

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

### Evina

This didn't feel right.

In fact, if it wasn't for the alien that sat across from me and everything else I'd experienced thus far, my mind would've easily come to the conclusion that all of this was a big farce.

Because despite supposedly being 'in motion', traveling at what my first iteration would've called speeds unimaginable, performing quick maneuvers that would've caused me to be bunched up against my seat, I instead felt... nothing.

Not even a slight push or tug.

And in the confines of a windowless box, it almost gave the illusion that we weren't even moving in the first place.

My cynical mind would've assumed that that was simply the case. That I was stuck in some advanced plot or scheme of some eccentric bunker gone rogue.

But my logical mind knew that wasn't the case.

This was real.

The alien, the tech, literally *everything* pointed to it being real.

So I just had to accept that certain things were just now *possible* by virtue of science and technology far beyond my understanding.

In a way, it *sucked*, especially given the arrangements and everything else so far. Because there was no real way of playing the game without being the pawn now. The disparity was just too intense. And whilst I knew that they were trying to be as accommodating as they could, trying to play themselves off as anything but malicious... I just couldn't shake the *practical survivor* mindset off no matter how much I tried. Partially because there was something else at play here, and the alien had already all but confirmed it.

So whilst the alien certainly meant well, and the vibes he gave off were in line with what my first iteration would confidently call the '*benevolent alien*' stereotype, the fact that he was here for reasons *beyond* pure altruism made my practical mind *buzz* with possibilities as to *what else* could be going on behind the scenes.

I couldn't help but to reach for the memories of my first iteration, pulling up conspiracy upon conspiracy theory of the months and weeks leading up to the end times. Of the greater hysteria, of the growth of the chaos spurred on by abrupt and inexplicable cult-like behavior in certain groups in the populace.

Could the alien conspiracies that sprouted out as a result of that be true? And if so... was this alien in particular part of that grand conspiracy? Or maybe... he could've been on the other side of the conspiracy?

You could be as advanced as you wanted, but war and conflict was never going to go out of fashion right?

And if that's the case... what if there was a war in the stars? What if we were just a pawn in that war? What if we were being used as a simple piece on the map?

Darker and darker thoughts soon emerged as a result of this, compounded by the mystery that was the signal station. My eyes narrowed further and further towards the alien that sat opposite of me. An alien that was seemingly deep in thought as he toyed with that tablet of his.

An alien that seemed so innocent and utterly benign on the surface, probably owing to his physical features, but that had the potential to hide something far more.

My gaze remained *fixed* now, as I looked up and down his form.

*What schemes could you be planning underneath that veneer of translucent pink? What else do you have going on in that mind of yours behind those plush-like eyes? What is it that you actually want to say to me, that you're possibly hiding out of some misplaced good faith? What-*

"You know." The alien began, interrupting my reverie with what I could only describe as an even loftier, flightier tone than he was already prone to using.

*This was it. Is it time to reveal the true plot? What else do you have to say?*

"I just realized something."

*And here it was. The turnaround. The bait and switch. The trap being sprung.*

"This is probably the first time in centuries that your airport is going to be used for its intended purpose, and this is possibly also going to be the first time in history that it's going to be receiving an alien craft at that! The builders of your aerial port infrastructure definitely weren't expecting that!" He managed out with a dumb grin.

*What?*

“What?”

“Oh, erm, apologies there. I get caught up in my own thoughts sometimes.” The alien *chuckled* out *nervously*. Like some sort of a mild-mannered academic who lacked both the experience of normal social interaction and the skills to hold a normal conversation. “Whenever I see structures such as these, I always think back to their original purpose, their original function, and ultimately, the souls that drafted them up. It’s... somewhat poignant to think about the history of these places, and the sapient minds responsible for them. So whenever I get into that train of thought, I tend to put myself into their shoes. I tend to imagine what might be going through their heads when they see their legacies being brought back into service, when they see that not only is it being used for its intended purpose, but for something far grander than anything they could’ve ever imagined.”

I didn’t immediately respond.

Namely, because I didn’t know *how* to respond to that.

I expected a villain’s speech. Or perhaps an admission of some darker intent, perhaps done in a self-excusing manner, but an admission of some darker secret all the same.

I wasn’t expecting... *this*. Whatever *this* was. Something that felt more in line with Eslan’s flighty discussions on science, morals, and ethics, than anything that resembled the monster I kept trying to rationalize the alien into.

“Oh erm, apologies if the translation unit may be-”

“No, I understood what you meant.” I quickly interjected, stopping the alien from potentially going down *another* path of weird, highly specific, very esoteric, and just an all-around niche tirade of topics that I just couldn’t connect with. Yet despite being unable to connect with it on a personal level... I could still appreciate it in a different light. More specifically, it reminded me of how people just... *talked* about anything and everything prior to the collapse. It reminded me of talks that didn’t *need* to involve issues of survival or existential dread. It was just conversation for conversation’s sake.

More than that, it was a conversation topic that revolved not just around practical survival, but an intellectual appreciation of the past in combination with a reverence for the future.

Again, it reminded me of Eslan.

“Well in any case, I apologize for not having any refreshments or snacks available on this flight.” The alien started up again. “I’m afraid those services will come at a premium.” The alien beamed out, as if waiting for me to reply in a certain way.

“So... do you wish to renegotiate the deal we made?” I clarified, narrowing my eyes as the tension that had been so effortlessly dispelled came back in spades at that sudden shift in conversation.

“What? No! Sorry, that...” The alien hastily tapped at his tablet, as if trying to check to see if the translators were still working fine. “Sorry, I was just trying to break the ice by leveraging the use of humor.” He continued, prompting me to cock my head in response. “Erm, that question was meant as a joke, just to be clear.” He attempted to clarify further, the worry on his face growing by the second, probably not helped by the utter indifference conveyed by the expressions of my resting poker face.

I stared at the alien for what felt like a full minute, in silence, and with my eyes narrowing further and further; as if trying to dig into his very soul to determine exactly *what* his angle was.

It was only then, after a tense minute of silence, that I finally let out a sigh. Alongside a dry, forced chuckle.

“Your jokes are horrible.” I proclaimed. “But as far as pre-collapse humor goes, I guess that’s par for the course.” I continued with a shrug.

This seemed to alleviate the growing stress and anxiety within the alien as he let out a huge sigh of relief, one that was so genuine, so earnest, that I couldn’t help but to fall back on my earlier assumption.

That the alien was a complete nerd.

It was either that, or he was exceptionally good at playing one.

The optimist in me that rarely liked to play ball in these sorts of situations, preferred the former assumption however as I leaned back deeper into the weird gel-like padding of the seat beneath me.

“In any case, how far along are we from the airport?” I asked, my tone of voice not once betraying the temporal and spatial disorientation that came with this whole journey.

“Oh, just about twenty minutes out.” The alien responded with what was yet again a pathetic attempt at a smile. “Actually, we’re just coming out of our orbital run and making the last final maneuvers towards atmospheric entry. Would you like to see?”

My worries, my concerns, any thoughts that came with the centuries of practical survival, all but left me at that moment.

“You should’ve started with that, *instead* of your attempt at humor.” I proclaimed with utter excitement.

My excitement was clearly infectious, as the alien reciprocated with that weird half-grin of his, one that was more natural than the 'forced' toothy grin that he so clearly pulled out whenever he was purposefully trying too hard.

"Alright, unbuckle. We have a few minutes before the inertial dampers need to adjust for reentry forces." He spoke quickly, the giddiness in his voice coming through over the speakers disturbingly well, as we both removed the useless seat buckles and moved up and out of the loading bay and into a long corridor. One that was flanked by several more doors, but was otherwise a simple straightforward path that led directly towards our destination without diversion.

What awaited at the end of the hall was a lone, unassuming door, bordered by a long strip of what I could only imagine was what passed for 'caution tape colors' for the alien - parallel stripes of black and yellow.

With a twist and a pull, the door in front of us *hissed* open, revealing a cockpit with... *no one there*.

My eyes grew wide as I turned towards the alien in a confused shock. "Why isn't there anyone here? Shouldn't there be someone flying?!" I snapped out in a bout of panic.

My logical mind, along with my first iteration's memories were laughing at me now, realizing well that autopilot features were in fact a thing.

But that didn't stop the shock from hitting first and foremost, especially given the dizzying view of the planet below that took up the *entirety* of the bottom half of the panoramic glass cockpit.

"Oh, don't worry, I have-" The alien paused, as if trying to find the right words to continue. "-automated piloting systems for the purposes of this venture. I do hope that's translating well enough?"

I nodded apprehensively. "Yeah, okay, fair, but... how and *why*?"

The alien... simply shrugged. "I am the only crewmember of my ship." He revealed nonchalantly, prompting my whole perspective on the alien's mission to utterly *shatter*.

That whole ship, that massive complex of high-tech mazes and corridors, with space and materiel that looked like it was built for a crew of *hundreds* if not *thousands*... was manned and operated by a *single person*?!

"I..." I struggled to respond. In between that revelation, and more worryingly, the view from the cockpit... I started to feel vertigo taking hold. As all I saw through the threshold of that door was

space. Or more specifically, a half-dome that gave the impression that the cockpit was just a pair of chairs and consoles just... sitting there, jutting out into deep space.

My legs wobbled in place as I almost collapsed if not for the alien approaching me, prompting me to rekindle what strength I had left to regain my composure.

"I'm fine." I managed out under a shaky breath.

"Do you wish to return to the loading bay? It was my intent for us to remain there at first so as to avoid the spatial disorientation most first-timers feel when they experience atmospheric reentry-"

"No." I interjected. "I **want** to see it." I reaffirmed, prompting the alien to nod worryingly, gesturing to one of the chairs that seemed to *float* in space. It was only after closer inspection that I finally saw the visual trickery for what it was. A clever combination of actual glass panels, augmented by monitors that were bent, curved, and shaped to resemble a seamless glass bubble separating the pilot from space. Allowing for an unobstructed view of *everything* around you.

Sitting in that chair, my heart raced as I felt like I was about to *fall*, my whole stomach feeling as if it was going to plummet before the shuttle even had a chance to descend.

Memories of my first iteration's first and only rollercoaster ride came to mind, and the nausea that came as a result of it hit me *hard*.

"Will reentry feel something like a rollercoaster?" I managed out nervously.

"Oh, ancestors no. Inertial dampeners more or less dampen most of the effects of the increase in g-forces."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"But while you might not *feel* it, you'll certainly *see* it in vivid detail." He quickly added, prompting me to buckle up and grip the two armrests tight.

"Are you ready?" He asked excitedly.

I nodded wordlessly.

The countdown began as soon as I did so.

I could feel and *hear* my own heart beating in my chest as the numbers eventually reached zero.

At which point...

I felt the plunge.