

59 Hours After the First Round of Interloper Interrogations. UNAFS Perseverance (HSR) - Shuttlecraft - 01. En Route to Truval City International Airport.

Evina

For the first time in centuries, the world below that had long since relinquished the mantle of civilization would be greeted with a loud, thunderous *bang*. One not born of thunder, or a stray satellite shower, but one belonging to the planned and purposeful approach of a working spacecraft built by sapient hands.

A sound that was formerly all but extinct, had now finally returned to the world. Though, when I thought about it further, it was probably just a one-off. Which put a bit of a dampener on the whole situation.

Regardless, my eyes were glued on the outside of the craft now, as I witnessed the emptiness of space and the *fullness* of the planet below *merging*. Becoming something I recognized from my first iteration as the highest extent of the horizon. It was just... bizarre, seeing the inky darkness of the abyss giving way to what felt like an increasing haze, like a fog that was slowly building up and up and up until a point was reached where you forgot you even came from that darkness in the first place. As everything outside the windows was replaced by that 'fullness' of a sky that I was more familiar with. With whites and blues and the brilliant reds and oranges of the sun peaking through all of it. Filling a formerly black and blank canvas with the brilliance of color.

The transition between these layers was almost like something out of an ancient screensaver, or one of those idle animations. But unlike those pieces of media, there wasn't ever a distinct layer that we neatly transitioned from and into, it was more a gradual gradient, and one that you wouldn't even really notice was there until it was all said and done.

I didn't so much as utter a single word during that whole segment of the flight. I could tell from the reflection on the front windows that my pupils were dilated constantly throughout it all, like some kit having been introduced to the concept of laser-game for the first time.

But I didn't care.

In fact, a part of me felt so incredibly... *whole* at that point, in a way that I couldn't truly describe.

The world from up here, from above the clouds, from *within* the clouds themselves... just felt so *peaceful*.

Up here, there were no borders. There were no lines on maps.

Up here, there was no fear of the wilds, the raids, the mutants, or the techbeasts.

Up here... there was only the distant hum of computers, the occasional *click clack* of buttons, and the distant *whirr* of the HVAC systems.

Up here... there was serenity.

Something I realized I hadn't ever truly felt, not even in the pre-collapse life of my first iteration.

I sat unflinching, at the very edge of my seat even after we descended below cloud level, as we now approached the continent that I recognized as my home. The sheer rocky cliffs and the white sandy beaches were some of the landmarks that weren't destroyed or affected much by the nuclear fires that burned almost everything else.

Throughout it all, I couldn't help but to feel... appreciative of the alien, for not interrupting, for not going on what I assumed would be a long winded speech about the superiority of his kind or the enlightenment of his people. My first iteration's memories would have led me to believe that this was an outright guaranteed custom that the 'benevolent'-type aliens would be prone to. Especially as we descended into areas that were clearly the result of the shortsighted nature of my kind, and the mistakes committed that caused irreparable harm to the world on every possible level.

And yet, despite ample opportunity to, and despite the very justified position to do so, the alien did not once pipe up. In fact, he seemed satisfied in letting me see the world at my own pace.

What's more, if his features were any indication, he seemed... *happy* to remain quiet, keeping silent as I took in sights and sounds that no other felinor had taken in centuries, or would ever take in for the foreseeable future.

Which once more made me question just *what* was going on through that head of his.

I was about to raise another question, my practical mind realizing now that we were more than likely on our last leisurely leg of the trip before more action was required of both of us.

But as soon as I opened my mouth to say something, another thought quickly dawned upon me.

*I don't think I even asked for his **name** yet.*

"I-"

"We're making our final approach towards the airport now." The alien stated softly. Or rather, the electronic translator that acted as the bridge between us both 'spoke' to me with a calm and measured voice. A voice that seemed purposeful in being calm and soft, as if to slowly pull me out of my deep introspective reverie without causing me whiplash.

Again, if this was the alien's intent... then perhaps there was something to this whole 'benevolent' attitude beyond just fronts and faces after all.

"I'd like to reiterate what you spoke of during our pre-mission briefing. You stated that, as far as you were aware of, that there are no local organized forces with the capacity for in-atmo monitoring, correct?" He continued, prompting me to nod my head once in reply.

"That's correct. There's no one really looking up at the skies when they're all busy looking at the dirt for their next scrap of food. Or, too busy hiding *underneath* the dirt, having completely forgotten about the skies above." I spoke in a way that I haven't spoken in *ages*. As I felt my first iteration's wishy-washy, flowery, philosophically inclined side suddenly poking through.

"Understood." Was the alien's sole reply, once more refusing to comment further.

He could've so easily chided my kind for our shortcomings here. Heck, I was even announcing it outright. And yet, he didn't.

"I'm also going to assume that your friend won't know we're coming now, would he? Considering I doubt you would've spent the time maintaining the airport's various radio and radar monitoring equipment?" He continued.

"That's correct." I nodded once more. "But you do bring up a very good point. We should review our plan of attack, especially considering how he's more or less in the dark about, you know... the whole *alien* thing." I waved my hands around to highlight that word.

The alien nodded, urging me to continue.

"Right, so, we'll be making our arrival right around the control tower. There, you'll drop the ramp, I'll jump down, head on down towards the bunker, inform Eslan of the plan, and then direct your drones to repair the tower's elevator so we can make a smooth evac from the bunker, to the tower, then to the shuttle. Sound good?"

"We're both on the same page then, as the humans say." The alien spoke up once more, prompting me to raise a brow at the latter bit of his statement.

"Human? What's that? Another species or culture in your grand alien alliance?"

The alien hesitated for a moment, before letting out a short sigh. "A great ally." The translator used a tone of voice that gave off the vibe that this species meant a lot to the alien.

A few more minutes passed, more words were exchanged on the nature of the mission and the security fail safes in place, before the airport finally came into view. It was around the same time that the alien grabbed what seemed to be a communicator of sorts. One that was strangely designed for an ear that the alien himself didn't possess. "Take this." He spoke, handing me the

device. “Just to make communication between us easier. Oh, and erm, take this as well.” He ruffled through another cabinet in the cockpit, revealing a pair of glasses that *definitely* wouldn’t work on him by virtue of the two long legs having nowhere to rest upon his flat head. “It will make the more technical aspects of this operation easier. It will bring up relevant information in front of your eyes, so, for example, look down there at the airport. I’m going to highlight the control tower for you.” He spoke, as I put on those ‘glasses’ by wrapping the surprisingly bendy legs up and around my ears. Sure enough, the control tower was highlighted just as he spoke.

Any one of my wastelander contemporaries would’ve probably been shocked out of their mind by this tech. But, given my first iteration’s *vast* repositories of trivia on science fiction, augmented reality and their seamless integration was at least something I was somewhat familiar with. Not to mention the fact that the ship, the shuttle, and everything else thus far had more or less numbed me to smaller revelations like this by now. “Now, you don’t really have to do much here. All you have to do is to look at things, point them out to me, and we’ll go on from there okay?”

“Alright, understood. I’m assuming you’ll need my help with evaluating the elevator shaft and stuff right?”

The alien nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay, alright. And, just a final quick question.” I turned around in my seat, pointing back down the hall behind us. “Those robots, are you going to deploy them with me, or-”

“In accordance with your plan, the drones will be deployed only *after* you have made your situation known to Eslan.” The alien replied, having clearly preempted my question.

“Okay.” I nodded once, before peering down at the airport once again.

It was... strange seeing it from this angle. Even my first iteration hadn’t had the experience of hovering above a major international airport, with the most comparable memories being a few uncomfortable flights that she’d rather not remember.

“Are you ready? We will only proceed once you feel like you’re-”

“Yes. Let’s do this.” I interjected, before unbuckling myself from the seat, and heading towards the loading ramp once more.

The further maneuvers down and towards the control tower were done without me feeling even a *hint* of movement. It was only after the ramp itself was opened that I actually *felt* a sense of vertigo coming over me, as I could now see *all* of the active corrections the craft made as it tried its best to stay stable above the lone tower.

With another breath to steady myself, I leaped off the craft, and onto the balcony of the control tower.

Standing there, seeing the world I knew, contrasted by this very real reminder of the *new* world that existed *beyond* its scope... was once again *beyond* jarring. In fact, it took me a few seconds before I could properly reorient myself, as I reminded myself of *why* I was even here in the first place.

Eslan.

I began the long walk down the dilapidated and haphazardly repaired stairs, wrapping around the broken elevator shaft, eventually finding myself in the basement of the tower. From there, I opened a hatch which led to the familiar long corridor leading further to the only working elevator in this whole city.

Heading deeper down, I couldn't help but to let out a sigh of relief as I finally felt not just a ray of hope, but an entire *beacon* of hope lighting up my world.

For the first time in so long, part of me just felt like everything was going to be alright. That the world was going to actually become *better* again.

And while the whole world might not have been saved, at least a small little part of it that I cared for would be.

I knew it was selfish but...

That's just how you had to be to survive in the wastes.

A soft, garbled *ding* marked my arrival back home, as I stepped out and into the warmth and coziness of the space I'd spent so much time turning into a place worth living in.

There, I was met by an expectantly worried Eslan.

Except he wasn't alone.

Nor was his immediate worry related to me.

But instead, a gun pointed directly at his head.

And more worryingly, a shadow that was quickly looming from *behind* me.

"You know the drill. Hands up! And no sudden moves."