



RUINS AND REFUGE

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"Vulture Unit 32, departure in one hour. Remain under 800 meter radius of the rendezvous point."

The comm unit in Abbey's hand buzzed with a thick layer of static. The voice of her squad leader disappeared as she shifted her attention back to the task at hand. She marked down the time in her comm unit. Remembering things had never been her forte. But remembering to brush your teeth was one thing while remembering to get back to your ship before it left you stranded in the ruins of the old world was something else entirely.

Abbey looked around her. There was something about the old world. Abbey always suspected that the seasoned scavengers stuck to this profession for something more than the high pay at the black market. Maybe it was a sentimental undertone that they're too stubborn to admit. To be perfectly honest, it didn't make much sense. The ruins of the old world hung across the horizon as far as the eyes could see with nothing to stand apart. Rubbles and remains were not exactly destination holidays.

And yet it was this premise of eradication that brought out the little things, like that one billboard from 2021 advertising the new groundbreaking skin care product or banners with ads convincing Abbey to try out the new soft drink that's guaranteed to recharge her soul.

Abbey doubted the claims but she sure wanted to try them out.

The buildings were not completely levelled by the bombs; Abbey rather preferred the phrase 'Damaged beyond repair'. Old buildings made of rusted steel and concrete debris hung around her like sleeping giants with an air of foreboding.

"Tread lightly."

While slipping her way into the remains of another skyscraper, Abbey looked back at her collection pod. Underwhelming didn't begin to sum it up. It was all about knowing where to be to find the good stuff and she never really was that good at it. A few old world coins, a laptop with a shattered screen and a fancy jar wasn't going to fetch much price. This building was her last chance at redeeming her hunt and she wasn't going to let it go to waste.

As Abbey prowled her way into the building through a balcony, her eyes scampered across the room like a vulture's. Something has to be in here that's not all ash and junk - an old phone, some stashed jewellery, a collector's edition comic book, even a wind chime perhaps. People would buy anything and scientists would break everything apart. Every little trinket had value if you just knew where to sell. This is what made all these trips back to earth worth it. For all the good the Mars base does for survival, it doesn't have the luxury of redundant things.

Abbey looked at her comm unit. For all the trouble it took her to get in, she had

10 minutes at best to search this place now. She took quick, calculated steps and did a quick scan of the whole apartment. Her steps light enough to not set the floor beneath her crumbling, she focused all her attention into everything around her - a broken table, inches of dust, grey rubble, a sound, a leaning column, a -

Wait, what?

Abbey turned around frantically trying to pick up on where the low-pitched sound was coming from. If she didn't know any better, she would probably think it was some sort of an animal. Abbey leaned down to check under something that was probably a bed once.

It WAS an animal.

Abbey looked at the small creature in front of her with a mix of surprise and disbelief. Of all the things that could have been under the bed, a furry squirrel making clicking sounds was one of the least probable. No sound reasoning could explain what Abbey was seeing in front of her. The environment on earth had been unsustainable for life forms for a long time now. There had been reports of possible growth of vegetation around the ruins of the old earth. But that could hardly be enough to sustain an advanced animal like a squirrel.

The squirrel chirped in agreement with Abbey's thoughts. Or perhaps it just chirped.

"Vulture Unit 32, 15 minutes to departure. You need to get back right now."

There was no time. Abbey couldn't find any reason for this living organism to be here. Neither did she have enough time to search for anything else to make her trip worthwhile. Not like she could just take this strange creature back with her.

Abbey looked at the wide eyed little thing in front of her. Its eyes beaming with curiosity as it scampered into Abbey's open palm. The amount of trust it had for her led her to believe it had never seen another human before. Abbey opened the jar she scavenged and put her new acquaintance inside. She had crawled and jumped her way into this dingy old place and she'd rather have a squirrel to show for it.

Abbey ran for the rendezvous point with her latest scavenged good safely hidden in her collection pod. With time ticking down and a lot to explain, it's understandable that she didn't have the time to look at the atmosphere reading that unceremoniously announced zero radiation in the perimeter and a breathable atmosphere. Neither did she notice the footprints around the apartment that almost looked like something a human would leave behind.

Almost.

Nuren Iftekhhar is your local stray cat in disguise; he interacts with people for food and hates bright light. He got Hufflepuff 3 times straight in Pottermore so no walking around that one. Send him obscure memes at n.iftekhhar18@gmail.com