

THE GHOOOL - CHAPTER ONE (sample)

By Sara Page

Against the backdrop of sandy mountains and clouds of toxic gas lie old ruins of a long-dead city. The wind rushes through the ghost town, gusting down over maroon-coloured cliffs. A shrouded woman trudges through the abandoned city, crunching old tree branches into charcoal with each footstep. Boiling streams run through the center of the town bubbles and little geisers of tepid water shoot up through cracks in the ground. The woman leaps across the river on a partially destroyed bridge and enters the remnants of an orchard. The trees have been reduced to ash forms, partially disintegrated by the wind. The woman kicks one with her foot and it collapses in a cloud of ash. She continues. Past the scorched trees lie a few tombstones, blackened by the heat. Wraith bushes bearing dark purple fruits have grown over the stones. A large black rock gate, slightly tilted, protrudes from the ground just past the tombstones. The woman stands still, gazing at the gate through her helmet. She turns her back to it and bends down at one of the tombstones. She takes a sickle knife from her belt and begins to clip the fruits and place them in a cloth sack. The name on the tombstone becomes apparent. It reads, "Mother." The woman brushes soot from the inscription with care. She continues to harvest the wraith fruits from the bushes. They resemble burnt aubergines, withered and twisted, squishy and juicy. The woman's long dark braids whip about her back behind her as the breeze intensifies. She breathes deeply inside her helmet. Loose ends of the bandages covering her arms flap madly about in the gusts and flick yellow iodine droplets upon her visor.

Her backpack filled to the brim with wraith fruits, the woman resheathes her sickle knife and pulls out a glass reading stone. She sketches out a message on the glass and then holds it up to the sky. The blurry red sun shines aggressively through the glass. The glass sparkles, and She pockets the device. Behind her, she hears the crunch of gravel.

A man emerges from the gate behind her. He is tall, dressed in form fitting black cloth, and without any bandages. His skin is gray and doesn't burn, despite his lack of protective bandages. Mere meters from her, his identity is mostly hidden by a face covering, except for his bright red and thickly-lined eyes. The woman puts a hand on the sickle at her waist. The man takes a step towards her.

She draws her sickle, trembling. "Don't come any closer. Who are you?"

The man narrows his eyes. "Where is Ghool?"

The woman backs up in the direction of the broken bridge. "What's a ghool?"

The man rushes forward and grabs her arm.

She cries out.

"You smell like Ghool," he whispers.

The woman riggles and manages to smack his face with her elbow. "Let me go!" She screams.

The man doesn't move, his eyes piercing. "I need to find the Ghool before she destroys the world."

"Destroyed?" The woman locks eyes with the man through her gas mask.

The man tries to pull her mask off and the woman shrieks and flails, slicing the man with her sickle as she loses her balance. She pulls her mask back down and runs

back over the bridge. Her skin is burnt where the air touches it. The woman runs towards a cliff past the outskirts of the abandoned city, with the man chasing her. She reaches the edge and plummets off the cliff like a dead weight towards a black river below. Her glider rockets towards her and she clumsily lands on it before she hits the water. She shoots back up and speeds off, navigating vapor clouds amongst a network of cliffs until she sights a black obsidian-like dome up ahead.

She glances back over her shoulder. The man is no longer on the cliff. The woman speeds up, the lights from within the massive dome reflecting off her gas mask. She hovers at the edge of the dome and presses her glass against the obsidian barrier. The glass emits a high-pitched tone, and she melts through the barrier. She glides down to the front gate past bright red and yellow floral fields, and jumps to the ground. She stores the glider with others in an obsidian structure to the left of the gate.

The gate is large and black, the texture like shiny wax, but with patches of ash and trailing soot. The bloody imprints of scratch marks, and strange symmetrical patterns run across it haphazardly. The woman presses her glass against the gate, and the glass turns blood red. The gate opens and she enters. The door swings shut behind her. She removes her mask and unravels her outer bandages in a large locker room before she descends deeper down the underground hallway. She reaches another gate and the glass starts to glow like a light source. She holds it to a larger piece of glass embedded in the door. The glass emits another noise, and the swings open. She enters. Behind her there is a shadow. The woman turns and looks but sees nothing. She stares for a minute, wondering if the man had somehow followed her. The air pressure changes drastically as the door shuts behind her.

The woman continues her descent alone, now past a few lone structures protruding from the pathway walls. Water drips into small glass wall reservoirs, black in the red light of her glass piece. Red lights begin to appear along the path as she passes through three more doors. She passes more structures, until she passes through the fifth door and a full city sprawls before her, a sea of black obelisks, glittering with red lights and the cacophony of high pitched glass ringing out. This is her home, The Shale. She jumps on a moving platform and joins a queue of other Shales as they travel through the city.

The red glasses glitter across the sprawling city. She jumps off the platform by a patch of crimson trees, where her sister is spraying heavily scented red flowers with a yellow liquid in a sprayer. Sister's long amber hair pokes out from underneath her almost translucent garment wrappings. The woman dashes up and snatches the spray can from her.

“Pajamas again?” She asks. Her sister shrugs.

“What’s the point in getting dressed up? It’s not like I’m going anywhere. I’m just a corpse watering a bed of corpses.”

The woman huffs. “...is Grandad inside?”

Sister nods, and the woman runs past, tossing back the sprayer. Her sister hesitates for a moment, anger across her freckled face. She resumes spraying the flowers. Faint bursts of adolescent laughter perfume the evening breeze. The sister kicks the ground and ashes fly up before falling back down in the wind. She throws down the watering can and sits on the garden wall with a sour look on her face. A man approaches in the distance.

The woman descends through yet another series of black underground doors through the red flower garden. She reaches a tiny kitchen and throws down the sac of purple wraith fruits with a loud thwack. The room is so quiet that the water dripping from the wall fountain might as well be a roaring animal. She presses her hands to the wet stone wall, and sticks out her purple tongue. Her grandfather walks into the room behind her and picks up one of the wraith fruits. He takes a loud bite out of the fruit. It is full of seeds. The flesh squelches as he chews.

The woman turns around and wipes her mouth. She rushes and hugs her elder.

“You picked too many,” he says softly.

She averts her eyes and pulls up her scarf so it covers her chin. “I’m feeling a little sick.”

The grandfather sits on a stool. “You could help me fix the waterwalls, it’s a bit tedious.”

The woman nods slowly, thinking. The grandfather uses a sharp tool to adjust the settings of the water wall while she holds the wall in place.

“You’re so much stronger than me now.”

The woman smiles. “It’s because I have to lug all your fruits around.”

“I don’t regret it!” he laughs.

The woman puts her hands under the water and watches it glow. “Grandad, do you ever miss the light?”

He grabs a different tool and hits one spot repeatedly. “Why isn’t this working? Stupid thing. What was that?”

The woman repeats. “The sun. Do you ever miss the sun? The taste of fresh air?”

The grandfather is quiet for a moment. “Of course, but it’s unavoidable. The air would kill you if you took your mask off.”

The woman heaves the wall back into place and pulls out a notebook from a drawer and starts counting and organizing the fruits. “Should my sister have forgotten by now?”

The grandfather shakes his head. “She won’t forget, I imagine. She will have to live with it.”

The woman watches as the old man eats another wraith fruit.

He continues. “It’s not uncommon to remember. Your grandmother remembered her past life.”

The woman puts the remaining wraith fruits in a glass bowl near the waterwall. They turn luminescent where flecks of water hit them. “Grandad...”

The old man looks up. “Hmm?”

“Has anyone ever willfully made their way through the Gate to Obsidian?”

The man purses his purple wrinkled lips. The fruit drips down his fingers. “If they did, I wouldn’t want to meet them. This world is meant only for the breathless.” He takes her hands in his and leans his forehead against hers. “May the gate stay silent.” He whispers.

The woman thinks of the man on the cliff. She remembers his scent, his menacing grip. She shuts her eyes and hugs her grandfather.

End sample.