

I retreated from this weird gift a step or two, and took stock of what lay around me with senses renewed. The scents which hung beneath the odor of water first drew my nose: sweat, fur, blood, none of which were my own, and diverse of origin. Perhaps this is what tempted my eyes downward, to gaze upon my feet, whose brown coating was now discolored by moistened spots. Beneath me lay tracks. My own, unmistakable, as I had pondered over them many a time before, but also a great number of others, enough to match the menagerie of smells which clung to the smooth stone brickwork. At first glance, they may have seemed haphazard and lackadaisical, leading nowhere in particular, but to the practiced eye they told a rather different story. Though the many paths wound around and around, the trend was clear, marching off across the desert, through troughs and over crests. The ember of curiosity within me flared to life at once. I had wandered these sands for ages, it seemed. Many times the sun had leapt across the sky, yet not once had I seen any indication of life. Neither tree, nor shrub, nor bird, nor reptile, or creature of any kind had graced my sight. The desert even lacked evidence of death, not one bone was to be found. And yet I beheld something which was unmistakable. The sheer newness of my discovery was... tantalizing. Recovering from my bewilderment, I set to following the path, adding my own paw prints to those which came before me.

I had fallen back into the trance-like state which I was so accustomed to, watching my feet slowly sifting through the sand as I followed the numerous tracks. I noted several qualities of them: The prints appeared roughly canid in design, possessing four toes with divots in the sand at the end of each toe, indicating claws which did not retract. For the few sections where clear sets of prints could be seen, it was obvious from the spacing that they were both bipedal and digitigrade, likely ruling out a stray pack of animals which had found a way to survive in this barren place. There also appeared to be several sets of tracks which belonged to quadrupedal hoofed animals. The depth of these tracks suggested that these were either very heavy, or were used to carry additional weight. I was shaken from the trance as a strong scent met my nose. I jerked my head level, eyes wide, scanning for the source. I instantly found my quarry. Ten yards ahead of me, with fear painted across her features, a small girl stood stock still. She couldn't have been more than ten years old, standing in the sand with a colorful cloak and holding a small basket. As we made eye contact, the little basket fell to the sand as she turned and began to sprint in the opposite direction, nearly tripping several times and shouting "siora, siora!" before disappearing over the crest of a dune. I stood, unmoving and with my jaw slack, unable to immediately come to terms with what I had seen. It had been many years since I had seen another living creature, much less sentient life.