

It's hard to breathe—sailing on the blood-dunes of Phanes. I look out over the crimson desert of our barren colony as sand and shrapnel patter the belly of our skiff. It rumbles and dips altitude when the solar engine sputters; then it sluggishly returns to a safe hover. We've sailed this one too much, and Brantley's too cheap to replace parts. We flank two more skiffs at safe distance, hidden in red sand clouds from gliding. Their solar sails glisten gold.

“How's it lookin'?” Iker grunts. The aroma of gasoline follows his voice.

I look over my shoulder as he cautiously squats beside me. This work ages the soul; he looks older than his real age—deep creases and wrinkles rung under his eyes. It's hard to look away from his missing middle finger when he scratches his copper beard. He spits overboard and wipes sweat off his bald black head.

I look up. No atmospheric bursts in the last hour, pale orange skies at midday. The sun beats down.

“It's calm, for now,” I answer.

The skiff rumbles and dips again. I should watch the solar engine, but the new guy can't call out weather patterns. He should be watching the engine's health. Where *is* he? New crew members can jump overboard if no one's looking.

I search around. Our main sail shades over half the deck. There, a bald kid, my age and fresh trousers ducks in the shadow. He sits still with a hard face, eyes down.

“Don't worry,” Iker gruffs. He watches the guy with me. “He's just gettin' focused for the job.”

Or thinking about how Brantley cut back our life insurance—again. Too many dead workers, tons of new hires.

“Kiiid.” Iker snaps his fingers in my face.

“My bad, guess I’m gettin’ focused too.” I sigh. The skiff rumbles again. Three times is too often; someone needs to watch it. “Hey, could you watch the, uh…”

“Sure.” Iker clears his throat. He gets up and walks to the stern. I think he just wants someone to talk to. Sailing’s lonely, even with company, but I need space to think, and looking out on the dunes helps. Small talk doesn’t. Besides, no one wants to talk about death.

I look out over the dunes, crimson from the iron and space debris we dig up. It’s soaked in the bodies of buried wage slaves—where we’ll all be someday. My jaw clenches. I take another shallow breath at the bow. Dad’s buried out here too—somewhere. I stuff my fists in the pockets of his olive-green bomber jacket tied to my waist.

A horn blows twice—brass and low.

“Hold!” A captain cries from the leading skiff. The sand clouds settle under the vanguard skiffs as two sets of crewmen, three men each, disembark with packs slung over their backs. Time to dig.

“Kid!” Iker calls. I turn around. Iker kills the engine, wining low until it fades with a soft whistle. Iker pauses over our third crewmate, still locked in his knees.

“Yo!” I shout for the new guy’s attention. I step off the bow and walk to the rudder where Iker crouches to his level. New guy looks dead already, clenched in rigor mortis or somethin’. I look at Iker. We’re thinking the same thing: we need to move or we’re dead.

“I don’t…feel so good,” New Guy murmurs.

“Hear that?” Iker asks me.

“I think he said he’s not feeling ight,” I repeat.

“That right?” Iker sighs. He grips New Guy by the collar and lifts him to his feet. Iker’s easily a foot taller, beefier too. “Listen here guy, no one stays with the boat, that’s the rule. Everyone digs.”

New Guy’s knees buckle. He’s gonna faint from anxiety. I shake his shoulder.

“C’mon,” I try reaching him. “The sooner we get done with the dig, the sooner we get home. We already out here.”

Iker keeps New Guy up. This isn’t working.

“What’s your name?” I ask. New Guy shakes his head. In fact, all of him’s shaking.

“Rodd.” He hyperventilates.

“Ight, Rodd, listen.” Am I reaching him? “I know it’s scary digging in a hot spot, but if you work with us now, and fast, I’ll make sure you get back. I’m tryna get home too.”

Rodd shuts his eyes and bows his head down. Is he praying, or hoping it’ll be over when he opens his eyes again? I feel the same most days.

“You got family?” I ask. Rodd keeps nodding. I think that’s a yes.

“My...brother.” Rodd says as he teeth chatter.

“You do this for him?” I talk to him straight.

“So we can eat, yuh,” Rodd shudders.

“Who came before you?” I ask. Everyone takes the place of someone here.

“My pops,” Rodd chatters as he clenches his jaw and fists. I look out over the blood-dunes again. A hollow wind wails across the desert—cries from ancestors buried.

“Mine’s out here too,” I say.

Rodd finally looks up. He looks out with me.

“We do this right, we get home, get paid, and your bro don’t come out here to take your place,” I say, to the point. “We gon’ be all right if we do this together. Your bro too.”

Rodd slowly nods, still shuddering. Iker stomps away and reaches behind the rudder. He pulls out three backpacks, each with a foldable shovel on the side. He passes one to me and shoves the other in Rodd’s hands.

“Inspiring,” Iker grunts and—ouch—bumps my arm. “New Guy, keep an eye on the sky while we work. You can tell if a scrap shower’s coming right over us, right?”

Iker steps off the skiff and trudges across sand. I look at Rodd, staring down at his feet until he realizes I’m watching. He meets my eyes and nods. We hop off together. The sand shifts under our boots. I unfold my shovel. Rodd copies and follows close.

PTHOM.

A familiar fume of burning steel—I focus up on the sky; everyone does. A metal comet of space junk burns through the atmosphere and streaks fire across the desert. It’s miles out, but my freehand grips my arm, tight. The burning debris rains and crashes into Phanes with a roar.

“That’s just the planet talkin, lads! Get back to work!” A captain calls from the front.

“Kid!” Iker shouts. I look back over. He’s already a dune over, struggling to lift a warped wedge of charred debris out of the sand.

“We comin!” I shout back. “C’mon, Rodd!”

Nothing.

“Rodd?” I ask, twisting around. He’s standing in place, eyes still up.

“Rodd!” I shout. Debris crackles across the desert. I shake Rodd.

“Hey man, we’re still clear,” I reassure him. It’s not raining over us yet. I check over the horizon. Suddenly, light burns above the clouds, and a barrage of scrap comets rain—they’ll fall miles away. “Rodd, we’re gonna’ get you to your brother, ok?”

“O—kay.” Rodd’s words crawl.

“We’re good.” We’ll be good. “C’mon, follow me.”

I don’t move until Rodd acknowledges me. He takes a shallow first step, then follows.

“Y’all done stargazing?!” Iker shouts as we get closer to wreckage. He grips a steel panel from a ship’s exterior twice his size, then lifts, bracing it out of the sand to reveal the crispy half from re-entry. Shrapnel shimmers underneath.

I crawl under as the heat-packed sand sings my arms and palms. I untie dad’s bomber jacket from my waist and slip it on, and then I dig. Let’s see—I brush my hand over the sand. There’s...bundles of copper wire? Good conductivity. And some solar panel shards could fix some of the sails. And steel plates—always good welding material. I toss them out behind.

“Rodd, pocket those would ya?” I pant. I hear Rodd’s boots shuffle over and grab the materials.

“I think that’s it here.” I crawl out from under the panel and sit between Rodd and Iker.

“Took ya long enough.” Iker drops the panel with a gasp. The rising sun splits between a couple of clouds as the heat kicks up.

“Whatchu’ sweatin for? I did all the work.” Iker extends a hand to help me up. I take it.

“It’s hot, man.” I pant.

“Yeah, well, that’s what it’s like in the galaxy’s armpit, right new guy?” Iker says as he bumps Rodd’s arm. Rodd keeps straight faced and stays tight-lipped.

“Right—C’mon,” Iker scoffs and shakes his head. “We’re wasting solar-light.”

I drag behind Iker as Phanes sinks every step. Rodd trudges behind. Iker scans over the blood-dunes for the next bounty; he never stares for long, just sighs. Jagged wreckage like metal fangs stick out from the sand, some of it still smoldering. Iker stops over another bed of sand, then groans while kneeling over. He brushes away grains, looking for the next piece of buried space debris. Experience tells him where. I look over his shoulder. A metal point sticks out of the sand.

“Around it. Let’s go,” Iker says as he grabs his shovel and digs. We unfold ours and join. Sweat and panting pours over the sand. We expose a charred panel.

“Got it.” Iker leans down and lifts. I check behind me; Rodd nods back, more focused. Now he’s getting it. Iker braces the panel at an angle with his bare strength, and I immediately crawl under for loot, straight to digging barehanded.

Suddenly my nails scrape against something rigid but it’s surface claws back, and the hair across my arms prick.

*Shiit!*

My hand curls against current of sharp pain. I pull my stinging fingertips from the sand.

“Dex?” Iker asks.

“Give me a sec!” I clench my fingers as the pain dulls out. I carefully feel around the sand. It’s something round, hard, but not metal—more like stone.

In my bloody hand, I lift a human skull from the sand.

“Gah!” I toss it.

“What is it?” Iker says.

“Du—dud drop!” I call back. I need to relax.

“All right then, crawl out and we can—” Iker stops.

“What’s up?” I pause.

“Hey! HEY!” Iker shouts away. The steel plate wobbles overhead. “Dex!” Iker shouts at me. “Get up! Hurry up!”

I crawl out to Iker’s feet. He grips my arm and yanks me up with my pulse. He lets go of the plate.

“We gotta go!” Iker points up, then sprints away.

Oh no. I look up. A bright red flash flickers directly over us and cracks—an explosion from atmospheric re-entry. Molten drops of shrapnel shower directly over us.

Shit.

I build to a sprint while Iker crosses the dunes. The fire roars louder, followed with the patter of bolts, screws, and shards overhead. Where’s Rodd?! I look around, no sight of ‘im. Wait, fuck it, where’s the skiff?! We’re running the right way, but I don’t see it. I look further on the horizon—at a crimson sand cloud sailing away. Son of a bitch.

“Iker!” I call out.

“I know!” Iker shouts back, loudly panting while in full dash.

The wind heats up. How do we get out of this? We need cover—a ship panel sticking out of dunes, something at an angle? A gust of smolders surrounds us, and suddenly I can only see my hands—I can barely breathe. Dry coughs spew from my lungs as the hot air singes my lips and an explosion howls nearby, then the shockwave smashes my chest. My legs buckle; I’m tumbling down a dune with burning sand pelting. I need to pull myself up. Get up. *Get up*. I grit and get to my feet, weaning while my ears ring and my skin burns. I cough again—there’s blood this time. I trot into a painful jog with pain in my chest. Does it matter if I run?

“Kid!” Iker’s muffled voice calls out. I listen for the source. “Kid over here!” There’s a whistle sharper than the ringing. Iker’s close.

I stumble through the burning smoke, following Iker’s whistle through the crackles until I see through ash clouds. There’s an arched metal beam planted in the dunes. Iker’s figure waves from underneath.

“KID! C’MON!” He shouts.

My quads remember how to run. I patter through the sand as another explosion thunders nearby and red sand whips my face. I dive under the arch and lay out. My heart hammers in my chest between coughs and wheezes. Holy shit.

“That fucking kid!” Iker growls. “Son of a bitch made a run for it when I was holding the plate! And he started the Skiff by himself? What the fuck?”

“Taught ‘im—too well.” I cough. I need to pause before speaking. Chest hurts. Lungs tired. “Any—other crews—make it?”

“Couldn’t see.” Iker sits down, watching metal comets rain fire through smolders in the sky. “We’ll wait ‘til the storm passes.”

We watch in the shade. In the barrage of roaring explosions and wailing winds, Phanes expresses the rage we feel in our bones—for being born on such a shit colony planet. God, I’m tired.

“Don’t doze off,” Iker says.

“Sorry.” I sigh.

Iker takes a deep wheezing breath. He closes his eyes while the boom of falling space debris echoes further away. Sun rays breach through dispersing ash clouds.

“You good?” Iker sighs.



My chest stings. I lift dad's jacket and my shirt. A swollen purple bruise covers my right side, fuck me. I let go and lean back. Let the sand cradle me.

"Trustin that kid..." Iker spits in the sand. "We shoulda sabotaged, taken a part of the solar engine before we left the skiff or somethin." Iker shakes his head. "Can't trust none of these new guys. Hope he gets fuckin burned by the scrap."

Iker opens his eyes and pauses, looking my way. I scowl back.

"What? Don't check me. Thinkin ahead keeps you fed—fed means alive," Iker scoffs. "Think the showers stopped."

I don't hear explosions either. He lifts and leans me on my good side.

"Let's get out of—" He stops and squints up.

"What's up?" I squint up.

Whoa.

A bright blue fireball pulses and streaks through the atmosphere, breaking through tall ash clouds. The sky illuminates iridescent blue, and then there's a thundercrack across the dunes. My chest feels the boom. The fireball splits as a chunk withers into a smoke trail and glides over us. The rest of the comet tail crashes into the horizon.

"Damn," Iker murmurs.

I gaze up at the smoke trail leading to the world's edge. I wonder where it leads.

"C'mon, kid." Iker snaps me out of it. He watches the sky again as I wrap my arm around him.

"Right, sorry." The chest pain feels worse as Iker carries me from our cover.

Suddenly a low hum vibrates under my boots. I look out for the source. Skiffs hovering our way lead crimson cloud trails. The other crews! Iker waves his free hand. We're gonna be all

right. The skiffs slow into settling sand clouds before they come full stop, engines squealing around me and Iker. A captain steps down reeking of cigarettes. The light casts his face in deep shadows under the sun.

“Happen to ya skiff?” The captain asks in a lowly tone.

“New guy took off with our boat.” Iker sighs.

“That’s rough.” He nods and purses his lips, smacks. “Well, we can take ya back, but yer explaining to Brantley what happened, and ya can pay us back for service with whatever wage ya get left.”

Iker grimaces, then lays me on the skiff. He hops onboard to my side. The solar engine hums again, and the skiff hovers on.

I look back and up to the re-entry smoke trail, snaking the opposite way in the sky. If we could just profit the loot from that wreck—no, no one ventures far from the City of Wick and lives. I turn back around. It shouldn’t take too long to reach home. Hopefully that’s enough time to explain what happened to the Skiff, and the solar engine with it. We might not eat good for a couple days, but I can spin this somehow—any way to avoid expulsion. I watch the horizon. A smoke cloud drifts from dune to sky, and a cracked solar sail flashes the sun’s reflection our way. Is that—

“Hey,” I try talking with the pain in my chest. “Iker!”

“Yeah?” Iker turns around. “What’s up, kid?”

“The sail.” I point to the reflecting light.

“So?” Iker asks.

“Iker.” I try sitting up.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Iker kneels to my level, his parental hands raised in protest. “You know that kid’s a goner.”

“What’s goin on?” The captain turns around. He bears over me and Iker with harsh shadows disguising his eyes. “Ya good?”

I point to the reflecting solar sail.

“Just ignore em.” Iker sighs. “He wants to go and see if our deserter’s alive.”

“Charitable heart there.” Captain grunts and turns his back to the front.

“The engine,” I manage. “Salvage the engine.”

Iker pauses, then rubs his beard. “You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not,” I groan.

“Those scrap showers earlier—I don’t want to spend anymore unnecessary time out here.” Iker looks away.

“We won’t go hungry,” I heave air.

Iker growls. He’s caved. “Captain!” Iker gets up.

There’s still a chance Rod’s alive.

“Adjust Mast!” The captain shouts. The skiff turns in the direction of the smoke trail.

I know, had it been my first dig, and given the chance, I’d have run too—at the slightest chance to live free—before complacency set in. Maybe that’s why dad eventually did.

The smokestack from the prior storm overcasts the sky. From above, the peach sun dims then vanishes into scattered, lost rays. The Skiff glides quickly to the wreck. I can already clearly see up ahead. The sail made of solar panels has a collective scar from top to bottom. The Skiff is shredded in two and smeared red in blood and sand.

I crawl to the edge as our Skiff stops, but Iker steps in the way, looking down on me.

“I’ll check,” Iker says. “Stay here.”

Iker rocks the Skiff as he steps off with two crew members. The captain takes a seat by me. He pulls a pipe and a match from his pants pocket.

“Let me know if da smoke too much for ya lungs,” the captain says. He lights his pipe and blows a white cloud off the side. I hold my breath for the smoke and what the search party might find. Iker and the crew examine the abandoned Skiff, then the surrounding sand. It’d be hard to track blood splatters or trails out here, and if Rodd’s not with the Skiff—

“He’s probably a goner,” Iker calls out. As usual, just the wreck to confirm it. It only takes a brief check with no body.

The captain flicks his match and extinguishes the flame pinched between his fingers. “Damn shame.” He murmurs. He smokes another drag before standing over me. “Salvage da solar engine so we can get de hell outta here.”

Iker meets my stare, a silent apology from him before he trudges for the engine with the rest of the crew. Maybe the wreckage reminds him of Dad.

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I’m back at 12 years old, welding with a plasma torch, bracing an iron plate, sniffing welding gas rank, and sweating in a Wick repair shop. Dad and Iker aren’t home yet. There’s soft knocking on the door, but the plasma torch is too loud, or maybe I imagined it. There’s another, harder knock, definitely real. They’re back. I swivel off my work stool, and hurry to the doorway, but it’s just Iker leaning there, darkness behind him. He’s bleeding, gripping the doorway, and falling over. I rush to catch him, but he’s resolved to rest on his knees. I lend a hand, but he puts his arms out to block me.

“Kid...”

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“Kid...Kid!” Iker shouts. He snaps behind my ear. “Hey, Dex, you still with me?”

“Yeah, sorry,” I murmur. I look around. The Skiff swerves around metal beams spired from the dunes. More explosions pop in the background. Smoke clouds build.

“Let’s have a look at that bruise,” Iker says. He helps me lift dad’s jacket. Every jerk movement of the skiff stings. “It looks bad kid. All this has got you hallucinating I think.”

I shift and-- “Fuck!” The chest pain stabs me.

“Hold on, Dex.” Iker gazes forward. “We’re almost home.”

I follow that gaze and the whine of steel. The Town of Wick. The repurposed climate rig on six, twenty-meter steel legs crawls toward us. Its metal hooves groan on each slow cratering step. Passengers aboard its dimly lit decks of scaffolding wave. Ember exhaust trails from the twin smog towers on the top deck. They’re burning fuel to reach us.

“We’re almost home.” Iker reassures again. I lay my head back and stare at the smoky sky. The Solar Skiff hum lulls me.

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“What do you mean you lost a Skiff?!”

Stabbing pain twists my chest while standing. I’m not sure how much longer I can keep it up, in-line with the sailors at attention, silent. My eyes wander around the workshop breakroom, to the scattered scrap in each corner against the steel walls, illuminated by flickering yellow bulbs hung on string from the ceiling. Brantley’s footsteps echo around the room as he paces back and forth, down the line of us. He’s tall enough to look down on everyone but Iker.

“How the fuck did you lose a Skiff?” Brantley shouts. “Do you understand how much--” He stops, kneels over, and takes a deep breath. His nostrils flare before he looks up to the ceiling, back at us, and smiles. “Who manned it?” Brantley calmly asks.

Iker sighs and steps out of line. He keeps his eyes down.

“Of course.” Brantley scoffs. He stops at Iker. “You never can keep a crew in line, can you? Always a deserter with you.”

I see Iker’s fist twitch before he composes himself. He stares at Brantley’s boots. “I take full responsibility for the loss in property, sir. I--”

“Iker and responsibility are non-synonymous to me.” Brantley seethes and walks away, back turned. “You of all people should know...” Brantley turns around. “The cost of an entire solar-skiff, and I can’t stress enough—costs more than the *entirety* of your lifetime wage. That’s even if someone collected on your life-insurance, right now.”

Brantley could put Iker on a literal life-debt.

“That’s why this is coming out of everyone’s wages today,” Brantley decrees. My pulse skips. It’s harder to breathe.

“But we recovered the engine?” The captain speaks up now.

“So?” Brantley shrugs. “Can you ride on an engine? Can the engine sail? No, I’m talking about the cost none of you consider: the price of solar panels, the cost of wiring, the cost of welding an entire skiff from scratch! Engineers ain’t cheap; they’re busy enough keeping the rig up and moving.”

I need to interject here. “Bu—”

“Which is also why everyone’s wages ‘el be garnished until the full debt is repaid,” Brantley finishes.

Bullshit! “Wait!” I pound out the words. I massage my bruised side, but it stabs me back. I look at Iker, but he’s still staring down, jaw and fist clenched.

“Got somethin to add junior?” Brantley callously smirks as he eyes the other sailors. I look up to meet Brantley’s stare.

“I can fix it,” I wheeze. “You don’t have to garnish the wages because I can fix it.”

Brantley side-eyes me and keeps walking down the line. He rolls his neck and sighs. He’s not used to being interrupted (or spoken to).

“I’ll build it! For free! I’ll dedicate all my time, energy and resources!” I say.

“Now there’s a thought.” Brantley rubs his chin. He paces back to my place in line and looks down on me. “But you’re just a scavenger, so how’ll you make this work? You an engineer and I didn’t know?”

“I grew up in the welding and repair shop, sir.” I keep at attention. Either my heart’s pumping, or my chest feels inflamed. “I’ll work nights til it’s done. Gimme two days, and if you don’t like what you see, you can outsource to someone more expensive, but I know I can do it, and I can do it for free.”

Brantley smirks and kneels in front of me. Eye level. “What was your name again?” He asks, empty brown eyes calculating my worth.

“D—Dex.” I stutter. The air is thinning.

“Dex!” Brantley smirks. “I like the initiative.” He looks back at the other sailors in the row, blank-faced, eyes forward. “Y’all see this? Dex here is showing real initiative! Work-ethic!” Brantley laughs while scanning the other sailors, still frozen and at attention. He looks back at me. “You sure you want to be wasting your time for this lot? Doubt they’d do the same.”

I look at Iker, eyes down, and then at the unmoving faces of the sailors in line. I spot the captain, dark shadows over his eyes concealing terror.

“Hey!” Brantley grabs my chin and forces me to meet his eyes. “Eyes on me, kid.”

“Sir, yes sir,” I wheeze.

“What was that?” Brantley leans an ear in.

“I’ll fix the sailor, sir!” I barely push out the air. Don’t cough in his face.

“We’ll see.” Brantley hisses as he lets go. He walks up the iron stairway overlooking the breakroom and sighs. “You’ve got a deal, kid. 48 hours. For 48 hours I’ll hold on garnishing, but if for *any* reason I don’t like the job, I *will* collect on *everyone* here. You all got that?”

Everyone silently nods. Brantley can still garnish, even after I make the Skiff.

“You’re all lucky you have a young-person willing to pick up your slack,” Brantley tsks. He opens the door to his box-office at the top of the stairs and slams the door closed. My legs can finally rest. I kneel on the steel floor. Standing’s too much.

“Dex--” Iker stands over me. I hear the footsteps of the sailors, filing out of the breakroom, murmuring until I can only hear echoes. I guess the rest of em got nothing to add. My heart thumps so fast.

“Dex?” Iker rests his hand on my shoulder. I focus on him until my vision fuzzes, blurs, and suddenly I’m laying out on my side. I can’t move. My eyes shut.

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I taste a full breath of air while laying on my back and staring at the ceiling. A sweet viola plays with banjo strums and a chorus.

I hate country music, but I’ll make an exception—being close to my deathbed.

“Ah! Yer awake!”



Is that Doc?

His thin face looks down on me with a glint in his glasses. His ginger hair flops over his face before he brushes it back with his hand. “Ya had us scared there for a minute!” Doc’s face reels back and out of my personal space.

How many hours have I been asleep? I need to get to work on that Solar skiff asap—

“AH! AH!” Doc shouts. I hear wheels squeak towards me. Doc sits beside me and rests a hand. “You’d *better* not get up yet. Used almost half the plaster gelly in the colony, and I barely got you awake from all yer hemorrhaging.”

“When can I get back to work?” I grunt.

“Seriously, kid?” Doc takes off his glasses and wipes them down. His restless green eyes look on me. “You need to sit the fuck down.”

“You gonna feed me if I do?” I cough. “Where’s Iker?”

“The big guy waited at yer bed. Told em it’d be awhile.” Doc sighs. He wheels away and reveals Iker, sitting on a folding chair, asleep and head nodding.

“Now, ya give me just a few minutes, lemme check your vitals, ight?” Doc wraps a blood-pressure cuff around my arm. He starts puffing. “What happened out there?”

“A shit-show,” I sigh. The cuff constricts my arm. “Lost a sailor.”

“The other sailors told me about your bet with Brantley--120 over 70.” Doc wheels away.

“Which is why I gotta be good to move ASAP,” I say.

“I heard ya the first time.” Doc wheels back and lifts my shirt. The bruise mark is gone—plaster gelly’s a beautiful thing, more time-efficient than stitches and surgery if it can hold the tissue in place. The residue gleams on my wound, where the rest must still be diffusing in. Doc

places his cold stethoscope on my chest. “Deep breath...again...and again...and again, good. Ok, now sit up for me.”

“You sure?” I ask. Doc glares and waits.

“Ok, ok.” I sit up. No pain, just tension.

Doc places it on my back. “Ok—”

“I know.” I breathe in and out. I’ll never take it for granted again.

“All right wise-guy.” Doc changes the placement, then takes it back. “Yup, yer good.”

I swivel to the edge of the medical bench and dangle my feet. Doc leans on his desk with a clipboard. A radio blasts country by him. Music players don’t come cheap. Doc wheels over to Iker, upright and asleep. He deserves better rest.

“Oh! Wait!” I protest, but Doc claps behind Iker’s ears. Iker leaps from the folding chair in boxing stance.

“Yer boy’s good and ready!” Doc shouts. He wheels back to his desk.

“Geeze, Doc! I was about ready to give ya a couple licks.” Iker grunts, his shoulders still squared-up. He looks around the white tiled room, the medical bench, and then focuses on me. He drops his shoulders. “Kid, you all right?”

I hop off the bench. I never thought walking upright could be a blessing. “I’m ready. I’ve gotta get back to work.”

“Well, all right, tough guy,” Iker walks to the glass door exit and presses his palm on the wall. The door swooshes open to the side.

“Thanks, Doc.” I smile.

“Go on, get outta here, and don’t let me catch ya here again. Yer too young.” Doc says waving us away.

Iker and I step into a steel corridor, dimmed red with emergency floodlights and a thread of sunlight crossing the wall. Workers scurry with carts of scrap parts. A pair of workers on smoke break lean against the other wall, watching the Blood Dunes whip up sand in the distance through a slit where the sun shines through. I barely made it back from there.

“You hungry?” Iker asks.

“Yeah.” But mostly tired.

A security patrol marches our way, keeping hands close to their holsters under their dusters. Iker and I start down the hall while they watch us. Keep walking, don't stare back. Don't give em an excuse to take a power trip and beat your ass. The patrol marches by, and I quickly glance over my shoulder. They turn the corner. We're clear.

“Great, now, about dinner--” Iker trails.

“I don't think there's much at home, but you can whip something up for you, right?” I ask.

“Just for me?” Iker tilts his head.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Where you goin?” Iker asks.

“I need to get to work on rebuilding the Skiff, remember?” I see bleaching sunlight at the end of the hall.

“No offense, kid, but 48 hours? And on top of Skiff sailing during the day?” Iker asks.

“I'll be home later tonight to catch some sleep in-between,” I say.

I taste dry air sweeping through the corridor exit. Everything blurs under the peach sun until my eyes to adjust. Two immense towers haze into view, then the smoke drifting from the tops, and the security guards in dusters posted all around. The Town of Wick bustles as Iker and

I walk onto the central deck. I look around. The marketplace is set up with dozens of metal tents and huts covered in camo tarps with lines of scavengers and welders waiting outside. We walk further. The tarps progress into more vibrant colors. Royal blue curtains and sigils of the botany clan have long lines of scavengers, welders, and engineers carrying cash rations, waiting for food handouts. Iker stops his tracks before the ration line. I hold up.

“Look, why don’t you just come home with me and catch some sleep right quick?” Iker insists.

“Nah, I’m feeling more energized after taking a nap at Docs.”

“You weren’t taking a nap at Docs. You were getting bootleg surgery,” Iker protests. It’s funny how he shows he cares.

“Look, I’ll be all right, promise. I’m just gonna take a minute.” For peace of mind.

“You always be doin that.” Iker strokes his beard. “’ight, kid.” Iker sighs and steps into line without me.

I walk the opposite way as customers cross between me. I want to rest at the edge of the rig and get some solitude, some stillness. The crowd dwindles as I reach the edge of the rig platform, braced by railing. I lean against it. A gust from the Blood-Dunes wails over the conversations behind me as the horizon fades into deep violet. Clear skies though, not even an echo of scrap showers. The gust settles into breeze at the same time as my thoughts.

I almost died today—for cheap. Rod did.

I sit on the deck and hold myself, weeping; I hold the sleeves of dad’s jacket. He could play his guitar to me on a day like this, anything to feel less afraid during sunset. Every day I think I understand more of how he felt on Phanes. The struggle over your right to exist, and how it drains you. I feel his jacket flap in an arid breeze until it falls low and stops.

The Blood-Dunes have a moment of silence for what it's worth. There's a ripple in the heat haze below the rig—shadows fading from nightfall, and the temperature dropping.

I should get to work.