world, you were just playing with it."

So, the Gatekeepers had already told dad his story. That was good - Ham didn't think he could bear to go through the whole thing again, and start crying for what must be the one millionth time already today.

"You did nothing wrong. And don't worry, we'll find your brother. He just got a little turned around out there is all," Sampson patted his arm. Ham bit his lip to stop it from trembling, and nodded. His dad straightened back up, "Why don't you go out there and tell mom everything you know so far. Tell her about this place, tell her that they'll look for him, that they'll- that *we'll* find him."

Ham nodded again, and turned to leave. But which way? His guide turned from the control panel and motioned for him to follow, then started walking for a door that Ham hadn't noticed before. Ham ran a few steps so he wouldn't lose sight of him.

"Ham," his father called after him. Ham stopped and turned, hoping that the guide would wait for him. His father had a new look on his face, one that Ham had never seen before. It was part fear and part determination, but Ham had no doubt which would win. "Tell your mom that I'll be home...when I have Aaron back. Now, go on," he commanded gently. Ham waved at him and turned, following his guide, who had indeed waited in the corridor for him. He turned wordlessly and led Ham back outside to the Arch.

Less than an hour had passed, but the sun was already kinder, having passed from directly overhead since Ham had entered the Gatehouse. The air was noticeably cooler, and the great arcing shadow of the Arch had grown softer around the edges. Sweet, dry smells from the deepsand filled Ham's lungs, and he felt better again somehow.

Amelia came around from the front where she had been waiting, saw him and ran over, folding him into her skirts with a long hug. Finally she leaned back to look at him, taking his face into her hands. Ham could feel his one-million-and-first cry of the day welling up in the front of his throat, but he fought hard against it. He needed to be strong,

to help find Aaron, to make his mom feel better. If she was still mad about not being let into the Gatehouse, she was hiding it well. He told her what dad had told him, and they starting walking to the tram.

"Wait, my bike! - " Ham turned around. His small bike had been moved, probably to make way for a freighter bringing commerce into the city. It was leaning now against the backside of the Highwall, just inside the Gate. His mom squeezed his arm and turned him back around.

"They'll bring it tonight. And Aaron's, too," she corrected herself. "Right now we need to get home. Your father is going out with a dozen men. There's nowhere for us to wait out here."

She was right. Other than the Gatehouse and the tiny tram station, there was no shelter this far out of the city. The idea of going back in there himself was not appealing to Ham one bit. If he never entered the odd building again it would be soon enough.

A single tramline reached out like a slender finger from the city to the Gate, bringing in hikers who had bartered for riding space on a freighter from one city to the next, and were left off at the Gate. You could also walk to Citycenter, but it took several hours, and the tram ran the high scramble in less than ten minutes. All tram transportation was free for Citizens, and inexpensive for traders and other outsiders. Ham and his mom would ride to Citycenter and then change trams for the shorter ride to their plat. From there it was just up the escalator and a short walk to their house on the corner. They could be home in thirty minutes. Then the terrible, quiet waiting would begin. They both knew it, and they didn't want to talk about it yet.

But they met the search team at the tram station. In fact, not twelve, but well over thirty men had come along. They clinked along bearing water kegs, ropes, digging tools, and light sticks. They were still wearing their hardhats. Amelia was touched that virtually everyone who had worked in the hot sun all day with her husband had come straight here from the work site, to help find their boy.

"Mook is bringing the flatbed. He'll be just behind us," Frank reported to Ham's mom, seriously, squinting one eye at her and tilting his head toward the dusty road leading to Citycenter. His other eye had been covered over by a black bandage for as long as Ham could remember. Still, his dad had often said that Frank was one of the best Riggers that he had. Riggers were the men who hoisted the steel joists onto the rough skeletons of new buildings. They had little fear of heights, walking across a beam only as wide as their own shoe, hundreds of meters above the sand, moving heavy crossbeams into place, and welding them with their hardhat-mounted lasers. Everyone knew that you needed two eyes to be able to judge distances accurately. So how Frank managed to not slip and die, much less aim the laser, was the subject of much wonder and debate among the other workers. Some joked that the fierce laser energies running through his hardhat had made Frank crazy enough that he didn't fear falling anymore, and therefore he didn't. But Frank seemed sane enough to Ham and Aaron. When they saw him at City events or over at their house, he usually managed to pull a pair of identical candy treasures deep from one of his many pockets, dusted them off, and presented them to the boys with an air of delicious conspiracy. The boys loved him for that.

Frank was still talking to Ham's mom, "Mook's got more equipment on the truck, too. Everything we need." Frank didn't seem to know what to say next, and a thick moment followed. Amelia broke it by hugging him and stepping back to let them go through. The rough men passed them silently, then, each nodding their heads respectfully at Amelia, some removing their hardhats. Some looked at Ham and made a confident face. These were strong, simple men, unburdened by overly complex ideas about their purpose on the world. Each of them knew that, without any doubt, if one of their sons was missing in the desert with darkfall mere hours away, Sampson Fielder would be at the head of line, organizing the search and rescue, barking out orders and drawing on maps, and not sleeping a single minute until the boy was found...dead or alive. If some difficult digging or hauling had to happen, regardless of how grisly the discovery might be, Sampson would be at the end of the rope being held from above by ten men, shouting for them to lower him farther and farther, until their arms were on fire and their heels were dragged to the precipice. They knew all that as they marched two abreast toward the Gatehouse.

The flatbed rattled past the tram, a funnel of blonde dust spiraling behind it. Mook was known to be the fastest driver among the workers, and he had made it to the Gate in record time, despite having to make stops to take on equipment and fuel.

In his mirror, Mook saw the tram unhook and shoot off toward Citycenter, shrinking rapidly down the long, straight track running alongside the road. He thought that he had seen Amelia and the other boy, his name was Hammond he thought, waving at him from the second car. Nice boy. Nice family.

Whistling absently, Mook spun the wheel and wrestled the long truck into the near channel. There were two channels per side leading through Citygate, each separated by a waist-high barrier. The 'keepers within could control each of them separately. This prevented jam-ups when they had to check a freighter or clear up some paperwork regarding commerce or inspections. This way, one problem didn't hold up everyone else – the others just moved to the other channel and proceeded through while the trouble with the one freighter was being settled.

The search team was already on the outside of the Gate, Mook saw, when the thick barrier sparkled and then disappeared, seeming to melt right into the fine sand. He lifted his hands from the wheel as the machines inside the Gatehouse took control for the passage. They nudged the long flatbed through the biohazard transom, an invisible filter that killed any organisms unique to the City. The Gate outside every City did this in both directions, ensuring that commerce between them did not result in germs and bugs native to one area getting passed to another. In the distant past, whole growing seasons had been ruined by this kind of contamination. After a moment the truck was through, and Mook took the wheel again, parking under the Arch and killing the turbine.

"Got here as fast as I could, Frank. Where's the boss?" Mook leaned out the window, pulling his red and black kerchief from his lower face. He liked to drive fast with the windows open, and without a kerchief, the fine sand and dust blowing in would choke you. Frank permitted a small smile and put a foot up on the flatbed's dusty running board. "Nobody drives that thing faster 'an you, Frank. You done just fine." Frank spat into the sand, looking off down the endless white road. A few of the men chuckled dryly

regarding Mook's well-deserved reputation for speed, but a child lost in the desert was very serious business. It happened maybe every two or three years. These men, ranging in age from twenty-five to sixty-five years, had been through their share of children and adults lost overnight outside Highwall. No one could ever remember a happy ending to any of them. The lost soul was either never found, or turned up dead. Frank spit again, an unfortunate habit. "Boss'll be out presently. Best we take stock." He flexed his legs and leaped straight up onto the flatbed, and clapped his hands loudly once over his head.

"Listen up!" his voice reverberated within the Arch. "Every man, go to Tom and give him your name. Tom, write down every man's name on a piece of paper and leave it in the truck. Make sure that me, Mook, and Sampson are on there, too. We need that list and a head-count before this truck'll move one meter, and we will count off from that list before we head back in. Likely it will be dark, and we'll be real tired. It'll be easy enough to leave a man out there by mistake, then we'll have to come back here again tomorrow morning and do it all over again! Understood?"

Everyone shouted yes, and Tom rang out that he was getting a piece of paper and a scribe already. Some of the men started moving away, but Frank wasn't done yet.

"Hang on! Next, I see that we got digging tools. Mook here has brought us a Router and a Footer," Frank pointed to the two large lumps on the back of the flatbed, covered with thick tarpaulins and lashed firmly to the decking. The Router could dig a two meter diameter hole through just about anything, and the Footer was a self-propelled round skirt that jammed itself down around the hole that the Router made. Its entire purpose was to keep the fine silt and sand from filling the hole back up as fast as it was dug. Without a Footer, a Router - no matter how powerful or fast - was completely useless in the sand.

"And let's make sure that we have at least one full waterkeg for each man. Put your kegs up here on the truck and I will count them. Tom, you tell me how many men we got, and I will give you the waterkeg count. If we need more, I'm sure the Gatekeepers can help us with that. After I count them, you men can take them back. Each man carries his own. Questions?" The men were already moving up to the truck and placing their kegs on the rear flap as Frank spoke. It looked to be a healthy supply. There were no questions.

"We all got our hats and lightsticks, 'cause we just came from the site. But did anyone think about a full medic kit? Who knows if the boy fell into a ditch, or got bit, or what-all-may-come?" Frank looked across their faces, making no effort to hide his amazement at their lack of sense. The men murmured among themselves, each asking the other if they had brought the medic kit, but no one had thought that far ahead. A few of them put good-hearted elbows into Jersey, who was actually a certified medic, and performed all the first aid on the job site. Of all people, he would have been the one to get a full kit from stores and bring it. But they had all come straight from the work site, grabbing their own tools and anything else they could think of as fast as they could.

After a long silence, Frank smiled and withdrew a full kit from behind his back, still sealed with biowrap, and held it over his head. The men clapped for Frank, alternatively extolling him and calling him some colorful names for teasing them like that. Jersey got a few more playful elbows in the bargain. Frank chuckled too, and knelt to start counting the water kegs. The rest of the search team gathered around Tom near the front of the

truck, making sure their names were on his search team list. He had already scribbled his own name plus put Sampson, Frank, and Mook at the top of the paper, since they were busy. Mook was on his back beneath the left rear wheels, jacking up the decking a little to give them extra clearance over rocks and berms in the desert.

"Thirty-seven kegs, Tom!" Frank called out loudly and jumped down from the flatbed. Tom sang back, "Thirty-seven kegs to thirty-four men, Frank. That gives us two extras ... plus one for the boy!" Some quiet "here, here's" and "he'll drink from mine," rose up at the idea that they would be finding the boy and watching him guzzle water from one of their kegs before long.

Frank turned and was suddenly face to face with Sampson, who had come out of the Gatehouse unnoticed. He had watched his men get organized without any direction from him, and was proud of that. He surely gave them orders all day, but primarily he encouraged them to be thinkers; to find their own solutions to tricky problems, and not be afraid to take command of a situation. They were already working together on this crisis, just as if it were a routine challenge at work. They had identified and catalogued their resources, and were taking steps to ensure that the job was done safely and correctly.

"We're ready for you, boss. Ready to go as soon as you are," Frank reported, then looked around, "Oh, Mook's got another side to lift, I'll go help him finish up --" and started back toward the flatbed. Sampson placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, stopping him. Frank studied him for a moment, then nodded, stepping back. Sampson dropped beneath the flatbed himself and hoisted the starboard carriage with one hand, ratcheting it up with three quick turns, then pushed the thick cotter pin through the eyelet to hold it in place with his other hand. He rose and dusted himself. Frank watched him silently and waited for instruction. Mook was still struggling with the other side.

"We're going to have some help his time, Frank," Sampson peered at Frank's face. Frank misunderstood, "Yep, this'll be the biggest search team we ever had out. Thirty-four men. That's nearly twice what we had for the Hatt boy..."

"No," Sampson jerked his thumb at the low window of the Gatehouse, "I mean that we're going to have some 'extra' help this time..."

Frank looked confused, then his one eye widened almost comically, "From them?" he rasped, trying to whisper but failing miserably. Several of the men wandered over, listening in.

Sampson turned around to face the search team. It was time to let them know what was happening. As he drew himself up to speak, they turned to face him, all conversations halted in mid-sentence. Sampson waited until all eyes were upon him. It didn't take long.

"First, I want to thank you all for coming out here. I can't tell you what that means to me and Amelia." He paused to look around at all of them, looking briefly into each face. "Frank here tells me that the supplies are all sorted out..." he paused, and the men called out that they were ready to go. Sampson nodded gratefully, "And Tom has a complete list of everyone in the party..." he paused again. "That's right, boss..." an unseen and muffled

Tom called from somewhere under the truck, where he was helping Mook wrestle the jammed port cotter pin into place.

"Well, we are going to have even *more* help this time than usual," he began, looking around at Frank, who was still somewhat numbed by this news. Now the men were really silent, hardly daring to breathe. Few of them had ever stood next to a Gatekeeper, or touched one. The closest they got in all their lives was seeing them through a darkly tinted window, and speaking with the automatic voices from their Gatehouse machines, when they drove a truck through once or twice a year. No one here except Sampson had ever even seen one from the waist down before. 'Did they even really have legs?' went the common joke in Paradise.

"One of the Gatekeepers has offered, and in fact, *insisted* that he come along and lend a helping hand in our search mission. He wants to come and help up get my Aaron back before it gets dark," Sampson announced to the stunned group. As he finished, a circle of blue light split through the wall to the Gatehouse, and another round door unscrewed from the wall. The shortest Gatekeeper stepped through, blinking in the bright light and raising his arm to shield his eyes. The door turned the other way and disappeared back into the wall without a trace. There was nothing but the lone cry of a far off bird-of-prey to be heard. The men looked at the Gatekeeper and then at each other in stunned silence.

Mook and Tom rose up from below the truck, wiping their hands on their pants, and stopped dead at the sight of the thin figure standing not ten meters away, looking utterly lost. The bright shock of hair on the center of his pale head looked incredibly red out here under the sun.

The Gatekeeper stepped forward with a few noisy, shuffling steps, then looked down in wonder at the layer of cream colored silt that covered his formerly black shoes. The man had clearly never been outside in his entire life. But no one dared to laugh. Sampson cleared his throat and broke the silence, stepping beside the thin figure and addressing him in a voice intended for all to hear, "Why don't you introduce yourself, Gatekeeper, so we can get started?"

The men waited. It had honestly never occurred to any of them that Gatekeepers had individual names. They were just, well, Gatekeepers. Interchangeable, as far as they could ever see. All eyes were on him as he spoke.

"I - I know you all, but you do not know me. That is the way of things, as you all well know..." he trailed off, looking uncomfortable. He picked up one shoe and tried to shake the silt off, but it clung stubbornly. When he could see that it was hopeless, the Gatekeeper lifted his head again, squinting out at the men.

"I will come with you today. We will find Aaron Fielder," he stated more confidently, looking around for approval. A few men encouraged him, "That's right, Gatekeeper" came some scattered calls, and, "We'll find him."

Sampson noted that the man hadn't said a word about the cylinder, or the strange circumstances surrounding Aaron's disappearance. He would tell Frank, and then they would pass the story quietly among the others themselves. There was no sense in keeping

them in the dark about it. Otherwise, how else would they know enough to leave one of those durned things alone if they found one? He would not let his men go into a dangerous situation without telling them the whole story. What kind of a leader would he be then?

"What shall we call you, Gatekeeper?" reminded Sampson gently.

The small figure took a larger step forward and lifted a thin finger, pointing squarely at Mook's truck. "I have always wanted to ride on one of these," his voice quavered a little, "Please call me ... Flatbed." He looked up, pleased with himself.

This time, even Sampson laughed. The men gathered around the Gatekeeper, shaking his hand and welcoming him to the team. After a few moments, Sampson ordered loudly, "Tom! Another name for the list! And put this one at the top!" More laughter, and Tom pumped the end of the scribe again, scratching the paper one last time.

"Added one 'Gatekeeper Flatbed' to the list!" he sang, and folded the paper into the map drawer, throwing the latch.

### Chapter 3 -- Squares in the Sand

Aaron's bike looked very small lying on the truck's wide bed. Tom and Frank jumped up onto the flap and strode across the hard decking. Sampson and Flatbed were kneeling beside the bike, examining it carefully, and talking in low tones.

Flatbed placed a thin index finger on the hub, "Ham Fielder reported that the cylinder was attached to this side of the wheel, below the rider's left leg, with a smartclip. There is nothing there now," This much was plain for all to see. Even the smartclip was gone.

"Musta popped off when the bike crashed," Tom offered, pulling on his peppery beard, but the others shook their heads. Smartclips established a molecular bond when they joined two substances. Even if the cylinder had the power to defeat the bond, the bike hub did not. It could only have been coaxed from the hub by a touch from a living hand. Even the big cutters that the men wielded to demolish old buildings were useless against a smartclip bond. Besides, Ham had reported that it had still been there on the bike when he left the scene. The cylinder, too.

Ten of the men had used the sighters to measure off a 100-by-100 meter square in the desert, with the site of the crashed bike in the center. Then they divided this area into equal squares, and each man was scouring his area with an autoglass and a sifter, looking for anything and everything not native to the desert. So far, only a few pieces of trash blown off the road over the years had turned up. Roadwash. But the search had only been going on for ninety minutes, and they had roughly three hours of sunlight left. No clue would escape them. But so far, there was no trace of the cylinder or the smartclip had turned up.

Ten other men were back at the road, conducting an equally exhaustive search of the route the boys had ridden from start to finish. The last ten or so men had started a search pattern to cover the surrounding desert, and were already almost out of sight.

The sand was so fine, and the gentle breeze so constant, that footprints were virtually unknown here. None of the search team had even considered it, because a footprint wouldn't last more than five minutes in the sand. Sand grains were smooth edged and incredibly tiny, more like powdered sugar than salt. They flowed like a liquid, and yet a

thin patina of them would cling to anything that brushed against them. Sand was anywhere and everywhere on this world. It was on the food, in the water, on every living thing, and in everything. It could choke you, but if you dug into it, sand could also shield you from the terrible sun during the day, and keep the heat from escaping your body at night, keeping you warm. But the stuff was so insidious that if you dug in too deeply, you might not be able to get out again. If you knew how to use sand, it could save your life. If you forgot its power, it could just as easily kill you.

The deepsand was a dense ocean of sand hundreds of meters deep. It was said that trucks without wheels could ply the sand by putting up light fabrics on a rope frame and catching the wind. None of these men had ever seen such a windtruck with their own eyes, but there were well-known drawings that every child saw in school. The vessels were part lore, part fancy. A romantic idea in this age of straight roads and fast freighters. The deepsand was far from here, on the other side of Nexty, the next city.

Still on the deck of the truck, Flatbed pulled a small box from his pocket and waved it just above the wheel hub where the smartclip would have been. He pressed a square key on the back of it and held the box to his ear, waiting. Frank and Sampson exchanged puzzled looks. After a moment, the box spoke to Flatbed. It was another Gatekeeper, reciting a list of elements. Sampson knew enough about metallurgy to know that the first elements were the alloys that the wheel was made of. Then the last, exotic sounding elements must be the trace compounds found on everything, including organic microbes, sand particulates, and a wide variety of molecules.

Flatbed reacted visibly to only one of the compounds listed. He pressed the key again and hissed a question back into the box. The answer came back an instant later, for all to hear, "Correct. This is the main catalyzing agent used in andropermorphic fasteners. Confirmed."

The Gatekeeper pocketed the box and stood, shielding his face from the sun. "There was a smartclip on this hub, there is no doubt. How it was released, unless by someone's hand, remains a mystery. The only organic elements found in significant quantities are from Aaron Fielder. Clearly his sweat and skin slough will be all over the hub. This is quite expected."

Sampson was unsure if Flatbed meant that they could identify biological residue from a person in general, or his son specifically. He wasn't even sure that was possible – after all, how could you look at a few dead skin cells and a drop of sweat, and tell one person from another? Gatekeeper Magic.

"No abrasions or signs of forced removal of the smartclip," Flatbed spoke again, mostly to himself. Clearly he was as mystified by the disappearance of the cylinder as the men. This did not fill Sampson with confidence. That cylinder was the key and primary clue as to the whereabouts of his son. If even their Gatekeepers were stymied, what chance did ordinary people have?

The bike now a closed avenue, all attention shifted to the search teams. The ten men searching the squares finished less than an hour later. Nothing but desert junk and roadwash was found, and not much of that, either. Frank had rigged up the earthsounding

equipment and was walking the squares now, sweeping the disk back and forth in front of him. Tom started from the other side with the other earthsounder. The two machines were linked together, and they built a complete orthographic picture of the earth below their feet, down to a depth of ten meters. They used this equipment before starting any foundation in the City, to map the dig, and avoid old power cables and fluid lines. If they missed a spot, the machines would guide them to it and beep twice when they had successfully mapped every square meter. Nothing was revealed by this. There were no hidden sinkholes, no tunnels, large rocks, fault lines, or anything but sand and small stones. Nothing.

Meanwhile, Sampson and Mook went out to the road. The second team had long since found the waterkeg where Aaron had dropped it hours earlier. They searched that area in depth, finding nothing. Then they mapped the entire length of the run that the boys made on the bike, using Flatbed's estimate of where Ham had stopped and turned around. Nothing still. All the same, the waterkeg and the little bits and pieces of roadwash that were collected were documented and brought back to the truck, where Flatbed examined everything with his strange devices, logging them and documenting each item regardless of its apparent insignificance. The first two teams plus Sampson, Tom, Mook, Frank, and Flatbed, conducted a short meeting back at the truck, agreeing that there was nothing more to be found here. Mook jumped into the cab, and Sampson fell heavily next to him. The rest stayed on the back, and Mook rumbled the big vehicle around, pointing it out into the desert at the last known location of the third search team. The jagged Grelling hills rose up in the center of the windshield, far away. Another City, Nexty, lay between the truck and the hills, they were so distant. But Nexty was over the horizon and was hence invisible from here. Sampson noticed the sun slipping lower behind the Grelling; their edges were already cast in oranges and purples, their leeward faces, normally chalky, already charcoaled in stark shadows. There was not much sun left, he knew. Not much natural light. He was not worried about the teams. These were grown men with supplies, lightsticks, and decades of experience. He was thinking only about Aaron. He was hoping that his lessons about the desert were recalled by the boy. Lessons about using the sand for cover, about avoiding the bites from a wide variety of desert creatures, and what to do if one got him.

The same thought kept rolling through his head: how could a boy just disappear like this? He suspected a drifter in a truck. Maybe whoever had left the strange object in the sand came back to reclaim it, and found the boys with it. Maybe he drove Aaron off the road, and took him into his truck. Then, after Ham left, he forced Aaron to release the Smartclip, then took Aaron with him to remove the evidence. He would be planning to dump the boy somewhere far away, where he would never be found. The thoughts disturbed Sampson, but as far-fetched as he knew they sounded, he couldn't stop torturing himself with them.

They drove on in silence. Mook's normal velocity was naturally attenuated out here, driving a big truck across the scrubble with twenty-five men sitting on the deck, which was also loaded with evidence, most of their tools and supplies, and a Gatekeeper called Flatbed. The men, who would normally lodge their complaints about his driving loudly and with unrestrained profanity through the cab window, were oddly silent on this trip.

Mook really was keeping the bumps and jars to the minimum possible, picking the best course from the untamed scrabble that stretched out ahead of them as far as they could see. Some sipped occasionally from their water kegs. Most just stared out at the sand and rocks, glad that their own children were safe at home, getting ready for bed by now. They were wondering how to look at Sampson, and what to say to him.

Just after nightfall the entire team assembled by the truck. Tom called the roll from the list, and everyone was accounted for. Frank had been right hours earlier, every man was indeed bone tired, and could barely stand. The third team had spent the longest in the desert, completing a sweep pattern that covered many square kilometers in record time, and missing nothing. There was nothing to find.

Dejection showed in every face as Frank counted the teams back onto the deck for the long ride back. A man could fall off in the darkness and not be noticed, so they were lashing themselves to the decking in twos using the equipment tie-downs. They left with thirty-eight and they would return with the same. Sampson rose up from where he had sprawled in the scrub just seconds before, mopping his forehead with keg water and trying to knock off some of the sand with his kerchief. He touched Flatbed and motioned for him to follow him a short distance from the truck so they could talk in private.

“It’s time, Flatbed,” he began, “it’s time you told me about this cylinder of yours.”

The Gatekeeper’s eyebrows shot up, “The cylinder is not ours, Sampson Fielder,” he protested. “That device is not from the Gatekeepers of any City.”

“But you know what it is, and what it’s for,” Sampson insisted. “And now I want you to tell me.”

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The next day was the longest that anyone could remember. There was no school anyway, so Ham stayed home. In groups of varying sizes, his and Aaron’s friends came to the house, offering tearful condolences and well-intentioned recollections about his lost brother. No one had any doubt that he was gone forever, dead or simply vanished, as the lore went. People vanished here. They disappeared without a trace and no one could say how or why.

Sometimes it happened to trouble-makers, and no one minded that very much. But other times, the most innocent among them just went missing, and were never seen again. After the day before, Ham didn’t think he had any tears left, but today was a whole new beginning. By noon, however, he was numb, and couldn’t feel much any more. He greeted the callers for a while longer, but mostly his mom and dad handled that. He went up to his room – it was really just his, now – and slept fitfully for what seemed like hours, but what turned out to be just over thirty minutes. He tried going for a walk, but he was approached by everyone he ever knew, plus about thirty others that he couldn’t place, who welled up and cried on him some more. He ran back inside, and back to his sanctuary, to be alone. The family wordlessly spooned dinner that night, not tasting it. Afterwards, his parents went to their room to get some sleep. Sampson helped Amelia up the stairs after her legs went weak. If a day could have been worse than yesterday, this was it, Ham thought. He felt drained, damaged, and – something else that he couldn’t

quite identify. It was a strange emotion for him. A powerful creature paddling just below the topsand. He sensed that there might be some reserve of strength in it that he could draw from, if he could only connect a name to it.

Ham found himself in the dustroom, the small chamber between the back door and the outside. Their mom insisted that the boys come through that way, and leave their bikes in there, too, as a matter of fact, to keep the fine sand entering the house to a minimum. It was a losing battle, of course, but the filters in the dustroom did help a little. He was surprised to find that his bike was back home. Mook must have brought it back this morning on the truck, and Sampson rolled it around back before Ham woke up. Mentioning it had been the last thing on anyone's mind during the terrible day that had just passed.

Ham stepped to the outer door and cracked it open. The moon looked down at him diffidently, as if nothing unusual had happened. The breeze smelled sweet like the scrabble, like it always did this time of night. After the sun fell behind the Grelling, the steady wind turned around, wafting the dry desert smells over the Highwall and down the City streets. It was a favorite time to walk for most folks. The streets were well-lit, and the air was positively moist compared to the complete lack of humidity during the day. The cooler night air was therapy for most folks. Trucks were allowed out, of course, but could not leave the City. Only long-range freighters, laden with tradegoods, rumbled through the widest streets during the early hours of morning, drivers eager to get their wares to the next City and earn their wages.

Ham trailed his fingertips over the cool bike frame as he moved through the door and onto the stoop. That odd feeling was coming back to the surface, and he tried once again to name it, touch it, feel it. He needed to walk, so he walked. No one bothered him now, although he passed several people. They were probably in shock at seeing the nine (nearly ten!) year-old alone on the streets after darkfall. He avoided the trams, because there was a curfew for kids his age and the tram wouldn't let him in anyway. The lights became farther apart, and fewer walkers passed him. After a while he realized that he was leaving the living part of the City and entering the Commerce. The wide Commerce streets fringed the farmlands, for obvious reasons – the crops were easily brought here, cleaned and packed into containers. Ham heard loud voices now, and the echoes from big metal doors and scraping tools. A freighter rumbled past him and nearly scared him witless – he had not heard its approach. The heavy rear wheels crunched on the sand and skidded to a stop in front of the crophouse he was standing in front of. The driver leaned out the window and revolved the wheel, backing the long vehicle up the loading ramp.

*These men live a whole different life than the rest of us,* Ham reflected. What would it be like to rise after midnight, driving the streets while the rest of the world slept? Then to pass the Gatehouse before the sun was up, driving all the day across the long white road? It must be odd to spend the next night in another City, then repeat the whole thing the next day. Did drivers have two apartments, one in each City? Ham considered that they probably joined up in pairs and shared living space, each man taking turns sleeping in the other apartment, perhaps never seeing each other for months on end. What an odd life. He was glad that his dad came to the same home every night.

Ham stopped to watch the loading. The driver and the Commerce crew clearly knew each other. They easily traded barbs and insults, joking and laughing all the while that the work was starting. The driver jumped out and pulled a lever Ham had never noticed before, and the freighter opened up like a mechanical flower. The back-end split into four articulated panels which pulled up and outward, then retracted straight back to lie flush against the rest of the freighter. Ham saw that this way, the big loaders could drive right into the freighter, deposit their huge silver bins loaded with produce, then maneuver out again. This went on for what seemed like hours to Ham. He had no idea that so much food could fit into one freighter. Amazing. One of the men noticed him and called him over, whistling. At first Ham thought he was in trouble, but the man smiled, revealing a broad grin with several missing teeth.

“Come on, boy - you afraid of a little work? That’s what yer here for, ain’t it?” He waved his arm at Ham with a pulling motion, then turned his back to him as a loader came up behind him and beeped. He jumped out of the way, turned and loped down the long ramp. Ham’s first instinct was to run. He knew he should not be here, and he suddenly became aware that he had been gone for hours already. If his parents woke up and found that their other son had disappeared, his mom would be apoplectic, and his dad would tar him just short of pure death for frightening her like that, and him too. But Ham did not run. The skinny man approached him, exasperated. Nearly hairless, his big ears stuck out the sides of his head and wiggled when he worked his jaw. “You boys come down here, then you don’t want to work! If you want more food, that’s right dead. Standard pay is all - one box - the biggest one you can carry by yourself, from the back to the front. Same as always. That’s the deal. That’s the way of it!”

“I - I didn’t come here - “ Ham stuttered out. Did boys come out here in the middle of the night to earn food? That was news to Ham. What else didn’t he know about his City? There were so many things that he didn’t understand yet. His family was among the lucky ones, and had enough to eat as far back as he could remember.

“Well, ye’re here now, so if ye want work, come on, boy!” the foreman made wide circles again with his arm, and strode back up the ramp, head down. Ham followed automatically. Actually, this might be fun, he told himself. Certainly different. He wasn’t afraid of work. His dad had taught him that.

“Mister - ” he ran to catch up. The worker didn’t even turn around. “Don’t call me ‘mister’, son. I’m a foreman, a beet scuttler, a lifter and a hauler. I ain’t no eddicated gentleman”.

Ham pressed him “I’m not - *I ain’t* afraid to work; I just don’t know what to do - “ he began, still trying to keep up with the man’s long legs.

“Just do what I tell ye,” he cut Ham off, and took him up the lifter to the highbay, picking a long shiny tool and orange vest off the wall as he went and handing them back. Moments later, Ham was knee-deep on top of a huge mountain of beets, pitching them into a silver bin the size of a small house with regular strokes of his fork. At first it felt good, to move in a rhythm, to conquer a new challenge. But after two hours his shoulders felt like they were coming off, and his lower back was protesting with every fork-full of beets that he launched into the bin. But he pressed on. At the foreman’s shout, other boys

joined him. Rough boys, these, dressed in dirty rags. They said nothing to Ham, who was glad of it. He was also glad that he had been up here first, and got his own nicer clothes respectably filthy before they saw him, else they would have known that he was a 'rich' kid, and likely beat him senseless. With the older boys laying into it, the pile shrunk quickly, and soon they were all standing on the wet hard-deck, sliding their forks under the remnants and pitching them up over their shoulders into the bin, the third one which had been filled nearly to the top from the beet mountain.

The rest of the night-turned-morning passed like a dream to Ham. He and a small army of silent boys had defeated two more mountains of produce, once again with forks, and then once, yellow beanpods, with broad shovels. Afterwards, when the last of the freighters had been loaded, Ham was shown to a long hose and told to wash down the hard-decks. He watched somewhat resentfully as the other boys loaded food into boxes and heaved them up over their shoulders, trudging to the far end of the crophouse. He was still working the hose when the last boy staggered beneath his box, and passed through the huge doors into the early morning. Ham would be last to go. He assumed that the 'new kid' got the job of washing the decks, as well as last choice among the leftover foods at the end. It didn't bother him; he didn't need the food anyway. And as the warm water splashed around his feet, he had at last identified the nagging feeling in his gut; the thirst that demanded quenching.

Anger.

He was angry with the world. Angry with the Gatekeepers. Those skinny, bizarre little people. For all their 'magic,' for all their secret doorways and odd machines, what had they done to get his brother back? How could they have failed his family so grotesquely? It was their job to protect the people, after all. To use their machines and their magic to monitor and guide people, and keep them from harm. Where had they been the day before? They should have seen what happened to Aaron, or at least been able to fix it afterwards. Even his dad had come down a few steps in the boy's eyes, but perhaps this was natural. Eventually, every boy realizes that his father is not a god: there are jars he can't unscrew, and wrongs he just can't right. But Ham knew that his dad was a great man, and he hated himself for these idle thoughts. He turned his wrath back on the Gatekeepers, focusing the hose into every corner and blasting out stray stalks and bits of food, heading them with a steady stream toward the corrugated sluice and down the ramp.

"Boy!" called the jug-eared foreman who had brought him in, "Grab your box and git! The way you spray, that'll be our water ration for the week!" he laughed and waved over his shoulder, disappearing around the central wall. Ham finished with the deck and wound the hose back into the round hole just the way he had been shown. He had managed to get nearly as much water on himself as the floor during the past ten minutes, and his pants and socks were soaked through. He stepped outside, and the morning air chilled him immediately.

"No box. Kinda figured that about you," the driver of the big freighter was leaning up against one of the loading ramp buttresses, chewing on something. Ham turned around, what did he mean?

“No *food*. No box of *food*,” the driver pointed to Ham’s empty hands. “Nice clothes. Nice haircut –” He looked the boy up and down, “- you don’t belong here,” The driver observed plainly.

Ham didn’t know what to say. He just looked at the man, who abruptly stuck his hand out. Ham jumped back, and the man laughed. “Hey! Just being friendly! They call me Jammer. Don’t you Paradise folks shake hands any more?” his hand was still sticking out. Ham reached out and shook it, embarrassed. “Hammond Fielder, sir,” he managed, looking down at his soaking feet. Almost on cue, an electric chill ran up his spine then down again, and he shuddered from it.

Jammer studied the boy for a minute. If he knew who Ham was, he didn’t show any signs of it. Of course, he had indicated that he wasn’t from this City, and probably didn’t pay much heed to their local news. “Better get dried. Still an hour before the sun’ll do it for ye. Before that you’ll be shaking like deliriums,” he suggested flatly. “I’m about to go. Come on, I’ll drop ye nearest home I can,” and pushed himself away from the wall, spitting out whatever he had been chewing on.

He driver pulled the door out and leapt up onto the midstep, looking across the cab through the opposite window. Ham hadn’t moved. Jammer shook his head and slid behind the wheel, spinning up the motor. “Suit yerself,” he offered mostly to himself, but loud enough for Ham to hear. The whine grew from a purr to a high-pitched drone, and Jammer was running through the controls, checking fluids and pressures. Ham abruptly turned and grabbed the handhold behind the passenger door, hoisting himself up. It wasn’t easy - the long-range freighter was designed for adults, not children. “Wait,” he announced, “Where are you going?”

Jammer didn’t look up. “Nexty, boy - not that it matters to you. I’m dropping you at your house. Jump in.” Ham swung the door out and climbed up into the high cab. ‘Nexty’ was Citytalk for the next City. Its proper name was Karo, but no one here called it that. Ham had been thinking about it all morning as he worked. Aaron didn’t fall down a hole, or wander off into the deepsand by mistake, or run out of water. Someone had taken him, of that, Ham was certain. Chances were, he had been taken to Nexty, or at least had passed through it. He was going there to find him. He could do it. Dad would be mad as a beewort, and mom would surely flay him to within an inch of his life, but he knew that he had to go. He had to press his anger into service, to release it, let it do some good. He knew that it was crazy, irresponsible. *I’m nine years old!*, rang in his head over and over like a busy bell. But it didn’t matter. The Gatekeepers had failed. Even his father had failed. So Ham was going to get his brother back, no matter what.

“Can you post a comm?” he yelled at Jammer. The noise of the motor was deafening and he had to shout just to hear himself. Jammer blinked, then grinned, “What? You got a girlfriend who reads her comms at this hour of the morning?”

Ham shook his head, “My parents. I want to tell them where I’m going, what I’m doing - so they don’t worry. Post to four-one-nine seven-oh-six, for later,” Ham requested, looking right into Jammer. Jammer grinned back, amazed, trying to remember what it was like to be nine years old and on a holy mission. He didn’t think he’d been this

self-possessed until he was twenty-nine. The driver punched the comm address and looked back over at Ham, “And where is it exactly that you think you’re going, Scout?”

Ham sat back, rubbing his legs to warm them. “Same place you are, Mister Jammer,” he said simply. “I’m going to Nexty.”