



JEREMY DALE HALL

**DORIAN
HAWTHORNE**

AND THE HIDDEN GALAXY

WHO IS DORIAN HAWTHORNE? (SERIOUSLY)

When disaster leads to a mass migration of refugees from Lee and Gilweather, survivors from both planets huddle together on Erroside, the last place humans can call home (so they say).

Both refugee colonies now answer to Erroside's Council and an unpredictable, half-bionic ruler who answers to *no one*. Smack in the center of his kingdom is the beating heart of Errosidian pride: a giant, floating arena designed for matches full of bots, bionic beasts, and battle royales.

Behind all the spectacle and assurance of protection, many can't shake the feeling that Erroside is hiding something. But the Errosidians aren't the only ones with secrets...

One Gilweather couple harbors a mysterious, orphaned teen assigned to them after the migration. With no memories of his life before the disaster and migration, Dorian Hawthorne has no explanation for the incredible abilities he possesses that would make him a champion in the arena and a threat to Errosidian control. When hiding his powers ultimately fails and Erroside threatens the people he loves, Dorian agrees to a forced arrangement to perform in the arena for the crowds.

While Dorian wonders what to do to save his friends and his own skin from the Errosidian time-bomb he knows is ticking, a mysterious source on the inside starts leaving him cryptic messages indicating they are not alone in the universe after all. Dorian will have to make a choice between playing it safe and risking everything to protect his friends and find answers to their questions about the universe and Dorian's true identity.

EXPLORE THE DORIAN
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DORIAN
HAWTHORNE
AND THE HIDDEN GALAXY

J. H. D.

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DEDICATION:

For Dorian's first fan club: my kids.

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CHAPTER 1- MAKE IT HOME ALIVE

Everybody wants to be a celebrity these days. Sadly, some might even kill to have their faces on the floating billboards around the arena. With teens all over the planet daydreaming about that kind of airtime, the fact that a reclusive orphan like Dorian Hawthorne became the most famous person in the universe *against his will* is an interesting story.

Ironically, only months before adoring crowds chanted his name, to those same people, Dorian was nothing more than a nameless meat-sack that needed to be removed.

“Get that kid out of the road! I’m already late!”

Rude.

It wasn’t like Dorian just decided to take a nap in the middle of a busy street. He didn’t ask to be rear-ended and thrown from his astrobike either (yet another form of airtime Dorian would rather have avoided). But the real trouble was

the unexpected spotlight and how he handled it. That's why he should never have been there in the first place. He was supposed to be flying under the radar, not over the rainbow. What happened in the seconds after he slid across the pavement could ruin three years of pain-staking secrecy and sacrifice. It wasn't time.

Not yet.

The pain in Dorian's broken forearm at least gave him a reason to groan a little without it being a lie (something he thought the Errosidians did enough of for *everyone*). Good thing he wore long sleeves. Someone would surely have seen the jagged outline of the break under his skin before it vanished like a poorly timed magic trick. Beneath the cover of his brown jacket, Dorian could already feel the warm tingling of the bone fusing itself back together. Thankfully, he still had his head shield engaged when the wreck happened. A concealed break is much easier to hide from street surveillance than a gash across your face sealing up like a time lapse video.

Dorian kept his eyes closed at first, listening to the chatter and chiding of pedestrians. He cringed when he heard the police bot sirens, at which point, he almost wished the

wreck had killed him. For a brief second, Dorian had a sort of out-of-body experience, imagining himself reading his pathetic obituary:

Dorian Hawthorne.

No friends, no money, no family.

Dorian never married or even kissed a girl (that he remembered). Because he never solved the mystery of his missing memories, he never figured out who he really was.

Dorian always thought he would die a rebel hero, not a road hazard. But after three years of hiding and training, it wasn't an army of bots or bionic beasts in the arena that finally took him down. Nope. In the end, he met his demise in the lamest way possible: risking everything for one more glimpse at a girl who would never even know he existed.

He died awkward, alone, and a disappointment to all.

What a waste.

Though the wreck left no lasting damage to anything but Dorian's pride, he felt like he might die of embarrassment, knowing that Painting Girl (a nickname he only ever used in

his head) probably saw the whole thing. Dorian dreaded having to tell his house parents that the entire debacle happened because he couldn't resist driving by that storefront where Painting Girl did her work. He wasn't stalking her. He was just watching her frequently without her knowledge. There's a difference, right? It's like stalking but...sweeter? Looking wasn't a crime. But had he not made a habit of it, maybe he wouldn't have been sitting there, completely distracted, when the other guy blazed in from behind and rear-ended him.

Through his eyelids, Dorian saw flashes of police bots capturing the scene of the pavement-plastered teen. He felt slightly ashamed when one of his initial thoughts was: *How is my hair?* With his head shield still engaged, that messy, brown nest atop his head was still partially obscured, but not for long.

"Rider, sit up and retract your head shield!" the robotic voice of a police bot demanded.

Really? The bot wasn't even going to ask about Dorian's well-being? What if he *couldn't* sit up? To be fair, the machine had no knowledge of Dorian's "gifts." For all it knew, Dorian was as breakable as everyone else on the planet. Even

beneath his jacket and tactical pants, anyone with eyeballs could tell that his height and build were nothing more than average for an eighteen-year-old. Still, a little courtesy would have been nice.

Dorian opened his pale blue eyes to the sight of a white humanoid bot with its egg-shaped head staring down at him, just barely blocking one of Erroside's moons, which were becoming more visible as the sun started setting. He thought it was strange that they designed the bots to look human but gave them no faces, just a vertical black stripe down the center. In one way, it seemed fitting, since their lack of personality matched that of the Errosidian leadership who designed them. Three years on that planet and Dorian still hadn't seen a Council member smile yet.

The only smiling people on the busy sidewalks around Dorian were those wearing smug grins and shaking their heads at him. With or without those snide stares, he could tell they were Errosidians by their uniforms. Full-buttoned jackets sat above the same-colored pleated pants. Darker colors were preferred, like maroon or grey. That made them easy to see

coming amongst the more casual styles of the other races on the planet.

Citizens stood by with hands over mouths or filming with their handhelds as Dorian sat up and reached behind him to press the small head shield housing square attached to the back of his neck. The glowing green forcefield around his head retracted into the small device, allowing a light breeze to lift any fallen bits of hair from his forehead so that his full face could be seen in all its humiliating glory.

Even the *wind* seemed to be mocking him!

Dorian saw his mug in the reflective glass of the building straight ahead of him. Nearly every building in Erroside proper had that same shiny look, which meant that anywhere he turned, he wouldn't be able to avoid facing himself and his poor decisions. Thankfully, Painting Girl worked in the shop directly behind him. Hopefully, she hadn't seen his face.

"Get up and walk," the bot demanded.

Dorian hung his head and allowed the bot to march him over to a small ship parked beside his overturned bike. At least the bot hadn't tried to touch Dorian yet. Having his

reflexes triggered and accidentally redecorating the place with mangled machines and unconscious bodies would have been a bad look.

Dorian quietly muttered his house dad's frequent warning, "Control yourself or end up being controlled by them."

Dorian seemed to be handling the situation better than the man who rear-ended him. The guy had already been seated on a metal bench jutting out from the inside wall of the ship, just inside the open back hatch, where he buried his face in his hands. Dorian plopped down next to him, hoping to avoid conversation. Scolding him seemed unnecessary. Based on the guy's sobbing, he was punishing himself enough already.

The cramped, dimly lit, prison-style space wouldn't have been Dorian's retreat of choice, but at least it removed him from watching eyes. Without warning, metal straps shot out from the wall and latched around both of their waists as the ship lifted off the ground.

“Really?!” Dorian complained as he threw up his hands and growled, “Come on! I just want to go home! I’m fine! We’re both fine!”

Dorian looked to the other guy, asking, “You’re fine, aren’t you?”

The bald, middle-aged man looked up from his hands with a string of snot stretching from his knuckles to his nostrils. Dorian looked away and tried not to gag, saying, “Okay, so definitely not *fine*, but you’re not injured, are you?”

By the time Dorian looked back at the man, the snot had at least been wiped away, but the guy’s distraught stare into space shifted Dorian’s mood from crass to concerned. Without breaking his stare at the wall across from them, the man choked out, “I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention. I was just out for a ride, trying to clear my head.”

“Clear it of *what*?” Dorian cautiously asked.

“They killed my brother.”

Wonderful. Dorian already had a hard time navigating serious conversations without turning them into an awkward mess, but having it suddenly sprung on him like this didn’t help anything. He took a second to gather himself from the

nerves that flooded his stomach. If he didn't say something soon, the silence itself would make it awkward without Dorian having to say *anything*, so he simply asked, "What happened?"

The way the man lowered his voice and covertly surveyed his surroundings before responding made Dorian uncomfortable.

"He and a few others had been plotting to leave for weeks," the man began in a near-whisper, "They had the whole thing planned. He mapped out departure times for F.O.I. ships and tried to follow them out when one of the shield panels opened."

Dorian didn't want to look insensitive, so he tried to keep his mouth from falling open at hearing that the brother would even *think* about such a careless move.

"There's not even a body left to bury," the man ominously added, "just the charred remains of his ship outside the shield."

That part didn't surprise Dorian. No one left Erroside without permission. Their enormous blue proton shield encapsulated all three colonies on the planet and kept out anything that didn't want to become a space crisp. Clearly,

trying to leave ended much the same. The only people who ever passed through the shield were mining ships, Errosidian military officials, and F.O.I.s (Foreign Object Investigators). A few times, some rogue rebel or group tried their hand at leaving, only to be obliterated, making an example of them.

Dorian could hear in his head the typical Errosidian explanation for these rules: “We must maintain as low a profile as necessary, just in case. Unsupervised, frequent gallivanting around outside the safety of the shield endangers *everyone*.”

Dorian didn’t completely disagree. After all, the only reason the survivor colonies of Lee and Gilweather were on Erroside in the first place was because their home planets had been laid to waste by previously unknown creatures called the Dagbon. When the creatures attacked Erroside first and started running into the proton shield like maniacs, they began bursting into clouds of space dust for about thirty seconds until that realization became quite the showstopper. After they fled, Erroside tracked the beasts, which led them to the discovery of Lee and Gilweather, already under siege. Nobody asked Erroside to swoop in and save the day, but beggars can’t be choosers when you’re seconds away from being digested.

Erroside assured everyone that the last of the Dagbon were wiped out. But on the off chance that they were wrong, or any other kind of disaster befell them, it seemed at least practical for migrated survivors to stay together behind Errosidian defenses. Besides, where would anyone go if they left? Thanks to the Dagbon, Erroside was believed to be the last inhabited planet in both the Talamoth galaxy and perhaps the entire universe. But Dorian didn't buy everything the Errosidians were selling.

No one on Lee or Gilweather had heard of Erroside before the attack, so Dorian didn't like how the situation smelled (and not just the stench of dead Dagbon). After getting a taste of the elitism and brutality of his new overlords, Dorian wondered if he had just exchanged one monster for another. Sure, Lee and Gilweather were allowed to maintain their own sub-governments under the larger rule of Erroside. But anytime anyone questioned *anything*, Erroside saving everyone from the claws of space monsters got thrown in their faces and questioners were labeled as ingrates.

"Part of me is actually glad it happened that way," the man told Dorian, "He probably died instantly. Can you

imagine what would have happened if their plans had been discovered before they even tried to leave?”

When the man paused to breathe, Dorian detected a shift to anger in his voice. The guy’s clenched jaw confirmed it as he muttered through gritted teeth, “I don’t even want to *think* about what kind of sick show the Val-Dóm would have put on as their punishment.”

It instantly unnerved Dorian to hear that name. Not only because Dorian despised the behavior of the Errosidian dictator, but because he also knew that they were probably being recorded in the back of that ship. Did Dorian’s new acquaintance want to end up like his brother? The Val-Dóm did *not* take kindly to negative feedback. Dorian’s mind immediately flashed to the two Lee soldiers the previous week who disappeared after being caught on camera mocking the Val-Dóm by doing goofy impressions of him. Those were the last recorded expressions anyone would ever have of those soldiers.

Thankfully, Dorian’s shipmate shifted gears and turned his focus outward, looking up at Dorian and sucking in snot before asking, “You Lee or Gilite?”

Dorian had been hoping to avoid that question (or *any* questions for that matter). But as much as he wanted to just shrug and look away, Dorian could tell the guy was desperately in need of knowing that he wasn't alone in his struggles.

"I don't know what I am," Dorian sighed.

When the guy's brows twisted, Dorian smiled faintly, adding, "I know, I know. It's weird. Erroside said they picked me up with other survivors on Gilweather, so maybe I *am* Gilite, but I don't remember. Something happened to me during the migration. Amnesia, I guess. I don't remember anything about my life before the Dagbon attack."

The man's brows went from twisted to lifted as he replied, "That's heavy, kid. I'm sorry. What about your family? Did any of them make it?"

"Like I said, I don't remember my life before the migration, so I don't know anything about my family. I just assume they died before the Dagbon or in the attack. Erroside's bioscans couldn't match me with any survivors, so they assigned me house parents from Gilweather. I was only fifteen when I woke up here."

Dorian's lack of memory meant that he had no explanation for how he could do things that no one else on the planet could. In fact, according to his house parents (the only other people who knew Dorian's secret), no one from *any* planet could do those things. It was one more missing piece of the puzzle that was Dorian Hawthorne.

"It's been *years*," the man marveled, "You haven't had *any* memories come back?"

When Dorian denied it, the guy simply shook his head and added, "That's rough. I guess I shouldn't complain. At least I have good *memories* of home before all this."

The ship ruined the moment when it jerked and landed roughly. As the hatch ramp descended, the metal straps around their waists retracted and the same police bot from before marched up and in, grabbing the man beside Dorian by the collar and essentially dragging him out. Dorian knew he needed to keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't help but let out an involuntary, "Hey! He's not hostile, wire-brains!"

At the base of the hatch, the bot shoved the man further into the small docking room outside the ship and then turned back to Dorian, pulling a beta blaster on him and

shouting, “Quiet, child! Unless you want me to treat *you* as hostile!”

Since beta blasters used concentrated beta waves to fire radioactive blasts that could burn straight through a person, Dorian decided not to push it and just bit his tongue. His fuming silence worked. The bot inserted the blaster back into a slot on its side. Dorian often wondered what it would look like if a blaster accidentally went off in there. Talk about heartburn!

When another police bot arrived and started taking the frightened offender away, it ate Dorian up inside to watch the way they roughly handled the guy. Had the man’s life been unjustly in danger, Dorian would have attempted a rescue, but the most he felt comfortable getting away with in that moment was shouting, “I’m sorry about your brother!”

The man looked back, moved at the display of compassion, especially from someone whose astrobike he damaged. His chin quivered as he called out, “I hope your memory returns!”

The man barely finished his sentence before he vanished behind a sliding door, leaving Dorian and the original bot alone in the empty steel docking room.

“Me too,” Dorian somberly whispered to himself.

Dorian grew more doubtful each day that his memory would ever return, fearing that he would forever wonder who he actually was. More than just who he *was*, he tired of purposefully hiding what he could *do* and refraining from putting Errosidian bullies in their place. He hated just standing by and watching them tear down good people.

“Soon,” Dorian’s house dad kept telling him, “I can feel it. Any day now, things are going to change.”

The police bot interrupted Dorian’s stoic stare by asking, “Do you wish to charge the perpetrator?”

“I just want to leave,” said Dorian coldly.

“Then proceed to processing and exit.”

The bot pointed to a small window built into the wall beside the exit door, where another bot sat still and silent behind the glass, waiting to take Dorian’s information.

“What about my bike?” asked Dorian.

“It was transported here. You’ll find it waiting outside.”

As much as Dorian tried to control himself, his sarcastic, smart mouth often betrayed him. By now, his annoyance level had gone through the roof, prompting him to snap, “So this whole flight was for nothing?! You could have processed me *there!*”

No answer. The bot simply walked away and vanished behind a sliding door, leaving Dorian to steam and huff alone. He gave his info to the processing bot, and then exited into the vast, rocky terrain around what appeared to be a police bot substation outside the city gates. Dorian pressed the square on the back of his neck to re-engage his head shield, the green of which matched the horizontal stripe on his black astrobike currently hovering slightly above the ground.

“How are you even still working?” Dorian marveled at the beat-up thing as he mounted it.

In fading daylight, Dorian’s astrobike emitted zipping noises as he swerved around sink holes and craters, soaring through the barren land between home and Erroside proper (called “proper” to distinguish it from the nation and planet as

a whole). In his head, he started playing out the conversation with his house parents, James and Tanna Mavern. None of his imagined scenarios ended in anything but disaster. Dorian knew he deserved it. His orders were clear: register for Labor Appreciation Day and come straight home. The Maverns would even have gone on his behalf, except that teens were required to register and participate on their own. Dorian hated the thought of that torturous day. Touring all around the city in a large group provided way too many unknown scenarios that might cause him to have a public freakout. Getting into an accident on the very eve of that anxiety-ridden event was sure to send James over the edge.

As if the day couldn't get any worse, a wave of dread fell over Dorian when his astrobike suddenly sputtered and stalled, causing him to bellow a panicked, "Don't do this to me!"

Darkness had fallen enough that when Dorian glanced behind him for the first time in a while, he noticed the glowing blue trickles of leaked fuel on the ground. Before he even had time to investigate the source, his bike slowed to a halt and died, dropping to the dirt on its flat, wheelless bottom without

any grace whatsoever. Dorian sprang to his feet and retracted his head shield before staring down at the busted fuel cell chamber. He slid out one of the glass cylinders, which was empty long before it should have been. Letting out a loud, frustrated roar, he hurled the fuel cell so far into the distance that it would have vanished on the horizon even in daylight.

With some effort, Dorian would have been strong enough to just carry the bike the rest of the way, but it was the last thing he needed a random surveillance drone to catch him doing. He almost felt like crying, but self-pity didn't feel right either. Had he not been so careless, he would already be home, chowing down on dinner.

"Walking it is," he huffed as he set out on foot the rest of the way.

When the Mavern home finally came into view on the horizon, a mix of relief and anticipation fell over Dorian. That giant metal box on stilts in the middle of nowhere looked like an otherwise normal house had been destroyed by a proton bomb and then put back together by a blind man. Its low-tech design and mismatched squares of salvaged metal might have seemed odd on a planet full of technological marvels, but it

made perfect sense for a cynical man like James Mavern. James didn't trust the Errosidians not to be tracking his every move. The house's bizarre design was the product of haste when Dagbon survivors first arrived on Erroside. They were offered a not-so-generous stipend to figure out their own housing or a spot in temporary, mass housing units. James affectionately referred to the latter as "fancy cages" and refused to wait.

"Let's just take the stipend," James had told Tanna, "We can hire a bot to scavenge for pieces and help us build. I want to get away from the crowds, at least for now. We have no idea who we're really dealing with here."

James' distrust of Erroside's controlled network was why Dorian didn't even have a handheld to signal the Maverns as to why he was late. James had theories. *Lots* of theories. With a humoring smile on the sharply curved lips of her particularly long face, Tanna would sit patiently and quietly on the nights that James went on and on, spinning speculations about what went on in secret behind the scenes on Erroside. James had a smile too (when he chose to show it), but it stayed partially hidden behind his black and grey beard that matched his messily parted hair. While only in his late forties, the wear and

tear of life had aged his face and dimmed his eyes, which carried dark bags and had a suspicious squint to them even at resting.

Dorian knew James would be wearing that squint heavier than normal when Dorian showed up so late. The Maverns risked their lives every day to protect and hide him, despite the fact that he almost killed them during their very first interaction. All James did was put a hand on Dorian's shoulder. The man meant it as a comforting gesture when Dorian got overwhelmed by waking up from cryosleep with amnesia, but it resulted in Dorian nearly breaking James' wrist before tossing him across the room like a dirty rag. Equally as shocking was Dorian panicking and trying to run out of the room at a speed that ended in him accidentally crashing into a wall.

It freaked the Maverns out even more when a slice on Dorian's arm from his failed getaway attempt sealed itself up before they could even open a med kit. But rather than seeing Dorian as a burden or a freak, James and Tanna saw him as a gift. However, they also knew that not everyone on Erroside would take kindly to knowing someone like Dorian existed.

Dorian remembered eavesdropping on their hushed conversation the very night he was assigned to them.

“I don’t even know what to think,” James had whispered to Tanna, “I feel like I’m going to wake up any second now. Am I crazy? How is someone like him even possible?”

“I don’t know,” said Tanna with a stressed hand to her forehead, “My head is just...spinning.”

“He doesn’t even remember who he is,” James marveled, “Maybe he’s not from Gilweather. Just because they picked him up there doesn’t mean he’s necessarily *from* there, right? Maybe he’s proof that there’s something more out there! If his memory comes back, he’ll be able to tell us. What if he’s the key to getting away from Erroside? What if he’s the answer?”

Tanna cautioned him, “He’s just a boy. And he’s afraid. I don’t want to see him as some...*thing*...to be used.”

“You know I didn’t mean that,” James pushed back, “And I’m not the one you should worry about treating him like a plaything.”

The way James ominously made his assertion reflected on fears that Tanna had already been entertaining.

“They can’t find out about him,” she adamantly declared, “If anyone sees what we just saw, it won’t be good. The Val-Dóm will immediately see him as a threat. Or they’ll want to put him in that awful arena. I won’t let them take him and make him perform like a pet for their twisted amusement.”

James rubbed his face, realizing the gravity of their peculiar situation, before sighing, “We’ll have to convince *him* of that. And we’ll have to keep him away from people, at least for now.”

“That won’t be any way to live, isolated and on edge.”

“Better than dead,” replied James, “And hopefully, it won’t be forever.”

The Mavericks knew Dorian had no real reason to trust them at first. They admitted that to him and said that he was free to go see everything for himself. But they also shared with him their fears and offered him safe harbor, in hopes that his memory would return. As powerful and mysterious as Dorian was, from the moment she laid eyes on his bewildered face as

he struggled to process his amnesia, Tanna simply saw Dorian as a lost teenage boy who needed a mother. After three years, Dorian still called the Maverns by their names. But since he didn't remember his biological family, for all intents and purposes, James and Tanna were Dorian's parents.

Dorian wasn't a *normal*, lost teenage boy. His unbelievable strength and speed required him to practice control to avoid exposure. It was a good thing James and Tanna already placed little value on physical possessions because Dorian had a habit of wrecking doors, walls, sinks, drapes, plates, clothes, and everything in between. It was more than freakish reaction speed that made Dorian's reflexes unique. When Dorian felt threatened, his reflexes essentially *took over*, turning him into a sudden, deadly expert at hand-to-hand combat. It often happened at inconvenient times, so Dorian tried to avoid contact and close quarters with anyone other than the Maverns. But he felt conflicted. Every story about someone being abused or neglected by the Errosidians made Dorian feel guilty for hiding.

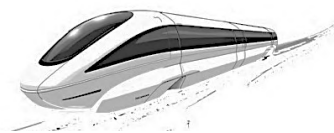
People whispered about the need for some kind of revolution, and Dorian knew that he had a lot to contribute.

But as powerful as he was, he was only one person, and he wasn't invincible. Besides, what was he supposed to do? It probably wasn't a good idea to just walk into the Council meeting hall and yell, "Listen up, jerks! My name is Dorian Hawthorne and you better be nicer or I'll punch your faces through the backs of your skulls!"

As much as the idea of facing a hundred bots with blasters pointed at him sounded like a party, facing the Maverns after his recklessness on the night of the astrobike accident was Dorian's biggest priority. Regardless of how much James and Tanna loved him, that wouldn't save him from the scolding coming his way when he finally arrived home. But when he opened the door at the top of the metal ladder leading up to the house, it wasn't James or Tanna who met him.

An unexpected fist flew at Dorian's face from inside the door, triggering his reflexes. His rapid dodge caused his feet to slip off the top rung of the ladder, sending him into a twenty-foot free fall to the rocky ground below. As he struggled on his back to catch his breath and prepare himself

for part two of the assault, at least one thing about his welcome home turned out the way he expected: grounded.



CHAPTER 2- MURDERERS AND MADMEN

“Dor!” shouted James as he slid down the ladder to their home without even using the rungs.

Before James could reach him, Dorian sprang to his feet and started swinging his fists in the open air. Though James saw only Dorian, in Dorian’s mind, he was suddenly engaged in combat with a black, faceless phantom that lunged at him. The figure vanished just as Dorian’s fist passed through it, but the terror wasn’t over. Dorian fell to his knees in the dirt and grabbed the sides of his head, gritting his teeth and groaning as he endured horrendous screaming voices that started up in his head.

James cautiously approached, making his presence known and kneeling beside Dorian, saying, “It’s okay. It’s not real. You’re alright. Just breathe.”

When Dorian's stiffened body relaxed and he moved his hands from squeezing his head to covering his face, James could tell the episode was over. As much as James wanted to yell at him, this didn't feel like the right time. Instead, the man simply announced a hand that he then gently placed on Dorian's shoulder to comfort him.

One more minor, not a big deal, totally manageable, let's-not-freak-out kind of thing that the Maverns discovered about Dorian was that he suffered from phantom visions and screaming voices in his head.

So... there's that.

Dorian at least referred to the sightings as such. He also experienced a strange vision of lights from time to time. Having dealt with his own mental issues, due to traumatic events from his time in the Gilweather military, James tried to help Dorian cope with the sudden, frightening occurrences. Dorian and James both believed they were memories somehow entangled with his conscious mind, coming through like hallucinations of sorts. What they *truly* were, none of them knew.

While the faceless figures typically took swings at Dorian, the voices mostly screamed for help or *at* him, except for the gentle voice of what sounded like an older woman saying his name. That last one usually accompanied Dorian waking up to a vision of wrinkly hands reaching down from above. Then there was the pattern of lights resembling a circle with a horizontal line through it that frequently appeared in his dreams or even in the dark of his mind when he closed his eyes. Like the other sightings, he had no explanation for it.

Never had any of these things harmed Dorian, but their startling nature sometimes put him in dangerous situations. One such scenario immediately entered Tanna's mind as she fell at Dorian's side opposite James, fearfully asking, "What if this happens while he's right in the middle of the tour tomorrow? This is the *last* thing we need. Maybe I could go with him."

As much as Dorian loved the thought of his mommy accompanying him on his big boy tour, he was already thinking exactly what James expressed when the man said, "We can't go with him. They won't let us."

“What if we say he’s sick?” Tanna desperately brainstormed, “I can get an official excuse from work. The new clinic head likes me.”

“It won’t matter,” James replied, “He’ll just have to go another day. And this happens so sporadically, that any day is as likely as another.”

“And if it *does* happen tomorrow?” asked Tanna.

James started getting irritated, though more at the situation than his wife. He threw up his hands and growled, “I don’t know! But if we push and push for him not to go, it’ll be suspicious. If he doesn’t show up, we’ll have equally undesirable attention at our front door. At the end of the day, he just has to go and hope for the best.”

By that time, James could tell Dorian had finished calming himself, so the man launched into the conversation he originally had planned for Dorian’s return home, asking, “Where have you been, Dorian? And where is your bike?”

“I’m sorry,” said Dorian, “I was in an accident. The fuel cell chamber is cracked. It ran out just a short way down the path.”

Knowing that Dorian's body would be perfectly fine, James kept moving full steam with his interrogation, asking, "What kind of accident? Did anyone see anything?"

"No. A guy just rear-ended me. And it wasn't my fault."

Dorian nearly cringed at the skepticism in James' voice as the man perceptively asked, "And exactly where did this happen?"

When Dorian hesitated, James shook his head and sighed, "A girl, Dorian? You weren't even supposed to be *on* that street. Was it worth it? Do you want them to put you in the arena? Do you *want* to die?"

By this time, the eyes of Dorian's low-hanging head welled with tears as he finally lost it, shouting, "What do you want from me?! I'm sorry, okay?! It was stupid! I know I need to be careful, but I have no life! No friends! I don't even know what I'm doing anymore! What am I even waiting on?! My memory isn't coming back, and I can't hide forever! I'm so...tired!"

When Dorian started sobbing, James just grabbed and pulled him in. As Dorian's tears fell on James' shoulder, the

man assured him with a calmer tone, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do. Maybe we need to think about a new plan of attack.”

James then released Dorian and added, “But not tonight. It’s late. I’m sure you’re hungry and you need to get some rest. Don’t worry about the bike. I’ll be home late from the mines tomorrow, but I’ll fix it. You’ll just have to take the railway in the morning.”

Dorian preferred not to think about the morning, but it came soon enough. His nerves had him up and ready at early light. For someone who spent so much time in his room, you might expect Dorian to decorate it with more than dirty clothes and scrap parts from weird contraptions he built in his boredom. But apart from the hammock bed strung across the center, the only other unique features of the mostly empty room were hologram screens that hovered above a desk near a handful of interesting meteor fragments he managed to score.

In the mirror of his dimly lit room, Dorian stared in disappointment at the reflection of his plain, baggy clothes, sighing, “I look like a deflated parachute.”

As much as he despised it, Dorian's outfit was strategic, designed to neutralize looking like anything more than a walking meat sack with nothing interesting to hide. A boring Dorian would be a safe Dorian if it got him back home with no issues. Before he could even finish feeling sorry for himself, the galaxy's most formal wake-up call sounded from a patrol ship flying overhead:

“Erroside is the last light of the universe.

We are loyal to the Errosidians,

Saviors of Lee and Gilweather,

Defenders of the Talamoth galaxy,

Conquerors of the Dagbon.

Sovereign. Gracious. Eternal.”

“Gracious,” Dorian snuffed, “Like an oozing sore that just keeps on giving.”

Like Labor Appreciation, the twice-daily Errosidian pledge only served to remind Dorian of all the reasons he disliked Errosidian leadership. He wanted to be respectful of authority, but he certainly wouldn't be approving of evil

either. Labor Appreciation Day took place once a year. All eighteen-year-olds from Lee and Gilweather were required to participate. Erroside advertised the event as a benefit for those young, budding citizens. Something about preparation and gratitude. Sure, those were important and the many laborers within Erroside deserved the credit, but Dorian had a sneaking suspicion that the goal had more to do with reminding them of their place. If the Errosidians served in the lowlier jobs, he might feel differently.

Once Dorian finished loathing his reflection, he quietly passed through multiple passageways on his way to the back balcony of the home but froze at the back door. James and Tanna had beaten him to the punch. They sat together outside where Dorian could hear them quietly talking and so hid himself inside to eavesdrop.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?” asked Tanna.

“I’m not worried about him doing something dumb, especially after yesterday’s scare,” said James, “I’m worried about him doing the right thing at the wrong time. With all the protests in the city now, anything could happen at any time and he be caught right in the middle of it. I’m afraid he’s

too good to look the other way. The last thing we need is for him to get thrown into a situation where he feels like he has to be a hero. I want him to do the right thing, but once they know, there'll be no going back. It has to be the right time."

Protests? Dorian hadn't heard about any protests.

"What he said last night was heartbreaking," said Tanna, "You say it has to be the right time, but I can't help but wonder the same thing *he* does. When? And the right time for *what?*"

"I don't even know. But it can't be an accident that he's here. It just can't. Ever since he showed up, things have changed. I used to feel like it was my mission to find a way out of here, but now I know it's *him*. He's my mission. To make sure he's okay and that he's ready whenever his moment comes. His future is bigger than us. He's going to change everything. Somehow."

Dorian waited for just the right moment to break his silence and join them on the balcony. When he did, Tanna embraced him a little longer than a standard morning greeting. Today's felt more like a mix of love and fear. Part of her tried

to pretend she didn't know it was only a matter of time before his ultimate journey would take him away from her.

"I'm going to get dressed," said Tanna.

With that, she disappeared inside. James stood and gripped Dorian's shoulders, asking, "Remember the plan today?"

"Kill at least three people, then rip off my shirt and run around screaming, 'I'm the king of Erroside.'"

"Not funny," James grumbled.

The pair of them leaned over the balcony railing that overlooked the vast, desert terrain behind their home. Dorian attempted to assure the noticeably burdened James, saying, "I know yesterday was bad, but everything's going to be fine today. I'll go to town, do my thing, blend in, then come home just like any other day."

James lamented, "I'm sorry it has to be this way. You know we're trying to protect you. Not that you need it, but you know what I mean."

"I get it."

James hesitantly added, “I didn’t tell you this before because I didn’t want you to have one more thing to worry about, but weird stuff is happening, Dor.”

“Weirder than *me*?”

“Not quite,” said James with a wink, “but still. We’ve had more security bots going with us to the mines on Gilweather. No explanation. And extra ships have been leaving at non-mining times with no human passengers, just bots. They say it’s for test runs on different routes, but I don’t buy it.”

“You don’t think they’re hiding a possible Dagbon threat, do you?”

“I wish I knew. I’m keeping my ears open for any chatter.”

James then turned to Dorian with a greater seriousness in his voice (if that were even possible), warning him, “As of late last night, there are protestors in different parts of Erroside. That means you have to be even more careful today not to get caught in the middle of something.”

“What are they protesting?” asked Dorian.

“The Governor of Lee proposed repopulating their planet and building a shield there to return home. The Council shot it down without a vote of any kind. They called it reckless and said Erroside wouldn’t be involved in aiding it. The Governor was apparently found dead at his home last night. Unknown causes.”

James put those last two words in air quotes with his fingers. He then gripped Dorian’s shoulders again and added, “I don’t know who you really are or why you ended up here with us, but I know you’re meant to do something great.”

“*I* know who you are,” said Tanna as she made her way onto the balcony.

She took Dorian from James’ embrace and wrapped him up, lovingly declaring, “You’re my son. And you’re great just by being you.”

“You know what I mean,” said James, “And today, you’re not Dorian. You’re Borian. A boring, normal teenager with nothing to hide, and who’s going to be late if he doesn’t get a move on.”

Tanna kissed Dorian on the cheek and Dorian rushed to check his hair one last time in his bedroom mirror. After all,

blending in didn't mean being a *complete* disaster, did it? A tiny smidge of dignity was still appropriate. When he finished satisfying his vanity, rather than using the metal ladder leading up to the house, Dorian opted for making an inhuman leap to the dirt below.

“Showoff!” James called from above.

Dorian flashed him a wink and a grin, the latter of which faded as he turned back to trek to the railway, sighing and muttering to himself, “Here we go. Be normal or be dead.”

Dorian despised taking the railway with so many people, but he did have to hand it to the Errosidians on how fast they created their post-migration infrastructure. Since bots don't get tired, hungry, or complain about health benefits, they were able to construct the railway between all three sub-colonies and expand the defense shield in no time. The stop near Dorian's house was nothing more than a tall, narrow obelisk with a red, revolving light at the top, anchored beside a long steel platform on the ground, on which sat several astrobikes.

As the white carrier came into view in the distance, hovering slightly above the rails, Dorian joined the line that

formed to board. He chuckled to himself at how easy it was to pick out each person's home planet, by their clothing, their general behavior, or both. Neither Lees nor Gilites had standard, uniform dress like the Errosidians. Each dressed according to their personal tastes, but usually with a base of loose-fitting, tactical pieces appropriate for the luxurious, barren terrain gifted to them by Erroside. But the most peculiar outfit aboard the carrier car that day repulsed Dorian about as much as the Errosidian uniforms. However, it was filth rather than flamboyance that did the trick in this case.

Dorian sat in the back corner of the carrier, hoping against hope that he was putting off enough of a “dangerous loner” vibe to avoid close quarters with anyone. Despite Dorian's best efforts, a scraggly old Lee man who looked like a walking health hazard plopped right down beside the disgruntled teen. The man glanced over at Dorian, revealing a single, blue, bionic eye. He then extended a poorly constructed metal hand to shake, muttering a raspy, “Good morning.”

Dorian wanted to shake that hand about as much as he wanted to shake the contents of a clogged toilet. He didn't want to be rude, but he had no idea where that crazy metal

appendage had been. Thankfully, he avoided it when the carrier blasted off and the Lee man was forced to grab the seat beneath him to hang on. At the same time, a few hologram screens appeared in the upper corners, scrolling news broadcasts. The old man became so absorbed in the events on those screens that he ignored Dorian altogether, especially when a piece about the Errosidian arena came on.

Dorian was fascinated by how much that enormous, hovering arena in the center of Erroside proper consumed the masses. They practically *lived* for the fights that took place in there; matches full of soldiers, bots, and all manner of bionic beasts the Errosidians dreamt up. The arena was said to serve a purpose other than just entertainment, as a recruitment tool. More people were willing to join the Errosidian military just for the chance to fight in there. And while only executed criminals were ever supposed to die in the arena, Dorian felt uneasy about the way the crowds thirsted for violence. He couldn't imagine himself fighting in there (although it was hard not to have the occasional vision of glory as he unleashed his gifts and shocked the whole planet, followed by an adoring kiss from Painting Girl). But James' warning to him echoed

frequently in his mind: “If they find out what you can do, they will take you and they will *make* you fight.”

The ominous feeling of that threat running through Dorian’s mind intensified when another news broadcast came on, the contents of which prompted a Gilite mother on the other end of the carrier to cover her daughter’s eyes so she couldn’t watch. Dorian himself wanted to look away from the sickening sight but also couldn’t help his curiosity.

A highlight played from an annual ceremony that had taken place the night before. On a stage lined with gold columns stood a man whose very image made Dorian’s blood boil. The Errosidian uniform that the Val-Dóm wore had the same trench coat with high collar in the back as other Errosidian leaders but with the addition of giant silver necklaces with round medallions. The Errosidian Council answered to him, but he answered to no one. “Val-Dóm” was a throne name. Habeas Val-Dóm currently occupied that position. His brooding intensity, coupled with violent outbursts and unpredictability, made him terrifying to most.

Habeas was tall and handsome, with albino hair and eyes. They weren’t always that way. A strange reaction to the

alloys in his bionic organs removed the pigmentation. When the effects couldn't be reversed, he removed the eyes of the two scientists who created the organs, as punishment for their error. Habeas' vanity kept him from altering his face with machinery, but one arm and one leg had been replaced, as well as a couple of internal organs. The Val-Dóm's half-human composition was by design. In fact, he added to it during that very ceremony.

On the screens, with his one fleshly arm outstretched, Habeas gritted his teeth and braced himself while an Errosidian soldier raised a large white blade called a zorrva and then used it to slice the arm clean off. Even Dorian looked away for a brief moment while Habeas groaned in pain, alongside sounds of the cheering crowd physically present for the grim, gaudy ceremony.

In no time, bots sealed the wound and began installing a second bionic arm to replace the mechanical madman's severed limb. Every year, the Val-Dóm had a body part replaced with a bionic version. Not only did it make him stronger, and essentially weaponized, but it also stood as a metaphor. The message? Our humanity makes us weak. The

more we can overcome the emotions that cloud our judgement, the stronger we will become. More machine, less human. *That* was the Errosidian idea of power.

Thankfully, the ceremony highlight switched to other broadcasts before Dorian threw up in his mouth from pure disgust. He looked out the window of the carrier to the sight of towering city structures coming into view on the horizon. Cruising through the massive city gates, empty land turned into rows of those shiny, rectangular houses and buildings. Through a crack in an open window of the carrier, smells of morning pastries and meats hit Dorian's nose as they came closer to the market streets. He would have given his left thumb for a podberry roll to calm his nerves. Those coveted cake-like desserts were filled with bright blue cream made from synthetic berries grown in forging pods. Each cake had three blue dots in a row on top. These were drops of a liquid called menzallite, which amplified the senses. Three tiny drops would be enough to activate the taste buds in a way that made the flavor more like an experience than just a dessert.

When the carrier reached Dorian's stop, he bailed off and headed swiftly down a back alleyway that emerged onto

the sidewalk of one of Erroside's largest market streets. The rush of busy morning life thrilled Dorian, though he tried to keep his head down and stay on the far edge of the sidewalk to avoid contact with people. Citizens and vehicles walked, hovered, flew, and drove in all directions. An aerial view would have looked like a pile of insects had just been smacked by a little boy with a toy zorrva.

The street had a vast array of interesting things: clothes, food, and simulation games right on the sidewalk. Bot shops displayed their latest house bot models in the front windows. Some of the bots even wore and advertised the likeness of arena champions. Fighters good enough to compete for long periods of time became heroes of sorts. Little kids pretended to be them. Kids and adults alike wore them on clothing. Enormous hologram images of their faces and stats hovered above street corners and around the arena itself.

Dorian had to admit that the arena was breathtaking. The early morning light reflected off every glass square of that giant floating orb in the center of Erroside proper. It sparkled with yellow glimmers, like a giant jewel in the sky, and hovered

there until it descended for matches. What an irony: such a beautiful sight filled with death and celebrated violence inside.

Dorian finally arrived at the enormous, dome-shaped building where he was supposed to check in. He joined a small line of youth at the entrance, feeling a rush of adrenaline about the whole process. But as he approached, his attention shifted when he heard chatter in hushed tones along with noticing that most people stared up at one of the large floating screens on the next building over. It had switched from arena stats and other standard morning broadcasts to a bulletin for a murderer at large, with the headline, “Where is Daen Yuliff?”

The former Lee soldier and arena champion had fallen from grace as fast as he had risen to fame. As of a month or so ago, people whispered about him: “Where is Daen? Is he dead? Is he hiding? Will he kill again?” People watched their backs, especially Terrawan, the nomadic, tent-dwelling Gilites whose name literally meant “land wanderers.” By this time, anyone who could stomach it had seen leaked footage of Daen murdering six Terrawan he robbed in transit in broad daylight. Not even the children were spared. What’s worse is that he seemed to enjoy it. In one way, it wasn’t surprising given that

Daen had been discharged from military service due to his overly violent behavior.

The news bulletin previewed a still shot from the murder footage, with Daen's face alongside a warning and offer of reward for information concerning his whereabouts. Daen's large, prominent features sat on his face like a group of boulders, from his wide nose and large lips to his protruding forehead that created miniature caves for his shadowy eyes to sit in. A short, black beard and mustache covered the lower half of his face above a neck almost wider than his head.

One *non*-permanent feature of Daen's in that particular image was the blood running off the side of his forehead and down his cheek; blood that was not his own. Daen clearly knew he had been captured by surveillance. That was obvious from the fact that his picture had been taken the second he looked right at the camera, which meant the image felt like the murderer was staring straight into Dorian's soul. Dorian overheard a conversation in front of him, in which a guy asked what Daen would want to steal badly enough to murder six people.

“Menzallite,” a girl replied, “My father said he was micro-dosing with the stuff, trying to make himself permanently stronger. That’s how his brain got all messed up and made him more violent than he already was. After he got discharged and they found out, he was banned from even having menzallite in his possession. That’s why he had to steal it to get it.”

Messed up and violent. That pretty much summed up the vibe Dorian got from Daen on that screen. Part of Dorian wished he could be in the same room with the murderer, if only for a few seconds, just to show him how little he really knew about strength, menzallite or not. But Dorian knew from personal experience that a higher form of strength came from restraint. That was something he needed today. Thankfully, the picture on the screen changed within a matter of seconds and Dorian’s anger abated when his attention was drawn away by being ushered into the building ahead of him.

Inside that dome, the world looked very different. It felt like stepping onto another planet altogether. In some ways, it didn’t feel like being inside of a building at all. Paved pathways between trees and bushes flowed in all directions,

connecting back to a circular path around a small pond of unnaturally blue water. That was just the ground. The trees just kept going, covering even the ceiling, but upside down!

More curious than this were the people in white uniforms and metal boots walking upside down and sideways along the top and sides of the dome, tending to the hundreds of large, white, egg-shaped forging pods scattered around.

“Defenders of the Talamoth galaxy, Conquerors of the Dagbon...”

Dorian hurried ahead at the sound of a group of about twenty youth (one of many Labor Appreciation groups that day) finishing the pledge before getting started with their tour. He covertly slid into the back of the group to finish the pledge with them. But before they could, they were interrupted by an angry Errosidian youth with the name “Baron” on his badge. He had been leading them in the recitation but was now flailing his arms and shouting, “Stop, stop, stop! Everybody stop!”

A vein bulged in the furious lad’s forehead just beneath his shaved head as he turned his attention to another youth about his same height in the front row.

“Why are you saying it that way? Do you not even know the pledge, Gily?” Baron berated the frightened Gilite.

“I...I do know it,” the Gilite stammered. “My lingatron is busted.”

“Busted? What do you mean?”

Had the nervous boy not been looking down in embarrassment, Dorian imagined Baron’s spit would have been hitting him in the face due to how close they now were.

“I downloaded a program to improve my vocabulary,” the Gilite confessed, “But it was a prank. It makes me say random words. I can’t eat it.”

The Gilite squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head before correcting himself, “*Help*. I can’t *help* it.”

Erroside gave lingatrons to survivors during the migration. These remarkable devices translated languages in real time, meaning everyone simply heard everything in their mother tongue. While most signs in Erroside now displayed all three planets’ languages for convenience anyway, even the written word could be read aloud for the reader to hear its translation through the lingatron. Some people wore the same type of black plug version that Dorian had, which was

waterproof and had a lifetime battery. But others chose to have it installed directly onto the spinal cord. This Gilite teen had apparently done just that, allowing him to install software to directly affect his speech. In this case, it was not in a good way.

By hearing Dorian speak without their lingatrons in, the Maverns discovered that Dorian didn't speak Gilite, Lee, or Errosidian. It was one more mysterious part of not knowing his exact origin. For fear that discovering that oddity would put Dorian in a compromising position, James and Tanna worked hard to teach him Gilite and insisted that he not use his native tongue, to help him blend in.

A smile grew across Baron's slim face, right above the patches of hair below his lip and on his chin. He mocked the Gilite, snuffing, "Serves you right for uploading strange garbage. Why haven't you fixed it?"

"My parents are punishing me by not paying to have it fixed for a while."

Thus began the typical verbal beatdown from Baron's particular brand of Errosidian. A few others with him stood nearby, shaking their heads and sporting that same smug grin.

He periodically looked to them for support as he spoke, which was something they gladly offered.

“Yeah, right. Tell the truth, Gily,” Baron scoffed, “What even *are* your parents? Miners? Shield maintenance? They probably can’t even afford to have it fixed, can they?”

“They can!” the teen snapped, immediately regretting his decision and lowering his voice as he added, “They both work at Gilharbor hospital.”

Baron’s smile vanished as he invaded the teen’s personal space again, offended at the audacity of even slightly raising a voice at him.

“Doing what?!” Baron hissed, “Cleaning floors?”

Dorian couldn’t take it any longer, blurting out, “Maybe they could come clean up your mouth!”

Dorian could hear James slapping his hand over his face and growling upon hearing about this. How could Dorian be so reckless? But then again, how could he not? How could he let this guy be treated that way? The group of youth frantically parted in half to make a path for the enraged Baron as he pressed toward Dorian like a charging animal. James’

assurance to Tanna earlier that morning replayed in Dorian's mind: "I'm not worried about him doing something dumb..."

Dorian thought he would at least make it to the actual tour before blowing that one.



CHAPTER 3- HOW TO GET BLOWN UP

It wouldn't have been all that surprising if a few eyeballs popped out of some of Dorian's tour group's heads and rolled across the ground at the sight of Baron standing toe-to-toe with Dorian. The vein in Baron's forehead looked ready to blow.

"You want to repeat what you just said?" Baron threateningly asked.

"You heard me," Dorian calmly replied, "Or is *your* lingatron busted too?"

Baron clenched his jaw and his fists before putting his face only a few inches from Dorian's and saying with a sort of angry whisper, "You should really watch who you're messing with."

Dorian held back a grin as he replied, “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Baron!” shouted a voice from the front of the group.

Baron spun to see that his superior (and their group guide for the day) had arrived and was staring him down with disappointment through his round, thick-rimmed glasses.

“Not another word! Get up here before I send you back without any credits!”

Baron obeyed the “no words” part but did leave Dorian with one last death glance before taking his place beside his fellow Errosidian students. Dorian then remembered Tanna’s frequent words to James when James got heated about the conditions in Erroside, “Justice, not revenge.” The sight of her gentle face flashing in his mind brought him down from rage mode.

The older man stood before the group in a dark grey uniform that matched his center-parted hair and three-day-old stubble, announcing, “My name is Grig Apon. I’ll be your tour guide for Labor Appreciation. These Errosidian students are here to assist. They will be receiving credit...”

Mr. Apon shifted his eyes to Baron before continuing with very precise diction, "...but *only* if they perform exceptionally well and don't step out of line."

With that, Mr. Apon turned and led the group into the trees, as though he were in a hurry. They stopped at one of the pods nestled between two trees. It was even bigger up close; nearly six feet tall sitting on its metal base. A young, female pod specialist with the name "Cammy" on her badge stood beside the machine, waiting for the group. When she placed her hand on the side of it, a square viewing window appeared on the front. It looked like it had been covered by a fog of some sort that slowly evaporated. A soft, yellow glow filled the pod. In the center hovered an incomplete pair of pants being generated at a nearly unnoticeable rate. Dorian recognized it as Lee in style. After the migration, Erroside used the pods to easily duplicate the basic cultural preferences of survivor colonies, based on the outfits in which they had been rescued.

As the youth crowded around the pod to catch a glimpse, Cammy explained, "It will take a day or so to finish this piece. The pods make everything from food, to clothing, and even certain supplies."

“What are they growing it with?” asked a teen with his nose almost touching the observation window.

Cammy gently and awkwardly urged him backward with her fingertips against his shoulder as she replied, “The pods take some things from their forest here and the rest from forging blocks, which are small bricks of compressed materials.”

“How do they know what to make?” asked the same teen.

Cammy pointed to a small screen on the side of the pod as she explained, “They’re programmed according to current needs in Erroside, which are tracked in ways that are over my head. I just put in the blocks that this side panel indicates.”

“Can you make something *living*?” asked one girl.

Baron and his friends snickered at her from the back of the group. They kept it low to avoid Mr. Apon’s disapproval, but Dorian overheard their whispered insults.

“No, you idiot,” said Baron. “What kind of question is that?”

Cammy responded with more grace but equal brevity, saying, “No, I’m afraid not.”

“If they could, maybe we could grow her a brain,” mumbled one of Baron’s crew.

Dorian bit his tongue and worked hard to ignore them. This was going to be a long tour. Good thing it moved quickly. After the pods, they went to Gilharbor Hospital, where they listened to a brief lecture from a doctor about various medical devices. One such device, a cellulizer, was even tested in front of them. The doctor led them to the room of a patient with a laceration across his head from falling into a crater and hitting scrap metal someone should not have disposed of down there. When the group entered the room, the patient was sedated with his head covered in bandages. The doctor slowly unwrapped the man’s head and whipped out the cellulizer. It looked like a very large writing pen with a line of small lights down one side. Then began an explanation the students did not understand in the least (which Dorian suspected was the showy doctor’s intent).

“The cellulizer speeds up cellular mitosis for regeneration. It pulls from an extremely advanced energy core

in order to facilitate rapid hemostasis, inflammation, proliferation, and remodeling of the tissue.”

Vomit. That’s what many of the students felt like doing. Some from the sight of the wound, but Dorian from the ego. They were there to learn, not to be further confused. But while the big words were hard to understand, the visual was perfectly clear. The lights on the side of the cellulizer lit up one-by-one in the direction of the wound toward which the doc pointed the device. Once all were lit, the doc slowly ran the tip of it just above the surface. As he did, it looked like zipping up a coat. Flesh grew and sealed itself up until only a small scar remained (and some unfortunate hair loss).

Dorian grinned and fantasized about saying, “That’s nothing. Watch this,” and then slicing his arm and letting it do the same thing *without* the cellulizer. But Gilharbor was overcrowded enough already without him filling rooms with patients suffering from Exploding Brain syndrome.

From Gilharbor, they boarded a nearby mining ship and listened to information about the mines that Dorian already knew from James. While the Errosidians deemed it unsafe to repopulate the planets of Lee and Gilweather on the

off chance they were wrong about the last of the Dagbon, they still had a massive amount of energy stores just sitting there. Not to mention Erroside tripled in size after the migration, which meant more need. Erroside deemed it more sensible to take advantage of hyperspeed ships to those planets than to put a strain on Errosidian mining efforts and prematurely deplete their own planet's resources. How do you protect miners from possible Dagbon? Auto-piloted ships carried armed miners straight there, landed them right up to the mines, and extended nearly impenetrable shafts into the ground. Oh, and they loaded up every ship with a double dose of death gas.

You know, just in case?

After the mining ship, the group hit multiple spots of little interest to Dorian, until they finally came to his second favorite part of the tour: lunch (which was second only to leaving).

“Could I get a podberry roll too?”

Dorian made his request through the serving hole of a tiny, dome-shaped, metal food hut in the middle of nowhere. He knew Tanna didn't like it when he ate podberry rolls, but

he really felt the need for a pick-me-up at the moment. Only a few seconds into taking Dorian's order, the man in the hut stopped responding altogether and just stared into space. After enough time to make it uncomfortable, Dorian breached the silence, asking, "Hello?"

Nothing. It was like the man had turned into a statue. Dorian tried again, with a bit more volume. For the first time since the man stopped responding, he locked eyes with Dorian, irritated and pointing to a small red light installed on the side of his head.

"Oh, sorry," whispered Dorian, "I didn't see."

Dorian despised those little red lights. They indicated that someone was in conversation. Wires and receivers implanted straight onto the spinal cord allowed thoughts to be read and transferred between individuals, near or far, over Erroside's controlled network. Since you couldn't tell when someone was having a conversation by seeing a device, or at least their mouth moving, the red light did the trick. It was small enough that Dorian couldn't see it on the side of the man's head facing away from him.

The other thing Dorian just couldn't see was why people weren't paranoid that having that installed in them could go wrong in some way; not to mention the fact that their transferred thoughts might be read by Errosidian leaders. It was the ultimate invasion of privacy. Some people might say Dorian was being paranoid or that it was all in his head. But then again, he wasn't the one with something *actually* installed in his head, was he?

Without a word, the irritated man in the food hut handed Dorian a small sack containing his lunch request and ushered him away with a firm point of a finger. Dorian scanned his palm to pay and walked away, sarcastically muttering under his breath, "Sorry to bother you by supporting your business."

No sooner had Dorian sat down at one of the rusty tables installed in the ground than Mr. Apon told them it was time to move, so Dorian took his lunch to go.

Irritated at barely having time to breathe between stops, Dorian sighed and consoled himself, saying, "Halfway done."

As Dorian's tour group neared Erroside's military base, statues towered over them on both sides of the road. Each depicted an Errosidian soldier slaying a Dagbon. Some of the students tried not to look at the statues. The very *image* of the creatures brought on panic attacks for many. To imagine the Dagbon, picture a boney, black creature the height of two average humans with no visible eyes, nose, ears or hair and a head wider than it is tall. They didn't speak. Instead, they made machine-like, high-pitched screeches that forced people to plug their ears if they didn't want scrambled eggs for brains. The sheer size and speed of the Dagbon made it almost impossible to stop them from tearing you apart before you could weaponize or wet yourself.

While the statues were anatomically accurate for what Dorian remembered of the Dagbon, the depiction of their defeat was a fanciful, "artistic" one that made Dorian roll his eyes. Soldiers never engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the creatures. When the Dagbon attacked Lee and Gilweather, they came out of nowhere and flooded the colonies on both planets for days. Since no one had ever seen them before, no one knew any weaknesses. Errosidian ships arrived without

warning and released the death fog. These clouds of red gas were so thick no one could see two feet in front of their own faces. Dagbon and humans alike started dropping right and left.

Once the fog cleared, Leara, the AI that ran many of the automated processes in Erroside, sent bots into the death fog to locate and carry humans into the Errosidian ships. While Death fog isn't a technical name, it does the job of explaining its effects. Lees and Gilites would have been as dead as Dagbon without the antidote administered on the ships. Seems like a good strategy, doesn't it? When you don't know your enemy's unique weaknesses, just kill everyone and resurrect the ones you want to keep. Not "kill" in the technical sense, given that they weren't dead yet. But they were headed in that general direction without intervention.

Once Leara confirmed that a person could regain consciousness from the death fog, cryosleep was initiated for the journey back to Erroside. Afterward, Leara bioscanned and helped reunite and settle families who had been separated. And of course, orphaned youth like Dorian were assigned house parents from their respective planets.

“I have a special announcement!” said Mr. Apon as the group stood in front of a row of military ships where two soldiers met them to talk.

The soldiers’ uniforms looked the same as other Errosidian outfits with some tactical adjustments, a blue stripe on both upper sleeves, and rank badges. Baron stood in front of the group beside Mr. Apon, who placed his hand on Baron’s shoulder as he announced, “This is actually Baron’s last day before starting his military service. *If* he earns his final credits today, that is.”

One of Baron’s buddies made a loud, animal-like noise in support. Dorian thought it was fitting for someone who acted like an animal already.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Mr. Apon quieted him.

After describing regular training drills and life in the barracks, the soldiers bid them farewell. The tour was almost over. They hit service workers and then the hydrotunnels as their second-to-last stop. That last one fascinated and terrified Dorian at the same time. Erroside constructed enormous pipes for miles upon miles underground. These hydrotunnels transported water from underground pockets and water

sources outside the shield straight into the three colonies. And “enormous” is not an exaggeration. Dorian’s house could almost fit inside of a hydrotunnel. Hydronauts, who worked in the tunnels making repairs, swam inside of them like small fish in an aquarium.

The group descended through a hatch into a dark, steel room that felt like a good place to get murdered. There they watched hydronauts swimming in a tunnel through a maintenance viewing window on the side of one. Deep, dark water crept Dorian out. While he knew the tunnels were sealed, he still imagined some giant sea monster coming out of the darkness and swallowing the hydronauts. As fascinating as it was, he was perfectly fine with the group not staying very long.

Foreign Objects Investigation came in as the final stop of the day. Mr. Apon led them into a brightly lit lab full of investigators in their white uniforms and gloves. White walls, floors, and ceiling made the room even brighter. Rows of metal tables lined the outer walls, filled with all kinds of meteor fragments and strange objects recovered from outside the shield. In the center of the room sat a floor-to-ceiling

circular set of screens with small analyzing pods beneath them, shaped like mini versions of the forging pods. Investigators carefully sorted and placed items into them for Leara to examine.

“Ninety-seven percent of what we find is useless and harmless,” a lecturing investigator told the group, “About one percent is useful and the other two percent are toxic or dangerous.”

Baron and his friends apparently felt too good to stand and listen with everyone else. Instead, they wandered slowly about the lab. Each had already been warned not to touch anything. Dorian went back and forth between listening to the lecturer and watching Baron’s crew stroll around like they owned the place. As Baron made a loop back toward the group, Dorian noticed something interesting out of the corner of his eye. At first, he wondered if his mind were playing tricks on him. A blue glow shown through a hole in a small meteor fragment on a table not too far from him, behind the lecturer.

Dorian blinked a few times and squinted just to be sure. His suspicions were confirmed even more by Baron, who slowly approached the fragment with furled brows and

narrowed eyes, bending down to examine it. Dorian had a bad feeling about it all, which only increased when Baron broke every rule in the book by gently picking up the fragment. Dorian instinctively and hurriedly started toward him, shouting for him to stop.

Baron looked to Dorian, which meant he didn't even see the blue glow growing. Dorian's hurried walk turned into a dash. Panicking investigators started shouting at everyone to back away. Baron's expression morphed from haughty to horrified when he looked back to the fragment. After that, Dorian did what he had been tempted to do all day: he shoved Baron to the ground with one hand and slapped the fragment away with the other, placing himself between Baron and the glowing rock. Unfortunately, Dorian's hand connected with the fragment just as it exploded and sent him flying into a table. Everything on the table (including Dorian) crashed to the ground. Students screamed and dropped, while investigators rushed to Dorian when the coast was clear.

"Everyone out!" shouted the lecturer.

Mr. Apon stayed and received Baron from an investigator pushing him in that direction.

“What were you thinking?!” Mr. Apon scolded him.

Baron ripped himself away from Mr. Apon’s grip and made no apologies. Dorian groaned and stood, concealing his hand.

“Are you okay?” asked one of the investigators.

What a question considering Dorian had just been blasted off his feet by a glowing, blue rock. Dorian lowered his shoulder to keep any reaching hands from examining him, insisting, “I’m fine. What *was* that thing?”

“The two percent,” said the lecturer, “And you just got blown off your feet. Let me see your hand.”

Dorian pushed through the crowd and made for the door, saying, “The table broke my fall.”

Dorian realized how dumb that sounded before the words even finished leaving his mouth, but he wasn’t trying to win a speech award. He just needed to get away at all costs. Juking to avoid Mr. Apon, Dorian left the investigators with some consolation, saying, “My house mom’s a nurse. She’ll check me out. I’m getting out of here, before anything else blows up.”

As Dorian passed him, Baron snapped, “I didn’t need your help!”

Dorian ignored him and kept walking.

“This doesn’t change anything!” Baron called to him.

Dorian passed through the lab door and headed straight for a restroom where he parked himself inside a stall. Thankfully, his arm temporarily went numb from the blast. Otherwise, the hole in his hand would have been excruciating.

“Come on, come on, come on,” he whispered, cheering on the healing process that had already begun.

Flesh and muscle fibers slowly weaved together until the hole sealed itself up. Had anyone else but Dorian or the Maverns witnessed this, they might have questioned their sanity. And while Dorian himself couldn’t explain the phenomenon, he was at least used to seeing it by now.

By the time Dorian left the restroom, the numbness had worn off. He hoped that everything happened fast enough that no one realized his hand had been touching the fragment when it exploded, that way no suspicion would be raised about why he looked untouched. He tried to make a big show of gripping door handles with that same hand to assure anyone

watching that it was okay. Dorian knew he would be glad when the tour was over, but being blown up really sealed the deal. The thought of the railway carrier never sounded sweeter. He could almost taste the nectar of victory at having survived the tour.

Dorian knew better than to push it, but he was making really good time, and he couldn't help himself. Painting Girl's window was only one street over from the railway stop. He wasn't on an astrobike, so getting into an accident wouldn't be a problem (at least of the vehicle kind). Maybe today would finally be the day he would go right in and talk to her? Who was he kidding? The other side of the street would be as close as he got. He could casually stroll by, pretending to look at other shops, and take an occasional, covert glance over, right?

He just got blown up! He needed this!

Minutes later, he found himself exactly where he knew he would end up, but with only minutes to spare before his carrier left. There she was in that window, like always. Painting Girl was a Terrawan. Though they traveled around, they still ran market shops in the three colonies. Dorian couldn't explain exactly what it was about her paintings that drew him

in. Though they were all different, they had a similar style and abstract design. In a strange yet familiar way, they comforted and mesmerized him. But not as much as their creator.

Painting Girl's dark, wavy, red hair cascaded down over her fair-complected face and blushed cheeks that almost looked like she had been out in the cold. Dorian loved how she placed the back of her painting hand to her perfect lips and tilted her head to the side to consider her work after every few strokes. But his favorite thing happened when she turned to look out the window where he could see the biggest, brightest eyes.

Dorian knew how creepy and crazy it might seem to know how much he looked forward to seeing a perfect stranger like that. But another part of him thought that any person who *wasn't* drawn in by the sight of her and her paintings would be the crazy one. And it wasn't like he was peeping through her bedroom window. She painted in that storefront where the whole world could see. It would be hard to be out there for any length of time and *not* notice her. But speaking of time, Dorian needed to hurry, so he remorsefully (but also casually and suavely) rushed away, back to reality.

Maybe one day he would finally speak to her and sweep her off her feet the way he had in his head so many times. At least he stayed upright and off the news for this visit.

Dorian sat in the same back corner of the railway carrier for the ride home, but without his scraggly friend this time. It took longer than normal for the carrier to even move, due to a line of Lee protestors chanting and marching in the direction of the arena, fighting past pedestrians and peace-keeping bots. Dorian assumed their intent was to rattle the Errosidians and interrupt the games. They had better be prepared for potential armed conflict. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

Once the carrier was clear of the chaos, Dorian let out the breath he had been holding. Daylight was fading fast as they crossed the barren land between Erroside proper and home. In no time, he exited the carrier at the stop near his house, but set out walking in a different direction, toward what Dorian referred to as "the Blood Cave," to meet James. Dorian and James did drills in there for Dorian to practice controlling his abilities. It wasn't something they could do out in the open, but after messing up the house one too many

times, Tanna demanded they find another location. A small distance from the house sat a cave they discovered while exploring rock formations in some dunes. It worked perfectly.

Dorian beat James to the cave and went inside to wait. He switched on the small round lights they attached around the walls at the back of the cave and then sat on the ground and leaned his head back against the rock wall. Their secret meeting place wasn't fancy. The only real decorating they had done were the blood stains on the ground. Dorian shed a good amount of blood in that cave, but not on purpose. And, of course, he healed right up. He fared better than James, that's for sure. Dorian almost accidentally killed him a time or two, not to mention the time blood got slung in the poor man's eyes and burned for a good bit.

"Where *are* you, James?" Dorian said to himself.

Dorian knew James would be late from the mines, but not this late to the cave. Concerned, Dorian stood to make his way back to the mouth just in time to hear the sound of an astrobike arriving.

"Dor!" shouted James in the distance, "Let's go!"

James leapt from his astrobike before it even came to a complete stop. Dorian met him at the mouth of the cave, asking, “What’s wrong?”

James waved for Dorian to follow him, frantically crying out, “We have to go! I don’t have time to explain!”

“Go where?!”

“I don’t know yet! We just have to go! We need to get Tanna!”

“What happened?!” Dorian insisted.

James realized Dorian was going to need more. The flustered man kept taking paranoid glances toward the house while speaking with scattered words, saying, “I’m sorry, Dor. I got us in too deep. I heard some things. But I can’t explain it right now. We have to get Tanna and hide. They’ll come for me.”

“Who?” Dorian demanded.

It was no use. James had already broken away and rushed to his bike. Dorian’s mind raced in a hundred different directions as he followed suit, mounting the bike behind James and wrapping him up. Both their hearts sank at the sudden sound of an explosion in the distance, coming from the

direction of the house. The sight of the Mavern home roaring in flames turned Dorian's stomach. As James rode hard for the house, they could see a small ship parked out front. In between the ship and the house, Tanna wrestled against a police bot that had her by the throat while two other bots stood guard nearby.

As James and Dorian closed in on them, James pulled a beta blaster from a compartment on his bike and shouted, "Let her go!"

At the sight of James, the bot dropped Tanna and started shooting at him. James' military skills outmatched it. One blast left a hole in the center of the bot's head.

"Get Tanna!" James shouted to Dorian.

James then rode away from the house to draw the bots away from Tanna while Dorian bailed off and headed her way. The bots seemed more interested in James. As a shootout began between the three of them, Dorian reached Tanna in no time and wrapped her up in his arms, asking, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she managed to choke out. "Help James, Dor!"

Dorian turned back just in time to see another bot taken out by a blast from James. But the bot managed to fire at the same time, hitting James' bike and causing him to lose control. He bailed off near a rock formation where he sheltered himself from further blasts.

Satisfied that Tanna wasn't harmed, Dorian shot off toward James at an unbelievable speed. At the same time, James peeked out from his hiding place to take a shot, but not before the final bot blasted a hole through his hand. James growled, dropped his blaster, and vanished behind the rock again, leaving his weapon lying out in the open.

On his way to James, Dorian swooped up a rock larger than his head and hurled it at the bot, connecting with its hand and knocking the blaster away. The bot turned to find the source of the flying rock but met a different flying object: Dorian's foot colliding with its metal chest. Thus began a hand-to-hand battle between Dorian and their unwelcome guest. They exchanged blows, with Dorian dodging and swinging faster than the bot could match.

Shots rang out from back toward the house. Yet another bot rode an astrobike out of the back of the ship, shooting at Dorian.

“How many *are* there?!” Dorian complained.

He used the situation to his advantage, tossing his current sparring partner in the way of the new bot’s blast. Dorian then grabbed the dead bot, spun with it, and flung it at the incoming vehicle. It smashed into the bike and sent its rider flying into the dirt.

Dorian braced himself, watching for any movement. When it appeared that all bots had been taken out and the coast was clear, he turned back to help James. James emerged from behind the rock clutching his bleeding hand and heading for his blaster on the ground. His eyes widened with panic as he shouted for Dorian to look out. Dorian spun to see that final bot he thought was dead raising its blaster from the ground. It only got the chance to fire off one shot before a blast from James took it out for good. Dorian sighed with relief.

“James!” shouted a horrified Tanna.

Dorian knew instantly that he didn’t want to see what was behind him, but he had to look. James dropped to the

ground. Through a hole in his shirt, a spot of blood on his stomach started growing. It felt like the world stopped turning and everything went gray. All Dorian could hear were Tanna's weeping screams. He panicked but managed to get out a shaky cry for her to look for a med kit on the ship. She fought her urge to go to her husband and listened to Dorian, who rushed to James' side and fell on his knees beside the man.

"Dad," said Dorian, not even realizing what he had just said.

The word just came out, straight from his heart. He frantically placed his hands on James' wound to apply pressure, stuttering and repeating, "No, no, no, no, no. Please, no."

James gasped and fell backward. Dorian tried to slow his fall and then kept putting pressure on the wound, crying, "Tanna's looking for a med kit. We can fix this. Just hold on."

Tears dropped onto James' chest. Dorian tried to fight off thoughts of the worst, convincing himself that everything would be okay and that a hole through the stomach could be fixed. He cringed at the blood running through his fingers.

"You called me dad," James choked out.

With a quivering chin, Dorian replied, “Yeah, and it’s not going to be the last time, okay? It’s not. You’re okay. You’re going to be fine. Everything’s going to be just fine.”

Dorian’s words started cracking and he was forced to blink to clear the tears so that he could see when he frantically looked for Tanna, who wasn’t coming. When he looked back down, James swooned and his eyes closed. Dorian’s own eyes widened as he immediately pressed on the wound, shouting, “No! Wake up!”

The pain of Dorian’s push brought James back. James groaned and gasped for enough air to whisper, “Dor...protect...Tanna.”

James’ words became less frequent, and his eyes kept trying to close as he finished whispering, “I’m sorry.”

When James’ head fell lifelessly to the side, Dorian’s entire head shook from the intensity of his sobs as he squeezed his eyes shut and moved his bloody, trembling hands from James’ stomach to the sides of the man’s head. Dorian wailed uncontrollably with their foreheads pressed together. The only thing powerful enough to draw his grief-stricken heart away from James was Tanna screaming for help behind him.

Dorian's head shot up as he frantically wiped snot and tears. He could hardly believe his eyes when yet another bot emerged from the ship and struggled against Tanna right outside the open hatch. While he regretted leaving James, Dorian rushed to Tanna's side, furiously shouting, "Drop her!"

Dorian's automatic reflexes taking over was about the only thing keeping him moving through all the shock and horror. He channeled all his anger into a kick that sent the bot flying backward into the ship. Seeing that Tanna was okay, he pursued the machine inside, unleashing a furious flurry of blows.

The bot surprised Dorian and stuck him in the leg with a blade it pulled from a slot on its side. Dorian grimaced as he yanked it out and used it to slice exposed wires at the elbow joint of the bot's arm. Sparks flew as Dorian kicked the bot into the front end of the ship and then grabbed his leg to put pressure on the wound, though it had already begun to heal.

"Dorian!" shouted Tanna, pointing to the front of the ship.

The bot lifted its arm and slapped a few buttons on the control panel. Dorian braced himself as the ship powered up and the hatch started closing. Tanna screamed for Dorian and ran aboard just before the hatch shut.

“Tanna, no!”

“I’m not leaving you!” she cried.

When Dorian rushed to the front of the ship, the bot grabbed a beta blaster from under the control panel. Dorian dodged a blast and then removed the weapon from the bot’s hand before removing its head from the rest of its body. After the bot fell limp onto the floor, Dorian turned his panicky attention to the control panel as the ship lifted off.

“I don’t even know what I’m looking at!” Dorian cried.

Tanna struggled to help herself into a seat. The ship had already taken flight and began picking up speed. Dorian placed his hands flat onto two glowing red navigation screens but didn’t know how to use them to steer.

“I don’t know what to do!” he shouted.

“Dorian, look out!”

Dorian's panicky eyes shot up to the windshield. Before he could do anything, the ship's right wing slammed into a rock formation that tore the wing clear off. The ship spun and fell toward the edge of a cliff overlooking a ravine. Knowing he couldn't control the ship, Dorian rushed to grab Tanna instead. But before he could even reach her, the ship collided with the ground, throwing them both violently against the walls.

When the chaos stopped and the ship was still, Dorian could barely hear from the ringing in his ears. His vision went blurry for a few seconds before coming into focus again. He was bruised and cut in multiple places, which would heal quickly, but Tanna was more breakable. Dorian spied her lying at the back of the now mangled ship, moaning in pain.

"Mom!" he shouted.

Within seconds, Dorian had swept her up and carried her out of a hole on the side of the ship. She was in bad shape. Blood covered half of her head. Dorian could feel the gash on the back of it. With both house parents' blood on his hands, he whimpered and struggled between completely breaking down and desperately searching around for anything he could

use to help, crying, "It's okay. I'm going to fix it. Just breathe. You're okay."

"Dorian," whispered Tanna.

Dorian panically looked down at her, repeating through tears, "I'm right here. I'm right here."

With staccato breaths, Tanna whispered, "Don't...let them...break you."

Dorian started losing it as he replied, "Don't talk like that. You're going to be fine. I need to search for a med kit on board, okay?"

Before he could lay her down and leave, Tanna gripped his shirt with what little strength she had and gasped, "Promise me! Don't... let them."

Tears trickled down Dorian's quivering chin as he assured her through angrily clenched teeth, "Never. I promise. I'll fight them *all*."

"No," she choked out.

Tanna tried to draw in enough air to speak clearer, whispering, "Justice...not revenge."

When Tanna's eyes started to close, Dorian shook her and cried for her not to go, but it was no use. Even after her

body went limp in his arms, Dorian kept shouting for her to wake up, knowing in his heart that she wouldn't. He pulled her to his chest and squeezed as he rocked back and forth and let out the loudest, angriest, blood-curdling scream. Anger, sadness, and confusion all mingled together and swirled in his head. Everything had happened so quickly. He shifted from crying for her to wake up to trying to convince himself that *he* was the one asleep, sobbing, "Wake up, Dorian. Wake up. It's just a dream. It's just a dream. It's not real."

Dorian went from crying to screaming as he vented his fury. At the top of his lungs, he growled with every ounce of strength and breath he had, until his stomach flexed so tightly that it cramped. He laid Tanna's body gently on the ground to continue his outlet by pounding the dirt over and over with his fists, screaming, "No, no, no!"

Dorian placed furious, trembling hands on his head as he cried. But when he did, an alarming smell suddenly invaded his nose. He sniffed his hands directly and instantly recognized the smell of fuel. His mind shifted modes and his instincts kicked in as his eyes followed the trail of leaking fuel from where he had pounded the ground, all the way back to the

ship. At the sight of sparks from exposed wires, Dorian shot to his feet and then started to bend down to grab Tanna's body, but it was too late.

The entire ship exploded, launching Dorian through the air toward the ravine. He managed to protect his head from the fall, but the rough ground was not very forgiving. Worst of all, his clothes as well as his hands had caught on fire. His body kept healing itself but struggled to keep up with the burning. The healing was the only thing keeping the flames from completely eating his flesh. Dorian wailed in pain, covered in dirt, sweat, and blood. His legs were hurt so badly that he couldn't stand until they healed more. He looked back to where Tanna's body lay, making the painful decision to crawl the other direction toward the water, knowing that he had to extinguish the flames. Dorian dragged himself across the ground on his stomach toward the edge of the ravine, screaming the entire way.

As if the physical agony weren't enough, black faceless figures appeared, swinging their fists at him. At the same time, the screaming voices filled his head, overwhelming his senses. He couldn't get the Mavericks' lifeless faces out of his mind as

he struggled against his burning body and the rocky ground dragging across his skin. The sound of the rushing river at the bottom of the ravine grew louder as he drew near.

When Dorian finally reached the edge and rolled over it, the figures vanished and the voices ceased. He screamed all the way down, in agony and torment, both physical and mental. Part of him still held out hope that when his body hit the water, he would wake up in his hammock bed. But if not, he wanted nothing more than for the impact to knock him out, just to stifle the images of the Mavericks' blood. As he closed his eyes, in the dark of his mind, he saw the vision of the lights again. It felt like the only light in the darkest moment of his life. But they too vanished the second his body hit the water, knocking him out.