

Rough draft #4

The repair shaft ran four hundred meters underground and nobody who worked it had a word for what it smelled like.

The grit took things from people. Their skin. Their lungs. Sometimes their names.

Funny enough, it gave things back too.

A young man, lean and worn thin. Weathered the way iron does.

Not broken, just stripped down to what holds.

Through the haze and dark, a smile peeked through.

“Is it night?” Adrias called through the haze.

“Nah, the light’s just getting to your head mate.” Castil’s voice came before his shape did.

“Have you lost your head in this heat?”

The particulate thinned enough to reveal him. Broad shoulders, dark hair plastered to his forehead, skin stained with grime. He looked as worn as the machinery around him.

Then he smiled.

“Me? You’re the one who’s happy to be here.” Adrias said, a grin trying desperately not to show.

“Haha, what’s there not to love?”

Castil stepped down from the ladder. In one motion he stomped the base, pressed a hand to his heart.

“Anything for the allegiance.”

Adrias gave up hiding his laughter.

“You’re gonna get us fired.”

Still laughing, Castil climbed back up and reached for a sleek metal knob wrapped in a thin membrane of grime. He turned it.

“Annnndd we’ve got power.”

Lights flickered slowly through the film. Then a rumble, distant at first, growing, until it stabilized into something almost melodic. Uncanny. On repeat.

“Those alarms scare me shitless.” Adrias dropped his hand from his head, shoulders falling.

“They wouldn’t mean much if they didn’t.”

“Real funny, Castil.”

“It’s one of my better qualities.”

Castil stepped down and picked up the ladder with a nod.

“How about a drink?”

“Do I have a choice?” Adrias scoffed, falling into step beside him.

The dust had finally settled. The hall opened up beyond it: wide, spanning hundreds of meters in every direction. Rusted but strong. The walls breathed in slow synchronized movements, expanding and condensing like something alive.

The hall had no memory of being new. It just endured.

The two men walked deeper into it. Looking down its length, it was easy to believe it had no end at all.

Their steps carried a slight wobble. Neither of them had the energy to hide it anymore.

“You going to see her tonight?” Castil said, grin already forming.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Believe it or not, we can just be friends.”

Castil rolled his eyes. “Your answer doesn’t help your case.”

“Not everyone needs to sleep with anything that has a pulse.”

Castil leaned in close. “Adrias.” He held the name a beat. “If that’s so true, why haven’t I made a move on you?”

Adrias laughed and shoved him off.

After hours of walking they reached the elevator. Sparks jumped off its sides. Rust had eaten into the wiring. It had been threatening to break down for years, just never got around to it.

“Fuckers couldn’t even get us a transport.” Castil hit the call button.

The elevator groaned somewhere above them.

Adrias didn't answer. He grabbed the railing, stepped in when the doors opened, and let the exhaustion hold him up for one more ride.

The elevator groaned upward.

Light crept through the rust holes. Small pieces. Never the full thing.

Adrias had been breathing this air since before he could name it. Four generations of his family fed themselves to this machine.

And it took, the way it always did, quietly and without thanks.

The groaning, the sparks, the feeling that this ride might be the last. It settled into him the same way it always did.

Castil leaned against the wall beside him. Neither of them spoke.

The surface light grew slowly through the holes.

Seven minutes. It always took seven minutes.

He'd counted since he was six.

"How long were we out?" Castil said while stretching upwards.

"We clocked in just over 40."

With four swipes the screen embedded in his forearm expanded into a holographic control center, an interface barely managing to hold a steady image.

As it continued to flicker, Adrias smashed his arm on the side of the elevator while accidentally cutting his hand on the rigid, rusted surface.

"Piece of shit huh?"

Castil smiled while grabbing Adrias by the hand.

He gave him a look of disappointment while pointing to the rust covered surface and punching him in the shoulder.

"Another excuse to go see her?" Castil laughed while letting go of his arm.

Adrias looked visibly annoyed, and returned the punch with twice the force.

Only on his stomach instead of the shoulder.

Castil let out a small shriek while grabbing his knees. "I deserved that."

As the lights on his screen started to gain form, Adrias said “let’s clock it in for 45.”

Castil let out a scoff while regaining his posture.

Suddenly the elevator came to a stop, gave a frightening rattle before the doors began to open.

The two men stepped forward with heavy feet, Castil still holding his stomach.

As their eyes began to adjust, bleak figures spanning thousands of meters started taking shape.

The figures started to get clearer, with pieces of metal hanging off the sides, wires tangled while sparks made a symphony of old age.

Through the smoke, the shadow of someone dancing on a flickering screen caught his eye.

The shadow was that of a young girl no more than 17, put in chains while moving in rehearsed synchronized movements.

Adrias looked away before she finished turning.

But just like the underground, the area was shrouded in dust and smoke.

Except this smoke had a colour to it, reflecting the many lights of the bleak figures.

It wasn’t the sun that brought the light the two men saw in the elevator, it was the luminosity of these lights.

“I’ll meet you there,” Adrias said while grabbing Castil’s forearm.

“Don’t be late.” Castil gave a wink while dropping his hand from the forearm and squeezing his cut hand.

Adrias let out a small shriek while kicking him away from the grip.

A child sprinted between puddles of coolant. Someone laughed overhead. Somewhere metal screamed. Adrias realized his ears had stopped ringing from underground.

It was easy to get confused when it was all shrouded in dust, but you can’t mistake the warmth underfoot, the air still polluted but fresh, the odd sensation of the blue lights and the reflections that come from it.

How it can make you dizzy but filled with déjà vu of life on the surface.

Even the noise, yes the noise.

a constant static followed by the sound coming from the forest of towers, people yelling, screaming, even laughter from their homes. The entire city always felt.. alive.

It was a mess. Always had been. But it wasn't lonely. Down there was lonely.

Without Castil down there, he'd have gone mad by now. He was sure of it.

In the distant fog a shrivelled old man called out from a small booth, most likely older than he was.

"Oj!"

"Something.. something you need?"

Adrias looked his way briefly, followed with a small nod.

"I.. I knew it!" The frail man had a constant grin on his face while scratching his arms after every sentence.

"Nothing for me," Adrias said while coming closer.

"Have you seen Lyria? Heard she needed some antibiotics from you."

"Ahhh Lyria, sweet... sweet girl, yes very sweet."

"Spit it out Ezekiel, I'm in a rush."

"3 marrow... very fair," the old man said with a dragged sentence.

"Hard bargain as usual," Adrias said while throwing the marrow his way.

Ezekiel caught the marrow and held it a moment in both hands before pocketing it. The way he always did. Like each one needed a second to become real.

"Ahhh yes.. yes Lyria, she's working in the kazool."

"Now.. Is that all?"

"You'd have to pay me to stay," Adrias said while already getting ready to leave.

"Say... why not enjoy yourself while here? I have a new pill called D08A."

"Kids are calling it DOTA."

"Maybe another day," Adrias laughed while already walking away.

He walked for some time through towers that never changed. Only what covered them did.

Adrias found himself at the base of one of these many towers.

In a bright purple hue, with small handprints pasted in white.

Instead of scrap covering the base to the tower, there was intent.

Adrias couldn't help but smile.

The smile faded. He looked around the area, then down at his feet, then back to the handprints