

The Noah

By
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"Why do we bother?"

Eve Cartwright looked up from the soil recovery auger she was using to collect core samples for testing. "What did you say?"

The shielded screen on her sister Shar's biosuit visor made reflected the sunlight and surroundings, making it impossible to see her face. "I said, 'Why do we bother?' I mean...what does it matter? What does any of this matter?" The girl's hand swept out indicating the vast wasteland that had once been a celebrated old growth forest in one of the oldest mountain ranges on the planet. But that was hundreds of years ago, before the End, the cataclysmic war that had poisoned the world and left it a barren, contaminated husk.

"It matters because this is our world. The only one we have. And even if we will never walk its surface without a biosuit, someone who comes after us will. And when they do, they'll thank us for all our work." Eve stood up, wiping the

knees of her clay-dust coated bio suit. She and the girls had been struggling all their lives to save what tiny remnants of their world they could, just as their ancestors had for the last three hundred years. Yes, the task seemed insurmountable. Whether they were searching the wastes for signs of life or sampling air, soil and water to test for regeneration and habitability, most days were long, fruitless, depressing efforts in futility. Like Shar, Eve had had her moments of doubt in the past, but she wasn't made to give up, no matter how difficult the path might seem.

A bright light flashed in the sky overhead, and a boom rattled the earth, making Eve and Shar grab the nearest boulder as loose rocks shifted and tumbled down the mountainside. Eve glanced up to see what looked like a meteor streaking through the sky—through the very nearby sky.

It disappeared behind a large sand dune in the desert wastes below, then another boom shook the ground. A cloud of dust rose into the air.

“Did you see that?” Shar breathed. She turned around, her eagerness unmistakable. “Let’s go check it out.” She ran towards the solar-powered rover they used to transport themselves, their equipment and their samples on their expeditions.

“Shar....Shar! Dang it.” Eve sighed, packed up her samples, and jogged after her sister.

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Twenty minutes later, the rover crested the last dune near the spot where the object had fallen from the sky. Inside the spacious helmet of her bio suit, Eve’s jaw dropped. Down below, half buried in that sand, was what appeared to be a ship of some kind.

"Is it Alliance, do you think?" Shar asked.

"I doubt it. There's been no sign of Alliance or Cartel ships in three hundred years. The holovids say they were all wiped, just like the rest of the planet." For the last three hundred years, the people of homebase had been the only survivor colony on the planet—well, if you didn't count the Ghosts, those savage bands descended from those who dwelled in the Wastes. "If we're going to check this thing out, we'd better do it quick. It's getting dark, and the Ghosts will be out soon." The ship's descent and crash had been visible for miles, which meant there was a good possibility the Ghosts had seen it too, and would be coming to investigate. "Bring the rover in close. I don't want far to go if we need to make a quick getaway."

"Roger." Shar maneuvered the rover into the valley between the dunes and drove right up to the crash site.

"That's close enough," Eve advised. She hopped out of the rover and approached the ship cautiously.

The soft dune sand had absorbed the impact, leaving the ship intact. Steam vented from several places on the vehicle's silvery shell. The ship was without any external markings. Not Alliance then, nor Cartel. Unless of course either of those had stopped painting identifying marks on their warcraft.

Eve circled the vehicle, looking for a way in. The ship seemed too large to be an unmanned drone, and if the pilot had survived the crash, she wasn't going to leave him without offering assistance.

The more she examined the craft, the more confused she became. The ship was like nothing she'd ever seen before. The silvery shell looked more like layers of crystal than metal, and now setting sun had cast the bottom of the valley into

shadow, what she'd thought was sunlight glinting off the ship's highly reflective metal surface now looked more like pulsating light trapped in some sort of translucent shell.

What was this thing? Where had it come from?

"Stay back, Shar," she cautioned, waving a hand in a sharp, imperious gesture when her sister's curiosity got the better of her. "In fact, stay in the rover." She didn't think the ship was going to explode. She couldn't see any sign of a fuel leak—for that matter, she couldn't see any sign of an engine!—and based on the readouts from her gas chromatograph the venting was primarily water vapor. She made another circle of the ship, moving in closer this time. The entire surface of the craft appeared seamless, as if the entire object had been formed from a single molded piece of...whatever the ship's exterior substance was. What in the name of heaven was she looking at?

A loud whoosing noise and the sudden jetting of vapor clouds made Eve jump and Shar scream. Eve spun around to find that the previously solid-surface of the ship had pulled back, revealing an opening into the interior of the craft.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Shar called. Her voice sounded tight. Afraid. "Come away, Eve. The sun's gone down."

The Ghosts would be out soon, scavenging for food—and they would likely come to investigate the source of the sonic boom. Sticking around when Ghosts were on the prowl was definitely asking for trouble. But this was this first time in three hundred years that any sort of advanced life form had been spotted in the wastes. The first time in three hundred years that anyone in homebase had proof they were not the only non-Ghost survivors on the planet. Eve wasn't about to leave now.

“One more minute.” She detached the disruptor from the belt of her biosuit. No one in homebase liked weapons—after the End, who would?—but the wastes were dangerous. Too many of Eve’s people had died at the hands of Ghosts while taking samples and conducting experiments in the wastes. Wearing a disruptor when exiting the safety of homebase was standard operating procedure now. Even Shar knew how to charge and fire a weapon.

“Eve...please.”

“Shar, stop. You know I have to check this out.” She worked to stay patient, not to snap. Shar was only twelve, still a child in most of the ways that mattered.

She had reached the craft’s opening. The inside was a pale, luminous blue-white. It was surprisingly tidy, considering the way the craft had crashed to earth. As if the craft’s hull had absorbed most of the shock of the rough landing. A movement to her left made her spin. A figure in a shimmering silver biosuit and helmet was pointing a weapon at her.

Eve was faster on the trigger. The disruptor fired. An energy field enveloped the stranger. The pilot dropped like a stone as the equipment nearby sparked and sputtered.