

Fucking hate this planet.

Looking around and there's nothing but sand and rock, more sand and more rock. Mountains on the far horizon like a jagged crack in the rust-red sky. The wind is fierce and I can already feel signs of gritlung: a taste like sandpaper in my mouth, the rough tickle in my chest, a twinge of pain with each breath. These face masks are useless. Cutting-edge they said. More like the short end of the budget stick.

We walk from the bunker to the transport leaning against the grating wind. Like walking into a sandblaster. The ramp is weathered down to the bare metal and when it retracts, the hydraulics grind and rattle. It rises, closes, and then the sandstorm is only a hissing staccato against the exterior. We strap in, too pissed and sand-logged to fuck around. The transport lifts off and we're gone.

An hour passes, the storm left behind. Hill and valleys pass beneath us and the skeletal ruins of terraformers reach out from the ground like flesh-stripped fingers. Long-dead trees, remnants of the failed attempts to make Mars human-friendly, shine bone-pale in the late day, bleached by the sun and worn smooth by wind-whipped sand. Pipelines carrying melted water from the poles stretch like gorged worms along shielding canyon walls.

We make small talk, clean our weapons and place them in self-sealing bags that won't do shit against the sand. We examine our armor and load magazines. We take anti-gritlung meds so the fine Martian sand won't shred our lungs and flood them with blood. We do that but it's only a façade. The unknown unfathomable depths of the Labyrinth is what plagues our thoughts, makes our hands tremble as we push rounds into clips, injects the slightest tinge of fear into our every word. It's a legend, a myth, the stuff of nightmares and campfire stories...only it's real and it's here. Descending for miles into Olympus Mons, its depths containing the secret to eternal life or endless wealth or the key to

heaven or whatever the week's story was. No one knows because no one comes back.

That's not some wives' tale. It's hard fact and we all know it.