

### The Remembrance

The upper atmosphere was thick with smog, dense and motionless like the planet below. Deep cracks covered the surface of the plain, dried up plant life nearly turned to ash and a long dormant riverbed the only evidence of life. Dark shapes of rubble punctuated the landscape, once towering skyscrapers and brick buildings discarded and ruined. Shattered glass covered the streets like freshly fallen snow, undisturbed by the barely discernible breeze.

A deep, powerful boom broke the silence of the planet. The dark haze above swirled as a silver mass pushed through the cloud cover. The silver-plated, Y-shaped craft lowered to the surface and kicked up a dust cloud as it glided through the ruined cityscape. The front of the ship was raised like the long neck of a giant creature craning upward while the middle was a bit broader before the engines split off to either side of the main compartment. Smaller rockets controlled the vessel's slow descent to the ground as the main engines powered down.

The ship touched down, the final landing making the ground tremble and the last remaining plant life fall apart from the shockwave. The ship powered down, the sounds of the whirling machinery echoing across the ruined city, settling in the riverbed near an old, steel bridge.

The rear door opened, a loud hiss as the door dropped open. A collection of three humanoids stepped out, the leader checking a display screen around his wrist. Satisfied with the results, he lowered his arm, his face visible through the glass of the helmet. The only human in the group, Cam had found home among a group of other rarities from the galaxy.

Cam knelt in the ash and glass, setting a small wire frame in the riverbed, roughly two feet on each side of the square. June stepped forward to help him set the framework down. She was human enough, but her species had dark green skin, an additional set eyes on the sides of her head where Cam's temples were and her thumbs stretched out from the middle of

long-fingered hands. Once the pegs on her side were firmly planted, she rotated her display, punched in a few commands and the framework began glowing. A point started to form, the dirt and loose ash starting to compact and press into a solid shape as the frame wove wires and circuits into the tower. There was a low rumble under his feet and Cam watched the shape start to form.

“Keep your communications open,” Cam ordered, turning to the others in the group. “You know your assignments. Thera, do you copy?”

“Loud and clear,” Cam’s grandmother responded from the ship’s controls. “I’ll keep an eye on things from up above. All teams check in at regular intervals.”

“We’ve scanned the planet and this is the best place to set up. Find what we need and we’ll meet back here. Understood?”

The group affirmed and started marching forward, their markers all heading in the same direction. Brist, the third in their group, flexed their blunt fingers inside the suit’s gloves. Towering and broad, Brist looked like a blocky, humanoid, stone statue, with a square jaw and surprisingly blue eyes. “What’s the atmosphere?”

“Not breathable,” June said, checking her display. “Keep your suits on and if anyone runs into problems, head back to the ship. Granny can get a med unit out to where we need it.”

“I heard that,” Thera said, a slight chuckle. “It’s not breathable to most, but Brist could hold out longer than anyone else. If you get into a pinch, they could share oxygen.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Cam said. He looked down at the plains ahead of them. Rubble was just barely piercing the ashen desert, markers identifying the layout of the city. Cam marched forward, heading toward the tallest building visible.

Apart from his own footsteps and the steps of his companions, Cam was very aware of how quiet the world was around him. It was the sort of quiet that surrounded and

suffocated a person, like cloth soaked in water or an atmosphere that was too thick for humans to breathe. Every footstep in the group seemed to echo and amplify, making Cam feel more and more like an intruder in this abandoned world.

“My beacon is east,” Brist said. “I’ll meet you two back at the rally point.”

Cam nodded as Brist broke off, heading to the far edge of the metropolis. The giant’s heavy footfalls were easy to trace until the sound of their steps was lost in the concrete maze. Cam’s beacon was further in, closer to June’s, so the pair continued to walk together through the city.

“So much lost,” June shook her head. “How could they do this?”

“The Plague Fleet pushed through this system,” Cam said, “no one saw it coming. They drained the surface of everything usable: gases, liquids...organic solids. This city was just collateral. It was the largest one remaining on the surface. It was the best chance we had of finding what we need.”

“I hate the Fleet,” June said. “Plague Fleet indeed. They’re a parasite. They do nothing but destroy and—”

“June, you’re getting worked up. We have a job to do.”

“I’m sorry. I know this is more important for you and Thera. This is a personal place for you both.”

“I don’t feel like it is. Thera and I have never known a planet to call home. We’ve lived in a dozen worlds, but never had one that we felt especially connected to. And I’ve seen a hundred planets like this. I’m not really affected by it anymore.”

June lowered her head, pretending to check her wrist display. “There’s a small shop over here. I’m gonna try checking there. I’ll see you back at the ship.”

Cam nodded and touched June’s shoulder as she walked away. He focused forward, stepping through the dust-covered streets. Each footfall kicked up a fresh cloud of dirt,

leaving a trail behind him. June was right; the city should have felt like home. In a way, it did. This city was like so many he had seen in pursuit of the death left in the wake of the Plague Fleet.

His beacon led him onward, getting stronger as he approached his destination. “Gran, are we sure this is the same city layout?”

“We accessed the most recent city plans,” Thera said. “They also take their design from common planet city designs. By our best estimates, this is where your objective should be.”

“Anything you have in mind?”

“You’ve been doing this as long as I have, Cam. Use that brain, you got it from my side of the family.”

“You say that about all my good traits,” Cam laughed, testing the doorknob. “And I’m pretty sure cloning is illegal in most systems you’ve lived in.”

When the door didn’t open, Cam kicked the entryway open with his heel. The doors fell off their hinges, clattered to the ground and kicked up a thick layer of dust. Cam entered the space and examined the acres of shelves along the edges of the building, stuffed tightly with the discolored spines of thick tomes. There were tables in the room with dozens of old computers, archaic by the standards of what the ship would require. Walking further into the old archives, Cam sought out his objective.

It was difficult to understand exactly what the Plague Fleet did to each planet they infected. Every planet they went to, the planet’s surface was nothing but death and ruined buildings. Most of the artifacts survived somehow, but there was nothing alive after they visited a planet. Buildings sometimes fell, but those were usually linked to the Plague Fleet crashing into them while flying over the planet’s surface. After the Plague Fleet left, the air was toxic, there was no water left and the only organic material was in trace amounts of the

dust. It was the same on every planet that Cam had been to. Whether the cause or the effect, death followed the Plague Fleet.

Cam turned the headlamp in his helmet on, casting a long beam through the old archives. Reaching up, he picked a book off the shelf, part of the binding crumbling in his hands as he opened the cover. The words were in a language his grandmother had tried to teach him a dozen times, but he had only ever picked up a few words. “What am I looking for, exactly?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“You’re the archaeologist, Gran. I keep the ship in order with Brist, while you and June are the historians.”

“You’re looking for a book.”

“I dare say that I’m in the right place.”

“Don’t be a smart ass. It’s going to be roughly square and covered with gold lettering. Probably tucked away in the far back. Based on the planet’s standard cataloging system, you need to go up one level and walk to the far back corner to the left.”

“Copy,” Cam said. He rolled his shoulders and started jogging through the stacks, his light casting long shadows along the edges of the archives. He headed up the staircase and looked ahead. With the books left open on the tables, Cam could easily picture a variety of archivists all working on the day of the attack. They’d left an imprint, all paused in the middle of their work as the world died around them. He hoped they had died painlessly.

This far back into the archives, Cam had to rely on his headlamp in order to see more than a few feet ahead of him. He resisted the urge to pull out his weapon, the pistol in its holster by his side. It happened every time they touched down on a planet after the Plague Fleet had come through. No matter how many times he scanned the surface, no matter how

sure he was there wasn't a living soul on the planet, he always felt that each corner had a monster or a ghost waiting for him behind it.

Rounding the corner, Cam found a large reading room with big chairs in a corner by a long extinguished fireplace. He checked the sign on the wall above him, wiping some of the dust off with his hand. As far as he could tell, the word meant 'Past' in the commonly spoken languages of the galaxy.

Cam skimmed the shelves, occasionally pulling out a large, leather bound book.

"Gran, you seeing this?"

"I am," Thera replied. "It looks like you're in the right place. Go a little slower, I can't read the titles."

"Why didn't they use any of the languages from the Unified Galaxies?"

"This system wasn't part of the Unified Galaxies. The language they used here is only spoken in a very few, small settlements of those abductees in the outer orbits of the far galaxies."

"Still, it'd be more helpful if it was something I could read."

"That one!"

"Which one?" Cam asked, raising his hands quickly.

"The big, red one... that's the one! *The History of the World*. According to our records, it was a nearly complete history of the planet up until thirty years before the Plague Fleet arrived. I think this will be fitting for our mission."

"I'll get it back to the site," Cam said. "I might look around a little while. See what I can find out here."

"Don't stray outside the city. We'll need you in one piece for when we leave. Take thirty minutes."

"I will. Check in with June and Brist."

Cam explored more levels of the library. He could have taken more volumes from the historical records. There were famous citizens with biographies and Cam carefully examined the covers, seeing the images of their politicians, scientists and great warriors from the past. On the second level, there were more books about the planet's science, causing Cam to stop and examine the planet's space travel.

They were close. This planet was already sending out satellites to various parts of the known universe, even if their view was smaller than the universe actually was. If only they had found the United Galaxies before the Fleet arrived, then maybe they'd still be here. Cam felt that the United Galaxies rules on interaction with 'primitive' cultures were restrictive. The United Galaxies were allowed to observe and review, viewing whatever information they could find. Cam and his crew had been reviewing the information from their digital signals for months, the loose threads of data being processed and cataloged by the United Galaxies Records for open review. Even he could see that this civilization, despite its faults, was worth protection. Maybe they would still be thriving and reading these histories and reaching further into the stars. Cam was tempted to track down their satellites and take them home, but that wasn't their mission. Their mission wasn't to bring things home.

"Cam?" Thera's voice rang in his ear. "Cam?"

"Copy... what's wrong?"

"Brist is on their way back. June is trying to make her own decision, but she'll be there shortly. I think it's time to start heading back."

Cam sighed and dropped the book he had been looking over. With *The History of the World* tucked under his arm, Cam walked back outside. Cam kicked through the streets, his feet dragging through the broken glass and breaking the planet's muted vigil. He wished he could see some of the creatures that had once lived on this planet. They had just started to unify their nations and embrace the search upwards. Now, there was nothing but memories

and the recovered data that Cam and the others had found by browsing the public data this planet had made available. If only they had had more time.

Depositing the book, Cam waited for the others to arrive back. The frame he had left in the dirt was starting to take shape. It was about four times as tall as Cam, a sharp spike in the middle of the riverbed that would be picked up by any passing ship. The anomaly was strange enough that a ship would have to pay attention.

Brist was back next, carrying a large, metal circle with two black hands pointing to symbols. Cam cocked his head to the side as Brist approached, raising an eyebrow. “A timepiece?”

“Yeah,” Brist shrugged. “Now. The moment. The present. It seemed fitting to have the planet’s last moment immortalized.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Cam said, watching Brist set the clock down, “I just don’t know you found it.”

“It was some kind of arena,” Brist said. “Just on the face of the building. Granny thought it would be a nice tribute.”

“I agree,” Cam said, making a note of the symbols on his wrist display. “Wish more places had timepieces like this. Maybe it’ll help us figure things out.”

June came last, slow and steady. She was carrying a small, stuffed creature. Bright yellow with dark spots beneath the dust and a long neck and legs. She approached, looking more like a small child than ever with the stuffed animal in her arms. They often debated who had the hardest job when performing their duties. Cam always thought that June had it the worst. It was the last component for their ceremony.

“Everyone ready?”

Brist nodded and turned toward the clock with their head bowed. June set the stuffed animal down and lowered her head to the obelisk. Cam stood and folded his hands, bowing



his head with the others. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “We are gathered here today to remember. We are gathered here to bring together the parts of this planet’s culture. Their past is in their words, immortalized through a story. The present, now forever frozen in the last moment. Their future is in their children, wayward, but not lost as they might think. May its history never be forgotten and may this obelisk stand as a reminder to those who come to terraform this place. May we always look back and remember: They were here.”

Stepping toward the tower of dark stone, Cam pushed the thin data card into the tower’s base and the spike lit up, gold symbols shining on the flat surface of the rock. The symbols proclaimed the history of the planet from all of the research the crew had done, from its birth as a simple rock in orbit to its final destruction at the hands of the Plague Fleet. The obelisk started playing a message to the galaxy, acting as a beacon.

A few moments passed and Cam just watched the obelisk. It was a masterpiece with eons of history condensed into its simplest form: a story. Cam had heard it many times over the last month as the crew had piloted the ship to the wreckage, making sure the words were just right for what they needed. June stepped forward and put a hand on Cam’s shoulder. “Let’s get going.”

Cam nodded and followed June back to the ship, Brist behind them. Cam hit the biggest button by the door, closing the door and stabilizing the atmosphere. Inside, Cam took off his helmet and took a deep breath of clean air and looked up at the ship’s name, etched just above the entrance. *The Remembrance* was a simple vessel, but it was the closest thing that he had ever had to a home.

Cam pressed his head against the cool metal, a welcome relief from the stuffy suit. He took off the air canisters and locked them in to refill before standing in a frame with several mechanical arms. The exoskeleton of his exploration suit unlatched from his suit and Cam stepped away in a thin layer of protective material.

June hung up her helmet and set a hand on Cam's shoulder. To his surprise, June wrapped her arms around him. She squeezed tightly and Cam hugged back. "I know this was important to you."

"Thank you, June. I appreciate it. We were...close. But we'll catch the next time."

"Should we report it?"

"Thera already did. Nothing for us to do until we pick up their next strike.

Unfortunately, we don't have the technology to get ahead of them. We can only ever be a few steps behind."

"Fitting name for the ship them," Brist grunted, taking off the remainder of their massive suit and hanging it by the door. "I'm gonna check on the engines. Make sure everything is alright."

"I need some time alone," June said. "I'm gonna go to bunk. Come by later, if you want to talk."

"Good plan," Cam said. "I'm gonna go work on the next coordinates with Granny."

"I heard that." Thera's voice echoed through the loud speaker. Cam couldn't help but laugh.

Cam climbed the deck to Thera's post. Adjusting her glasses, Cam's grandmother smiled up at him, her gray hair in a tight bun. She put her wrinkled hand on his, holding his fingers carefully. Cam rubbed her shoulder and kissed her forehead gently.

"Have a good trip?"

"I wish you could have seen it," Cam said, sitting in the control chair.

A few of the older display screens were cracked and the buttons had been relabeled a dozen times in a dozen languages, but Cam couldn't bring himself to replace anything on the ship. He worried it would be like dishonoring the work he did, preserving memory. The ship was a living testament to that.

“Where to next, Thera?” Cam asked, looking over the ship’s controls.

“No trail yet,” Thera explained, looking over the local system charts. “But there’s strong traces of Plague engines heading to quadrant four. We could try and catch up?”

“No point in falling too far behind,” Cam said. He pushed up off the ground, the rockets propelling the ship upwards. Guiding the ship between the ruined buildings, Cam followed the path of the riverbed for a while, taking in the outline of the old city with Thera. He imagined this world through her eyes, the eyes that had witnessed a thousand burned out planets like this one. He tried to imagine the cities full of life and teeming with possibility, but that wasn’t this world anymore. This was a hollowed out husk of that place.

Leaning back, Cam turned the nose of the ship upwards, taking the rig up through the lowest layer of cloud cover. The capsule shuttered as the ship struggled to break through the atmospheric layers. After a few moments of the engine’s roar and the shuttering of the cockpit, everything was silent. Cam grinned and adjusted a few controls on the ship, setting it into an orbit around the planet. Brist came in with a warm mug of a tea from their planet, passing it to Thera.

“I’m going to check in on June,” Cam said. “Let me know when we have coordinates. Brist, you have the helm.”

Brist nodded, deep in conversation with Thera, debating the local planets and trying to pinpoint the next location of the Plague Fleet. Cam climbed down to the main level, the main hold just below the catwalk leading to the crew quarters. He walked the length of the ship and found June’s room, easily marked with religious symbols she’d painted on the door’s frame. Cam knocked and entered, finding June by the far wall looking out her window.

“You can almost pretend it didn’t happen if you look out this side.”

June had her legs curled tight against her chest, holding a set of prayer beads in her fingers. Cam sat across from her and looked out the window. The ship was angled so it faced

the other planets in the system, out and away from all the devastation just below them. Underneath was a world of finality, but June focused on the infinity that lay in the heavens around them. Millions of light years in any direction and for some reason, this system had ended up in the sights of the Plague Fleet. It seemed like they'd be safer alone in their system.

“That’s not our job,” Cam said. “How are you feeling?”

“Powerless,” June said, displaying the natural honesty of her kind. “We keep falling behind them, just barely catching up to whatever system they blew through and by the time we arrive there’s nothing but ash and death. I don’t even think we’d know what to do if we knew where they were going to strike next. We can’t ride ahead of the Plague Fleet, warn the planet and get them all to safety. We can’t fight the Plague because we don’t even know what they are. And whatever we tell the United Galaxies, they don’t do anything to stop it. Is this our lives now? Following death and praying for those they claim?”

“We make them remember,” Cam said. “We’re giving them the respect they deserve. These people on all of these worlds? They deserve something better than what the Plague Fleet is doing to them.”

June looked out the window, holding her beads a little tighter. “I just wish we could do more.”

“We will,” Cam said, rubbing her knee. “For right now? We can remind people the cost of what the Plague Fleet is doing. And maybe, just maybe, we’ll earn some peace for their victims.”

June nodded and tapped her window, bringing up the local transmission they were sending out from their obelisk. In every language known in the civilized galaxies, a message played over and over again, a final stanza for the planet. “This was Earth,” the obelisk declared in an automated voice. “They were here.”