Lawless Lands

 There was a breeze; so soft and gentle it could be mistaken for the boy’s own breath. It was a whisper, softly telling the boy all of its secrets. The Sandlands was a loud place, not in a booming way, but in the way that the constant ticking of a clock would sound in an empty room. The orange sands of the Sandlands were softly whisked away, brushing over his youthful face, orange specks sparkling over his tanned skin and mixing in with his black hair.

 He sat still, letting the colors of the Sandlands bring him in, mixing him into its canvas, hiding him within it. Every breath he let out mixed with the soft breeze, floating away with it, becoming one with the Sandlands hot breath. He was overheating in this spot, hidden in a dead bush, the sun barely shaded and beating down on him. His sweat dripped down from his face into small puddles on the ground, turning the single specks of sand into one, mushing them together into a darker spot.

 Off in the distance, waves crashed onto the shore, their sounds like a muse enticing him. He desperately wanted to follow the muse’s song, to break free from the dried-up bush he sat in and float atop the waves, drifting slowly away into the water, cooled and refreshed. Instead, he clenched his fists a little tighter, letting his nails dig into his palms, cutting himself off from the hook the ocean cast on him, freeing him back to his dreadful existence.

 The ground started to vibrate, sand bouncing around the little bush, landing into his puddles, mixing together. A rumbling sound accompanied the feeling, coming closer and closer. He stuck close to the ground, digging his body into the sand, clumps of it creeping into his clothing, itching his skin. His eye twitched, pushing at where it itched, trying to block its entrance.

 A dune buggy flew past his vision, a loud, whooping cheer coming off it. An older man was sitting on top of it, tied down to its roof, and it sped down the Sandlands. His silver hair was chopped short, bald spots littered his head, and he looked messy and unkempt. His smile was gummy, multiple teeth missing. He was laughing maniacally, clutching his stomach and holding onto the torn, measly strap that kept him tethered to the vehicle. The boy in the bush watched on silently, soaking up as much information about the man as he could.

 “That is fun as hell!” the old man said once their buggy stopped moving.

 “Shut up, horse,” a scrawny man said with red hair and pale, freckled skin, jumping out of the buggy and dusting his hands off, “You’re so obnoxious.”

 “You shut up, Jack,” Horse said to him.

 “Yeah, shut up, Jack,” a dark-skinned woman said, jumping out of the buggy, “I wanted to ride on the top!”

 She had curly black hair pulled away from her face into pigtails and brown eyes that were alight with amusement and insanity. Energy radiated off her as she bounced up and down, trying to smack Horse’s feet as he swung them back and forth. Eventually, she managed to hit one of them, sending it flying back into the buggy, and he cried out in pain.

 “Owe! You piece of shit!” Horse said.

 “No, Peace!” she cried, “My name is Peace!”

 “You ain’t peaceful at all!” Horse yelled back.

 “And you ain’t a horse!” she retorted.

 “Shut up!” Jack cried out, “God, you both are so annoying.”

 A tall and lumbering man stepped out from the driver’s side of the car, shaking it as he did. He was tan and muscular. His shirt was tight on him, showing off the mountains of muscle he had. He was quietly looking over all the people in his group, his presence hushing them. Once they were settled, he reached back into the buggy and pulled out a fourth man with dirty blonde hair and pale blue eyes who was smiling up at the sky.

 “Hello, everyone,” the man being pulled out sighed, “What a lovely day. Do you guys hear the ocean over there? It sounds so peaceful.”

 “The hell happened to Bassy?” Jack said.

 The tall man shrugged, “I’m not sure.”

 “Damien! You gotta smack him; then he’ll snap out of it,” Peace said.

 “Yeah, smack him right in the face!” Horse said, sliding off the car and joining her.

 Damien blinked at them, shaking his head and dropping Bassy to the floor. Bassy chuckled when he landed, sprawling out in the sand, snuggling into its warm embrace. He lazily turned his head from side to side, his hair utterly filthy with dust and sand. Peace laughed at his antics and kicked him in the leg, yet he didn’t move a single muscle. Instead, he hummed peacefully and closed his eyes.

 Jack groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose, “We’re never going to get anything done with you dumbasses!”

 “Yeah, Bassy,” Peace said, kicking his leg again.

 A grinned up at Peace, sighing, “All I feel is peace.”

 Peace’s face crinkled, “No, you don’t!”

 “Shut up, Peace; he isn’t talking about you!” Jack told her, shoving her to the side to look inside the buggy. After a few moments of rummaging around, he pulled out a syringe with the remnant of a shiny golden liquid within it, “Liquid gold? You took liquid gold! Are you stupid?”

 “No,” Bassy responded, “I’m enlightened.”

 They continued their bickering, all the while the boy in the bushes silently watched, taking stake of the area and gathering as much information as he could. He’d heard of this group before; they called themselves the Five Musketeers. The name usually made people laugh at them, shaking their heads and not taking them seriously, but that was always their first mistake. The people who underestimated them were always the first to go and never heard from again.

 There was a slight shift in the sand a few meters to his right. Barely noticeable if someone hadn’t been paying close attention. He took note of it, paying close attention to the spot before returning his attention back to the group. They were still arguing, only now; Peace had her hands in the buggy, slowly pulling out a large weapon. Jack continued his rant about they were unprofessional, keeping all attention on him while Peace rushed to the side of the buggy, placing the gun on its back and firing quickly at the spot where the sands had shifted.

 Everything went silent, the Sandlands stilling in quiet anticipation. The boy’s heart was racing now, beating a mile per second, watching in silent horror as the sand where Peace shot turned dark red, the body still buried beneath it, left to rot. Peace laughed, shooting another few spots near the bloodied sand, turning it all red.

 The boy hadn’t even noticed anyone in those other spots, but Peace did, going crazy and laughing maniacally. His hands shook violently, and he clenched them together, willing them to stop lest the crazy woman spotted him and shot him dead too. Some sand nearby broke apart, spreading wide and revealing multiple people dressed in orange garbs, faces covered by masks and goggles, all shouting now and taking fire at Peace.

 Jack grinned at the sight, hiding behind the buggy, occasionally poking out to shoot at them. Horse screamed at the top of his lungs in pure joy, climbing back on top of the buggy and shooting at the other group, not missing a single shot. Damien pulled out a different weapon, a large launcher, shooting explosives at the sand, eyebrows raising in amusement at each body that went flying.

 Eventually, the shooting stopped, and each person that had popped their head out of the sand was now lying dead in a puddle of their own blood, mixing with the orange to create a canvas of death and destruction. It was horrifically beautiful. The group was all cheering now, high-fiving each other and complimenting the other’s handy work.

 Then brown met blue, his gaze finding Bassy’s, who was staring straight at him. His blood turned cold, lungs no longer working. Bassy smiled at him, leaning back on the buggy. He still looked dazed, not completely aware of his surroundings. The boy silently prayed he wasn’t really looking at him, hopefully just staring off at nothing in his drug-induced state. Or maybe he didn’t even notice him; maybe he was just staring at the bush. Either option would be preferable.

 His hopes were crushed when Bassy waved at him, wiggling his fingers mockingly as he started to laugh. The boy reached down into the bush, knocking around at the branches, scratching his hands, and drawing up blood. It dripped from his fingertips and mixed with the sand, side by side with his sweat. He finally found his gun, grasped it tightly, and prepared to shoot.

 When he left his home last week, he was prepared to fight; the situation he was casting himself into was dangerous. He knew it was risky going out with so little experience, he was only fourteen, and he’d only been on this God-forsaken planet for three years, but he had no other choice. They were running low on money, his dad and him, and his dad had no intention of getting up to get any. He was too busy trying to find himself at the bottom of a bottle, the anniversary of their tragedy quickly approaching.

 He had told his dad he was leaving, taking his dad’s gun with him and some food. He didn’t know how long he’d be camping out in the Sandlands, but he knew he had to be the first one there for the event. People came as early as they could, hiding out and sleeping there for days, sometimes weeks, if necessary, to get some loot.

 It was in a bar he was cleaning for some money when he heard about it from two drunks; the Welcoming Party, they called it. When a new batch of people were taken from Terra and brought to the shithole he was on now, punishment for their crimes against humanity. Their families would accompany them and would also be punished for their crimes; Terra’s Council of Authority said that it was to encourage people not to act out. That didn’t work out so well for Isaiah, his dad ignoring the warnings.

Isaiah shuttered when he heard about the new Welcoming Party. He had clenched his broom tighter, remembering his own. The chaos and destruction, death’s aroma filling the air. His dad was sober then; he had carried Isaiah, who had been frozen in fear, off the ship, and to safety, killing dozens in the process. Isaiah tried not to think about how easy it was for him to do that, not wanting to think about what kind of crimes his dad committed that brought them to this planet.

His dad wasn’t like that anymore, and when he left last week, his dad stared over at Isaiah, smiling wobbly at his son, unaware of what was going on, “Have fun, Isaiah. Be safe.”

Isaiah didn’t give him a response, heart clenching painfully at the reminder of who his father had become. Back at home, his real home, he was so loving and caring. Always involved in Isaiah’s life, willing to listen to him for hours. There wasn’t a single situation where he didn’t have some wisdom or knowledge to impart to Isaiah; he seemingly knew everything. After his mother and brother’s deaths, though, that knowledge vanished into an endless stream of alcohol.

He shook his head, refusing to think of his dead family, but now Isaiah yearned for his dad’s knowledge as death looked him in the eyes. He wished that his dad was there now, his old dad—the one who protected him and kept him safe from maniacs like the Five Musketeers. The one who was kind and generous but also deadly and wise.

“Puffers down!” Horse yelled, “Those sons of bitches are the worst! Good thing we got ‘em now instead of dealing with ‘em later!”

Peace nodded in agreement, “You’re welcome!”

“You ain’t done shit I haven’t done before,” Horse said to her, scowling.

“Just say thank you, old man!” Peace shrieked.

“Nah, you only killed a few of ‘em; I killed, like, a ton of ‘em,” Horse said.

“You bastard!” Peace shouted.

“Will you two stop it? We’re not done yet,” Jack said to them.

Bassy started to laugh, still staring right at Isaiah, reaching for his gun, and singing, “Yeah, we aren’t done yet.”

He placed his hands on his gun while Isaiah started to lift his own when a loud booming sound was heard. Everyone looked up into the sky where the sound originated, a giant chrome ship coming in from the atmosphere. Bassy giggled in delight, dropping his hand from his gun, his previous mission forgotten as a new one appeared.

Isaiah sagged in relief, taking deep breaths to regulate his emotions. He needed to be on top of his game if he was going to get into that ship and find its core. It was what kept it moving and made it able to pass through space at such high speeds. Back on Terra, it was far less valuable item. A small amount of it was used to power people’s homes back where he was from. Here though, it was different. They didn’t have anything like the core. When he was at the bar, he overheard someone talking about how it was a high-value item, but only for one particular person. Apparently, they were the only person on the planet who knew how it worked. He didn’t know who that was yet, but he had every intention of finding that out.

“Here we go,” Jack said, pulling out another gun, the two of them pointed down at the ground, “Be on the lookout; the Birds should be coming here soon. Slavers too. Most importantly, though, keep an eye out for Quirky; I heard he’s planning on stopping by here.”

Peace shrieked in delight, “Quirky! Oh, I love Quirky! I can’t wait to see him!”

Jack groaned, “He isn’t your friend today, Peace, remember that.”

Peace frowned, turning her attention back to the ship that was getting closer and closer. The sunlight bounced off of it, hitting Isaiah right in the eyes. He burrowed down deeper into his bush, keeping himself hidden away from its sights. He knew what would happen next and was unsure how the Five Musketeers would get out of it.

The chrome ship’s bottom broke open, revealing four different turrets. They were long and dangerous, scanning the area beneath them for potential targets to take down. Isaiah stayed in his bush, hidden away from its menacing eyes. The Five in front of him didn’t take any such precautions, instead giggling again to each other in delight.

“Do it now, Damien,” Jack said.

Damien nodded, pulling out the same launcher he had out, flipping a switch on it that opened up the top of it, revealing a circular opening. He took aim at the ship, its sights set on their group, the buzzing getting louder and louder as it prepared to shoot them down. It never got the chance to do it, Damien pulling the trigger, releasing a blast at the turrets. The turrets went crazy, spinning around and around, blasting white lasers out randomly at the sand before falling off the ship, landing on the ground with a loud thud, shaking the ground. The ship started to swerve erratically. Its movements were unpredictable and violent.

Jack whistled, “Thank you Quirky for making that weapon!”

The ship was only a few meters off the ground, preparing to crash land when revving engines were heard. Isaiah looked to the left, where six large trucks were rolling in, dozens of men on top of each of them, shooting at the Five Musketeers along with the ship. The Five Musketeers went on the other side of their dune buggy, shooting at the fellow group, a fight breaking out. Damien used his launcher whenever he could, shooting down two of their trucks instantly

“Focus all attention on the Slavers!” Jack shouted, “Don’t let up for a second!”

Others started to pop out of their hiding places, rushing towards the scene. A group of people came in on dirt bikes, revving past the trucks, shooting at their tires. Out towards the ocean, some people pulled themselves out of the water, stripping themselves as they ran towards the ship, reaching into the sand and pulling out hidden weapons, guns blazing.

Whistling sounds sounded behind Isaiah. Dozens of figures appeared in the sky, all in a group with what appeared to be wings on their sides. They quickly approached the scene, dodging bullets that flew past them, threatening to ground them. They were quick and agile, not easy targets for anyone as they fought each other.

The ground shook, and the ship was now landed, preparing to open its doors to release its prisoners, when a final figure appeared under the birds, walking over one of the Sandlands hills. The figure had one hand in its pockets, strolling casually towards the ship, while the other hand tossed a device up in the air, catching it with ease each time.

As it approached, Isaiah could make out more and more about it. It wore a long brown coat down to its knees and brown leather boots. It was nicely dressed, with a white shirt tucked into its pants, and not a wrinkle was seen. Isaiah looked up at its face, It had a cattleman hat on, keeping its hair back and away from its face that was obstructed by goggles that sat atop its head and a mask that covered its mouth, looking almost like a grin with metal teeth smiling at him.

Then, it stopped tossing its device, placing its thumb over one of its buttons as the birds passed overhead, casting shadows down onto it. It looked up in the air, watching as the Birds passed overhead, pulling the device down to the ground, pressing the button, and tossing it high into the air. It soared upright, shooting at them like a rocket, before it blew apart, a wave coming off of it.

The device clipped the birds’ wings, their bodies no longer soaring as they malfunctioned. Birds came falling down to the ground, landing into heaps all around the figure who walked forwards without sparing them a single glance. It sidestepped, a body falling right where it once stood, rolling off to the side in the sand. Another fell right in front of it, body crushed and mangled as it stepped right over them, continuing its journey to the ship.

The crush of a body sounded to Isaiah’s right, making him jump, losing his balance in the bush and falling out of it, looking over to the side where a bird lay mangled and broken. Only their mouth was visible, the rest tucked away into their attire, and blood came out of it in a stream as they moaned in pain, body broken beyond repair. Isaiah shook, unable to look away as they drew their last breath, slumping further into the sand.

With a shaky breath, he looked up, freezing when he saw it standing a few feet in front of him, still and staring at him. They both continued to stare, locking in a trance as the Musketeers and the Slavers ran to the ship, fighting each other to the entrance. Isaiah didn’t blink once, staring at the masked face, looking for any trace of empathy.

Finally, after what felt like hours, it shook its head and continued towards the ship. Isaiah watched it move, smooth yet robotic, pulling out yet another weapon from his hip. It was a launcher smaller but similar to the one that Damien had used, and it was pointing it at the trucks. It shot at them, blowing up the remaining trucks that Damien missed earlier, and strolled up to the Musketeers.

Isaiah sat puzzled on the ground, dazed and confused by its kind actions. His mind burned with questions, curious and afraid of being shown such mercy, but he pushed them back. He had to make it onto the ship before anyone else did, or he wouldn’t make it to the core in time. He scrambled up and off the ground, gathering his things and preparing to board the ship.

There were only a few remaining Slavers; the rest of them burnt to a crisp in the explosion, continuing their fight with the Musketeers. The figure watched them fight for a moment before it joined in their clash. Two of the slavers went up to it, one holding a gun, ready to shoot, dead on the floor within seconds, a bullet hole straight through the skull. The other roared and shot at it, but it was quicker and shot the other man dead.

“Look! It’s Quirky!” Horse shouted out, laughing.

Peace perked up, slowing down her stabs to the body below her, “Oh, Quirky! Hi, Quirky!”

It, the man, or Quirky, rather, continued past them, not saying a single word in greeting. He continued to fight any of the slavers that came up to him, giving them all a beatdown that left them paralyzed or dead. Isaiah used this opportunity to run to the ship, each of the Musketeers talking to Quirky while he fought the slavers, making a good enough distraction for Isaiah to enter the ship and get what he needed.

He ran through the Sandlands, keeping away from most of the fighting and sticking to the ground. He’d pause at different bushes surrounding the area, allowing people to pass him by to join the fight. Most of the people that passed were killed instantaneously, either intentionally or by a passing stray bullet. He continued his trek, steering clear of most of the trouble.

Then, as his luck would have it, one of the ocean dwellers spotted him, eyes narrowing before he started to shoot at Isaiah. Isaiah ducked away from the bullets, Isaiah’s body hitting the ground with a thud as he continued his torrent of bullets. Isaiah raised his gun, took a deep breath, and shot back at the man. The man ducked away, rolling on the ground into a kneeling position, gun held steady, aiming right at Isaiah’s head.

The ocean dweller was dead before he had the chance to shoot. His body fell to the ground as his peers ran past, most of them falling alongside him. Isaiah turned to where the bullet came from, freezing when he saw that it was Bassy who had killed him. He had a lopsided grin on his face, casually killing dozens of people like it was his normal day-to-day business.

Once most of the ocean dwellers were dead, Bassy looked away from them and to Isaiah. His eyes widened, and he started to laugh breathily, taking aim and shooting. Isaiah managed to dodge out of the way, barely missing the bullet that whistled past his face. He kept his head down, sprinting to the nearest bush, zig-zagging all over the dunes to avoid Bassy’s aim.

Eventually, the bullets topped reigning on him, and Isaiah was left alone beside the ship. He looked back to Bassy, who was now involved in a fight between two other men. Bassy was still laughing at them; even with sluggish movements, he managed to outdo them, taking his knife from his pocket and slicing through the air. One of them fell from the blade, Bassy turning his attention to the other man and stabbing him in the eye.

The man’s scream rang through the Sandlands. Isaiah shook his head, looking away and keeping close to the ship, slowly maneuvering to the entrance. The fighting still raged on, the Slavers’ numbers dwindling while random groups appeared and took their place. Just as Quirky and the Musketeers were about to shift their focus onto the others, another few trucks pulled up to the ship, barreling towards them at high speeds, shooting down anyone in their path. Isaiah snuck into the ship while the others watched them come, taking a deep breath when he finally got in.

The walls were all white, sterile, and suffocating. Isaiah’s shoulders tensed up, jaw aching from his teeth clenching together. It looked just like the ship he arrived on three years ago. There were four separate rooms inside the ship, each containing prisoners. One room was for adult women, the other for adult men, the other two for children, separated into boys or girls. They were all strapped into their seats, forced to sit and wait for the doors to open and their straps to release before they could bolt and try to survive. Besides those rooms, though, were a few others: the cockpit, the engine room, and the most popular of all, the supply room, where the loot sat.

He walked through the ship, glancing around each corner as he did. He tried to remember where the ship’s cockpit would be. Luckily, it would be mostly empty, no one ever going to it, much preferring the supply room where the loot could be found. He had to hurry to find it, the prisoners would be released any second now, and if he didn’t get to the cockpit, then he’d end up dead.

As he searched the ship, a loud buzzing sound rang through the ship. He bolted into one of the hallways, trying to hide from the prisoners as they shouted fights ensuing. A heavily tattooed woman escaped from one of the doors first, eyes wide and afraid, before she sprinted into the hallway across from Isaiah, trying to find her way out. Others came after her, the pounding of their fleeing feet mixing with the pounding of those entering, looking for blood and loot.

Isaiah did his best to ignore the symphony of bullets that played in the background, their melodic tune swift and sudden, mixing in with the drumming of bodies hitting the floor. He could hear more people running, dancing along to the music while people sang along, screams echoing off of the wall, short and sweet or long and prolonged. Death’s conducting was unrivaled, bony fingers swinging like a baton as his orchestra fell down, a continuous encore as they were replaced in the never-ending symphony.

 Isaiah did his own dance through the halls, searching as quickly as he could, hoping to beat the imminent traffic that would come after the show was over. The longer he looked, the more his heart pounded, the bass of it melding with the music outside. Slowly, he could feel himself approaching the stage, death beckoning Isaiah towards him as he tried to fight against the rush of people moving forward.

 Room after room, beat after beat, and not a single sign of what he was looking for. He could barely walk now, his legs shaking violently, tapping along on their own violation. He begged them to stop, trying to reason with them that the music wasn’t good and that the voices were too high-pitched and had uneven beats. It wasn’t a song to dance to; it was a song to run from.

Finally, dripping with nervous sweat, he found the cockpit. It was empty; no living person sat inside the self-driving ship. The song picked up pace in the background, matching his stressful energy as he rummaged through it. He whined in frustration, body nearing the stage, a bloody instrument on the floor waiting to be played. He cut and broke open different panels, trying to figure out where the core was.

 A bright white light encompassed the room, casting a spotlight on Isaiah. He was now center stage, the instrument in his hand slowly slipping out of his fingers, much to Death’s disappointment. Isaiah’s song would’ve been the sweetest. His youthful and innocent melody desperately needed in a piece so filled with violence and rage.

 Isaiah pulled the core out, all white light beside the core’s fading into darkness, leaving nothing but the soft red glow from the emergency lights overhead to cast its sinister light upon the musicians. He stood up from his position on the floor, staring at the core in wonder and awe, smiling at the light. He opened up his pocket, stuffing the core into it when he heard the grand finale; the cocking of a gun, cold metal pushed into his skull, death bowing to the crowd before motioning to the stage where Isaiah stood alone.

 “What do we have here?” the man holding the gun asked.

 “A kid here, huh?” A different man said.

 Isaiah didn’t speak, tremors wracking his body as the men laughed, “Kid thought he could sneak on here and take something, huh? Stupid idea, but what else do you expect?”

 “I bet he’s desperate,” the other voice said, walking around the man holding the gun, standing right in from of Isaiah.

 He could barely make out the man’s face in the darkness, only able to recognize his wrinkled and splotchy skin along with thinning brown strands of hair. His eyes didn’t seem to have color in this lighting, appearing as blackened holes in his face. He lowered his head, placed his fingers on Isaiah’s chin, turned his face however he pleased, reached down to Isaiah’s side, and pulled out his gun.

 “I bet he’d sell pretty well,” the man said, pocketing the gun and grinning, “I don’t see any scarring or deformities.”

 “Well, that’s good,” the man with the gun said, “How about you tie him up then, Fox?”

 “Got it, Grizz,” the man in front of him, Fox, said, “Keep the gun on him, don’t want the kid getting any funny ideas.”

 Isaiah was so cold, blood turning to ice as the man pulled rope out from his bag. They were the Slavers the Musketeers were talking about, the ones who came in the trucks. Every possible way this could go wrong played out in his head. There was no way he could get out of this, he was so stupid even to think he could manage to get the core, and now he’d be enslaved too. Now he wished he had sung along to the tune from earlier, the sweet release of death seeming far better with each passing second.

 His hands were tightly wound in front of him, Grizz and Fox getting the job done quickly. Isaiah kept silent, unable to find the words to speak or the will to fight. Now, more than ever, he wanted his dad here. He wanted him to save him, God; he wanted him to save him.

 He was harshly spun around, Grizz looking at the knots on Isaiah’s hands before looking at his face. His eyes widened slightly, black pits becoming even larger. Isaiah’s gut churned, the expression on the man’s face making him feel ill. He put a hand on Isaiah’s face like Fox did, far gentler and far more sickening.

 “You’re right, Fox; he’ll sell just fine.”

 Footsteps sounded from behind Grizz, lighter and slower. Grizz and Fox looked back at the hallway, watching as a figure slowly approached them. Isaiah could barely make the figure out, the hallway too dark for him to see properly. He bowed his head, not wanting to deal with another slaver, hoping that whoever this was would leave him alone.

 Fox and Grizz held up their guns, aiming them right at the figure, “I’d stop there if I were you.”

 The figure stopped, a glowing orange light appearing where its mouth was, and in a robotic voice, asked, “What do you got there?”

 Fox growled, “Don’t worry about it; I suggest you get lost before anything happens to you.”

 Grizz was met with silence, the figure in the hallway still and quiet. Fox scoffed, shooting at the figure five times. Isaiah expected to hear a thud, the body of the figure in front of him falling to the ground with the shots he took. That never happened, however. Instead, the bullets clanged against the metal paneling of the ship.

 “What the hell?” Grizz asked.

 “Wrong move,” the figure said.

 A loud pop went off to Isaiah’s right, making him jump, and the other two lost focus of their target. The three of them all looked up simultaneously, expecting to see the figure but finding the hall empty. Fox walked forward a single step, ready to go and find the figure, when the brutal sound of metal clashing with his fabric-covered stomach stopped him. Fox groaned in pain, doubling over and letting go of Isaiah. His groans quickly turned into gurgles, a knife cutting through the air and slitting his throat wide open.

 Hot blood fell onto Isaiah’s face; Fox fell to the ground. Grizz quickly let go of Isaiah, who fell to the ground beside Fox, his blank and empty eyes staring lifelessly at him. Isaiah looked away from him, a short and loud yell catching his attention as Grizz was sent to his knees on the ground, the figure right in front of him.

 Isaiah’s breath caught in his throat, the figure’s shape far easier to make out this close, the familiar sight of a billowing coat and cattleman hat atop his head greeting him; Quirky. He was holding a gun to Grizz’s head as the man on his knees looking up at him. He was quaking in fear, trying his best to catch his breath.

 “I don’t like people who fuck with kids,” Quirky growled through his mask.

 “Please,” Grizz begged, “I’m begging you, please don’t kill me! Please!”

 Quirky tilted his head, “That’s a shame; because I don’t want you to beg. I want you to die.”

 A single shot rang out, and Grizz’s body fell to the floor on the other side of Isaiah. More blood pooled around his body, seeping away from him in little rivers over to Isaiah, soaking through his pants, coating him with a metallic scent. It was so stifling and overwhelming that he choked on it, forgetting how to breathe.

 Quirky knelt beside Grizz’s dead body, rummaging through it for a few seconds, cursing silently when he couldn’t find anything, before moving on to Fox. He did the same thing again; all the while, Isaiah watched him, shaking like a leaf in a hurricane, close to ripping away from its branch and losing all control. Eventually, Quirky stopped rummaging around their corpses, standing up and slamming his foot on the ground, making Isaiah jump and whimper.

 The sound drew Quirky’s gaze back over to him. He watched as Isaiah shook for a few moments, the silence stifling. Quirky was menacing so close up, his silhouette shrouded in a coat of red, a glowing hue that seemingly originated from his body, a vision from hell. He was the devil himself, falling from heaven and right onto the two men who were now dead on the floor, crushing them and dragging them down with him.

 “Stand up,” Quirky said.

 Isaiah looked up at him, lips parting enough for his salty tears to sneak in, “What?”

 “I said stand up,” Quirky snapped, “Or I’ll leave you here to die, your choice.”

 Isaiah picked himself off the floor, struggling to move with his hands bound and the floor covered in a thick coat of blood. He managed to get his feet on the floor, feeling like a newborn fawn, legs shaky and flailing underneath him. He was almost upright when he slipped on the puddle, almost falling forward when a hand shot out, grabbing his shoulder and pushing him upright.

 “Stand up,” Quirky said, “Stop falling; it’s pathetic. Get a hold of yourself.”

 “Sorry,” Isaiah said, shaking.

 Quirky reached down to his belt, pulling out his bloodied knife, “Give me your hands.”

 Isaiah’s eyes widened when he saw it, too afraid to move. Images of Fox’s murder flashed behind his eyes, the gurgling sound and the feeling of blood on his face. He tried to pull himself together, reminding himself that Fox was a bad person, the blood on that knife belonged to someone bad, but he couldn’t manage to do it.

 “For fuck’s sake,” Quirky growled, reaching down and forcefully pulling Isaiah’s hands up, “You’re a pain in the ass; I should’ve fucking killed you when I saw you outside.”

 Quirky started to cut Isaiah free, all the while, his lips trembled, “Please don’t kill me, I’ll do anything, just please; I just want to go home.”

 “Then you shouldn’t have come here,” Quirky said, finally cutting through the rope, freeing Isaiah.

 Isaiah’s hands fell numbly to his side, bouncing off the core that sat in his pocket, a sickening reminder of his time here. Outside, he could still hear the sounds of gunshots; along with it now was also a loud and grating wrenching sound, people tearing away at the ship for parts. He focused on it, trying to control his panic and dread. He much preferred to listen to the horrors of the outside world if it meant he could ignore his own.

 “Give me the core,” Quirky said, snapping Isaiah out of it.

 “The core?” Isaiah asked.

 “Don’t play dumb with me,” Quirky said, “They didn’t have it on them, which means that they were too stupid to take it from you, so hand it over.”

 Isaiah nodded, reaching into his pocket, enveloping the core into his hand, the warm metal buzzing beneath his fingertips. It soothed him, melting away his anxieties and fears and keeping him grounded. He squeezed it tightly, about to pull it out, when he paused. This little core was all he came for here; it was all he wanted. Having this singular object could potentially house and feed him and his dad for months, something he desperately needed.

 He remembered when he was younger when his mom and brother Xavier were still alive, and his dad was warm and thriving with life and kindness. The days when they had so little. His dad would go out, doing whatever it took to feed his family. He was always so tired then, the circles under his eyes deepening with each passing day, but his smile was so bright that it brightened them, masking them away from his family.

 One day he came home, and blood was found all over his clothes. Isaiah and his brother were sent to their room, his mom rushing over to him. His brother didn’t ask any questions, tugging Isaiah and telling him that it was time for bed. Isaiah feigned sleep that night, waiting until Xavier’s breathing slowed and his body slouched into the bed before he tiptoed to the door, listening in on his mom and dad’s conversation.

 “Why do you do this, David? It’s too dangerous to keep this going! You’re going to end up dead!” his mom said worriedly.

 His dad sighed, “I have to, Layla. It’s for a better future, not only for us but Xavier and Isaiah too. I need to give them a chance.”

 “They also need you, David. More than anything, they need you,” Layla said quietly.

 “And they’ll have me,” David said, “For as long as I can be there, they’ll have me; and no matter what the risks, I’ll take care of them. I’ll always do that, no matter how bad it gets.”

 Isaiah spent the next day clinging to his dad’s side, bombarding him with hugs and affection while his mom watched sadly on the side. His dad didn’t complain about it once, accepting it with open arms and big smiles. Isaiah would never forget that day; his dad’s bravery and compassion were traits that Isaiah wished to inherit one day.

 Now, he felt like a coward. He didn’t do anything when those men grabbed him. He couldn’t find the strength to move or fight them. This mission he sent himself on was to keep him and his dad afloat, to prove that he was strong and brave like his dad. To show his dad that he could be there for him like he was and maybe even inspire him. Perhaps if he came back and showed the progress he had made, and how strong he had become, then his dad would come back. He felt weak and afraid now, the exact opposite of whom he wanted to be, but that didn’t mean he had to continue like that; he could try.

 So, looking right up at Quirky and into his covered eyes, he said, “How about a trade?”

 Quirky didn’t say anything for a few seconds, staring at Isaiah with his hand outstretched before speaking, “A trade? I just saved your life, and you want to trade?”

 Isaiah nodded, “I’m grateful you did that for me, but I still think that the core’s value is worth something. How does 20,000 sound? Doesn’t have to be cash either, can be something worth that amount.”

 “Fuck off kid, stop playing stupid games with me,” Quirky said, pushing his hand out further, “Hand over the core, or I’ll take it from you.”

 “Go ahead and try,” Isaiah said, “But I’ll fight you for it, and I won’t let you leave with it; you’d have to kill me to get me to stop.”

 “Alright, fine,” Quirky said, pulling out his gun, pushing it into Isaiah’s forehead, stopping him in his place, “I’ll kill you then; I don’t give a shit.”

 The cold metal of the gun pressed into his head, freezing time for a moment as Isaiah’s fears tried to claw their way back into his heart for the umpteenth time that day. Quirky’s hand was steady, his body still and dead set on getting what he wanted. Isaiah could see that he wasn’t willing to leave without the core, its importance to him was obviously enough to get him here and kill without remorse, but there was one thing that Isaiah was almost entirely positive he wouldn’t do.

 “You won’t kill me,” Isaiah said simply.

 “Really?” Quirky asked, “Wanna bet?”

 “Actually, yes,” Isaiah said, “It’s a bet that I think you’ll be okay with. If you can kill me, you get the core and I’ll have no say in it. If you can’t, I’ll tack on an extra 10,000 to the original price I gave you. Deal?”

 Quirky didn’t say anything, pushing the gun further into Isaiah’s forehead. Isaiah didn’t relent, allowing Quirky to push the gun as much as he wanted. Every sane and normal part of his brain told him to back off that he almost died multiple times today, and his luck would run out. Every time he felt that urge, he squashed it, thinking about his dad back home in their little apartment, about how they needed money soon or they’d be homeless and hungry. His dad was brave enough to push forward for him, so now he’d do the same, no matter how bad it got.

 Eventually, the gun on his forehead started to shake, Quirky’s shoulders shaking with his silent laughter. He brought the gun down and away Isaiah’s head with a small snort, twirling the weapon on his finger before placing it back in its holster. He shook his head at Isaiah, reaching further back on his belt.

 “Alright, fine; you win. I don’t have any cash on me, though, just a weapon that will sell for around 40,000 if you’re smart,” Quirky said.

 “It doesn’t have to be that high,” Isaiah said, “30,000 will do.”

 “Nah, it’s fine,” Quirky said, pulling out a small chrome weapon in the shape of a gun. It had a different look to it, though, tinier.

 “Are you sure?” Isaiah asked, “I don’t want to take too much from you.”

 “Too late for that,” Quirky said, holding out his hand for the core, “Now give me the damn core, and I’ll tell you who to trade this with.”

 Isaiah eyed the weapon one more time before he pulled the core out of his pocket, immediately illuminating the room in its white glow. Isaiah could see Quirky’s face a little cleared now, the mask and goggles still intact. He could see a few dents and scratches on his gear, one being a dent in the shape of a bullet on his goggles.

 They both handed the items to each other at once, pulling the other away. Isaiah squeezed the chrome weapon, holding it against his chest while Quirky examined the core, pulling it up to his goggled eyes before he pulled them up slightly. Isaiah examined his eyes, noting the almond shape and green color before Quirky pulled the goggles back down.

 “Do you even know who you were going to sell this core to?” Quirky asked.

 Embarrassment heated Isaiah’s cheeks, “Well, not exactly. I just knew there was someone out there willing to pay a real hefty price for it.”

 “Yeah, there is,” Quirky said, “And that’s me, and you just fucked me over. You’re lucky you aren’t dead now; most people who attempt what you did end up that way.”

 “Well, I’m thankful that you didn’t kill me,” Isaiah said.

Quirky scoffed, “Don’t thank me. You beat me fair and square; I couldn’t have made it any more obvious what my weakness was.”

Isaiah smiled slightly, “Yeah, you don’t fuck with kids.”
 “Right, now shut up. I don’t want anyone else hearing that shit,” Quirky said, “Now, back to business. Your gonna wanna sell that to a man named Gecko. Ask around at any seedy bar, and you’ll find out who he is real quick. He’s an asshole, but he won’t try to rip you off, especially not for that.”

 “What is this exactly?” Isaiah asked.

 “I call it the ‘Fuck’em Up’; that’s all you need to know. Don’t try to use it either; you’ll only get yourself killed,” Quirky warned.

 Just then, a man rounded the corner, slick with sweat and blood, when he eyes the two of them. Isaiah turned to him, watching as he gasped for breath and approached them, footsteps uneven and crooked. Quirky took a step forward as he approached, subtly placing himself in front of Isaiah. He had his gun out already, aiming it at the man as he stumbled closer.

 “Give me that core, or I’ll fucking kill you,” the man slurred, his head wound revealing itself in the light, a large sharp object sticking out of it.

 Isaiah’s stomach churned, and Quirky’s voice rang out, “Turn around.”

 Isaiah did as he was told, turning away as Quirky shot the man, body hitting the floor and gun holstered all within a second. Isaiah looked up above the man’s body at the hallway. He didn’t want to see what became of him now, preferring to keep some nightmares away.

 “Alright, I’m going,” Quirky said, walking forward, “Do what you want.”

 Isaiah watched him walk away for a moment before he chased after him, sliding a bit on the floor from the blood. He didn’t say anything further to Quirky, the man’s shoulders already tense and body on high alert. Isaiah didn’t distract him, following behind him as he led them out of the ship, ignoring the dead that littered the hallways. Isaiah did his best to do the same, keeping his eyes pointedly on Quirky’s back.

 Staying so focused on one point left Isaiah vulnerable to attack, something he should’ve recognized before he did it. Unfortunately, he didn’t recognize that in time as someone came barreling at him from the left. Hands wrapped around his body in a second, both of them tumbling to the ground. He whacked his head on the ground, making him hazy and confused as he was pinned down by who could blearily see was the same tattooed woman from earlier.

 He looked over to Quirky, hoping that the man would help him, when he saw him locked in a fight of his own against two other men. Isaiah had no doubt he would win, already almost done taking down one of them, but he wouldn’t be quick enough to help Isaiah. The woman above him wrapped her hands around Isaiah’s neck, pushing down tightly and stopping the air from reaching his lungs. He tried to buck her off, writhing and fighting beneath her, but it was no use. She was far stronger than he was, and no matter what he did, he wouldn’t be able to stop her.

 His vision started to go black, little spots dancing around when he saw another woman approaching from behind the tattooed woman. The new woman tapped on the tattooed woman’s shoulder, momentarily causing her to lessen her grip on Isaiah’s neck, giving him a chance to breathe before she was pulled violently off of him and stabbed straight through her forehead. The tattooed woman fell to the floor, a gaping whole in her forehead.

 The new woman cheered at her kill, jumping up and down in glee. Isaiah recognized her cheer, realizing that Peace of the Five Musketeers had been the one to save him this time. She was still bouncing around when she turned around and landed her eyes on Isaiah, not yet seeing Quirky, who was now done killing the other man and wiping blood off his face. Peace smiled sadistically at Isaiah, clutching the knife in her hands tighter, ready to pounce.

 “Don’t kill him, Peace,” Quirky warned before she came at him.

 Peace stopped, snapping her head to the side and squealing, “Quirky!” before running at him full speed and enveloping him in a hug.

 Quirky went rigid as she hugged him, uncomfortable with the embrace before he lifted her hand and patted her back, “I’m giving you three seconds to stop hugging me before I cut off one of your toes.”

 Peace giggled, “Been there, done that!”

 She stopped hugging Quirky, looking over to Isaiah, who had brought himself back onto his feet, rubbing at his sore neck. She bound towards him next, leaning down and examining his face with a grin. He stopped rubbing his neck, staring back at her while she watched him. Eventually, she started bouncing again and squeezed his cheeks.

 “What’s your name lil fella,” Peace said.

 “Isaiah,” he mumbled out, her squeezes making it hard to talk.

 “Awe, you’re so adorable!” she said before turning to Quirky, “Is he alright, or should I kill him? I know you said not to earlier, but I also know you have trouble killing kids, so I can do it if you want.”

 Isaiah’s eyes widened, and he panicked, looking to Quirky, who scoffed, “He’s fine, and fuck off.”

 “So mean!” she whined, “I never get to see you anymore! After you and Jack had your weird little thing, you never come by and see us!”

 “That’s because you’re annoying,” Quirky said, “And Jack is a bastard.”

 “No, Bassy is a bastard! I’m Peace!,” Peace said as a matter of factly.

 Quirky shook his head at her before walking away, “I know about your dumb names, Peace; I just don’t give a shit. Now show me where Jack is; I have a job for you guys.”

 Peace cheered again, reaching back and taking Isaiah’s hand, leading him along with her after Quirky. Isaiah didn’t stop her, too afraid of Peace and what she could do. He was okay with letting her lead him along for now, so long as she and Quirky kept him safe. The two of them together were a very dangerous duo who, luckily for Isaiah, had no intention of hurting him; yet.

 They reached the entrance to the ship with no other problems, but the sight that greeted them made Isaiah sick. The other members of the Five Musketeers were all alright, sitting around in the front with bags of loot beside them. Jack was pacing around the front, ranting about something stupid, stepping over people as he did. Bassy was lying on the ground, laughing at the sky, shoulder to shoulder with a man who was no longer breathing. Horse was braiding some dead woman’s hair, humming a tune to himself. Damien was the only one who stood still in a pile of other dead people, listening to Jack and nodding his head.

 “Hey, guys! I found Quirky! He wants to talk to you, Jack!” Peace said, letting go of Isaiah and sitting by Horse

 “Me?” Jack said, zipping around and standing still when he saw Quirky, “Oh, hey, Quirky.”

 All the other Musketeers looked at them, Peace and Horse laughing with each other at their awkwardness while Bassy continued to laugh at the sky. Damien was looking between them, scratching the back of his neck and turning away as they spoke. Isaiah even looked away, the awkwardness so obvious that he noticed it, trying to focus on the sounds of the ocean.

 “Jack,” Quirky said, ignoring the awkwardness.

 “Jack and Quirky sitting in a tree,” Horse sang, “K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

 “First comes love,” Peace continued, “Then comes marriage, then comes fucking in the-.”

 “Shut the fuck up,” Jack said to the two of them, cutting Peace off, “Or I will blow your heads straight off your bodies.”

 Peace and Horse giggled to themselves, trying to stifle their laughter before burying their heads in the sand, kicking their feet up and down as they laughed into it. Bassy laughed even harder, egged on by their laughing, until the three of them turned into laughing puddles on the ground. Damien shook his head at them in disappointment.

Isaiah looked back to Jack and winced at his appearance. Quirky had the benefit of having a helmet, but Jack was left defenseless, his face completely red with embarrassment and anger. He had his hand on his gun, squeezing it so tight his knuckles turned white, a stark difference from the rest of him, which was as red as the blood that stained his clothes.

“What do you want, Quirky?” Jack asked, “I thought we didn’t do business anymore?”

“Y’all definitely don’t do one type of business anymore,” Horse said, cackling with Peace and Bassy.

“That’s it!” Jack raged, pulling out his gun, ready to shoot when Damien intervened, placing his hand on his arm.

“No, Jack,” Damien said calmly, “Not worth it.”

Jack took a deep breath, nodding at Damien’s words and putting his gun down, “Fine, now what do you want, Quirky?”

Quirky, who had been calmly waiting for the trio to stop, spoke, “I need you to take this kid back home.”

Isaiah looked up at Quirky, eyebrows furrowed, when Jack spoke, “And why the hell should I do that?”

“Because if you do, I’ll let you in on a deal I made and give you a share of the cut,” Quirky said.

“How do I know you aren’t lying?” Jack asked.

“Because I’m not,” Quirky said.

Jack stared at him for a moment, “No deal, I don’t feel like working with you right now.”

“Fine, but you’re still taking this kid home,” Quirky said.

“I’m not doing jack shit for you,” Jack said.

“He does a different kind of-,” Horse started but was promptly stopped by a bullet shot right next to his head from Jack.

“You will,” Quirky said, ignoring Horse, “Because if you don’t, I’ll make your life hell and make sure you never cut another deal again.”

Jack and Quirky were in a standoff, both staring the other down. The winds bellowed, shifting the oranges sands in between them. It wisped in swirls in front of them, going back and forth in the air, shifting side to side. Never once did it settle, continuing its unending fight for direction. The others were silent now, watching the show with anticipation, unsure of where the sand would land.

Finally, the winds stopped, sands landing at Quirky’s feet and Jack cursing, “Fine, I’ll take him. I want in on that deal too.”

“Fine with me,” Quirky said, looking back at Isaiah, “Follow them and do as I said with the Fuck’em Up.”

“Okay,” Isaiah said, “Thanks, for saving me, by the way.”

“Whatever,” Quirky said, walking away from him and looking at Jack once again, “Get him home and contact me in two days; I’ll tell you about the deal then.”

“Alright,” Jack said, “Now fuck off.”

Quirky nodded, walking away from their group and off into the horizon, the sands following him as he went. The Five Musketeers stood up from their positions, beckoning Isaiah forward to follow with them. He did as instructed, following them but keeping his eyes on Quirky the whole time. Even when Peace and Horse both cheered, excited to be tied to the top, even when he got in their dune buggy, Jack swearing over and over again about how much he hated Quirky, Damien listening as he started the car, even as Bassy tried to give him some liquid gold, he watched Quirky leave. Until he was nothing more than an orange speck, mixing in with the sand, and the dune buggy drove away.