

The Southern Dunes

‘We arrived on the *Sheppard* together, me and that John’ I tell him as we shovel. The old man merely grunts back at me, his usual response.

‘Didn’t enjoy that ship one bit, cast off in June thinking we was in for smooth sailing, didn’t know the weather was all backwards here’ my back is a warm ache, the soft sand creeping back into the hole as we quickly dig.

‘You’re best not talking none about those days boy’ quips the old man, his eyes are screwed up in April sun, the heat of the day bringing the sweat to both our brows despite the swift salty wind at our backs. Old Sam is always trying to get me to move on, to not talk about the past. Forged get it, he says but it’s hard, I miss my family. I wonder if my sister survives, what she might have become to do so.

‘Do you know what happened?’ I ask, I’ve heard rumours at the Round, but I want it from Sam, assistant to our Master, he knows everything.. He stops shovelling, the soft white sand so different from the beach at home, slides slowly back into the hole.

‘Went mad they said, never gave no reason for killin’ the Pollard boy’ he crosses himself, looking at me hard, hastily I copy.

‘He never seemed mad’ I comment as we put our backs into it once more, but Sam just grunts. I consider pressing him for more information but he’s a tad irritable, so I leave it be as I work hard to make up for the time spent chatting. We soon hit the damp sand in the dune, making life easier. As we finish, a whistle down the beach draws our attention, Mr. Schoales is leading two prisoners carrying a covered stretcher to us. As they climb the steep dune the lad at the back stumbles, causing the load on the stretcher to shift, a pale arm slips out.

It’s not the first dead body I’ve seen. Sickness at home had them put out in droves in the winter and then again on the ship over, wrapped and slipped into the sea, poor souls.

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We'd sing for them as the sun went down over the ocean, the sky a mirage of colours, wish them well. But no one is here to sing, to wish him well.

'Sam' Schoales nods to the old man now leaning on his shovel as his men hit the crest of the dune. Without ceremony, a prayer or word the Guardian nods to his men, they up end the stretcher into our hole, and we are given leave to fill it in.

The pressure in my chest has nothing to do with the effort of my labours as we shovel that soft pearly white sand back in. It rains down on poor John Gavin, his face no longer covered by the cloth but quickly covered by the sand at my feet. They've done things to him, I can see he's not quite right, even for a hanged man. We leave no marker for him as we make our way back to the Round where we act as groundskeepers for the gaol and courthouse. The bile in my throat eases as we move away from the dunes, soft sand giving way to crushed white gravel, but the simmering anger doesn't fade. I didn't ask to be here, shipped off from my home without say, digging graves on the other side of the world.

'How many years do you have to go Thomas?' asks Sam suddenly, I frown as I try to remember but I never learnt my numbers so the year of the lord means nothing to me.

'Four I'm thinking' I reply. I nod respectfully to the soldiers at the gate who ignore me, the great archway of white limestone leads us into the dark of the gaol. One day my indenture will be finished, and I can leave this place behind, far from Her Majesty's 51st who look at me with nothing but contempt if they look at all.

'And you'll do what?' he asks as we put our shovels back, so they can't fall into the wrong hands later. I'm surprised by his questions but more that I have an answer.

'I'd like to farm' I reply. Sam chuckles as he locks the tools away leading us further into the bowls of the Round.

'I hear they have an opening in Dandalup'.