Phoenix: A Collection

Annika Rose Vargas

Follow this and additional works at: https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstone Projects and Theses by an authorized administrator of LOUIS.
Phoenix: A Collection

by

Annika Rose Vargas

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma

to

The Honors College

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

30 March 2022

Honors Capstone Director: Ms. Anna Weber

Senior Lecturer, English Department
Honors Thesis Copyright Permission

This form must be signed by the student and submitted as a bound part of the thesis.

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Diploma or Certificate from The University of Alabama in Huntsville, I agree that the Library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by my advisor or, in his/her absence, by the Chair of the Department, Director of the Program, or the Dean of the Honors College. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to The University of Alabama in Huntsville in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in this thesis.

Anniha Vargas

Student Name (printed)

Student Signature

3/30/2022

Date
Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................2
Confusion........................................................................................................................................3
Log Entry 1....................................................................................................................................4
Log Entry 2....................................................................................................................................5
Loss.................................................................................................................................................6
Log Entry 3....................................................................................................................................19
Log Entry 4....................................................................................................................................20
Brimstone......................................................................................................................................22
Suffering........................................................................................................................................23
Log Entry 5....................................................................................................................................36
Log Entry 6....................................................................................................................................37
Hope..............................................................................................................................................38
Log Entry 7....................................................................................................................................51
Log Entry 8....................................................................................................................................52
Reflection......................................................................................................................................53
Abstract

*Phoenix* is a collection of short stories and poetry. This collection was created on the idea that there are two sides to every situation. If you only view a situation from the outside you lose the context of what happened inside. In contrast, if you only view a situation from the inside, you lose the context of the potential weight of the decisions you are faced with. The poems in this collection are designed to guide the reader towards the emotional setting that the stories are trying to convey. The rest of the collection is an exchange between two different short stories.

The first story is a series of log entries made by a group of aliens that call themselves the Observers. They’ve been tasked with studying a planet that they know as Rethon 3, and documenting the life they find and the progress of the planet. Each log entry is short, and the Observers exist outside the happenings of the planet, watching the evolution of society and eventually the planet's demise.

The second story is a narrative centered around the perspective of a boy named Stephan. Stephan only knows a world in chaos, in his time the Earth is almost entirely a wasteland, suffering from a nuclear war. He fights to survive amongst the harrowing conditions, fueled by the determination to prove that he isn't alone on the surface. Stephan is stuck inside the world, dealing with the outcome of decisions he never had any control of, just trying to make the best of a horrid situation.

These stories play off each other as you see the development of Earth, the outside view that the Observers log, and the inside struggles that Stephan faces.
Confusion

Breathe when the dust settles
Take in the scene around
Blink as the light returns
Illuminating truth laid down

Ponder at the long-laid rubble
Thrown down by unknown names
Sift through tragic memories
To make sense of all the pain

No answers lie within the dust
Just more questions laid out bare
If only the alternate was known
But that’s just a distant prayer
Log Entry 1
Year: 6001.02.3

Location: In transit to Rethon 3

This is the beginning of the official log recording observations and data artifacts concerning the third and fourth planets orbiting the Rethon star. This mission was approved by the Higher Research Authority and is designated a strictly orbital scan and distanced operations.

There is to be no interference with the surface. Personally, this is the first mission I have been selected to lead by the Higher Research Authority, so there is much riding on its success.

This star is the furthest one our people have traveled to observe. Long distance data has indicated there are planets in the Rethon system that are in the beginning stages of forming life. However, due to delays in being able to launch this research team and the unavoidable delays in the travel of light and data from another world we are not exactly sure what state the life on the planet will be when we arrive.

For the record this expedition is composed of eight crew total, with six Observers. The main crew being the ship commander, the engineering hand; and the Observers consisting of two life studies specialists, two chemists, the communications specialist and myself, the lead researcher.

Supplies are steady and we are on course to arrive at Rethon in no later than three revolutions of our home sun. Adjustments will be made to work on the rotation schedule of the Rethon star. All research crew will compile individual logs concerning data, these logs will contain overviews of mission progress and any events of note that occur.
Log Entry 2
Year: 6402.26.5

Location: Orbiting Rethon 3

Current observation is focused on the migration of the life units on the surface. They seem to be maintaining similar social structures as was observed in their more primitive state. There is a distinction beginning to form between units and the roles they have to the collective of units. Most life units are still located on the largest land mass.

The life studies specialists have found evidence of past units much greater than those we are observing now, but sadly we began observations after the elimination of these greater life units. We are unable to determine how these primitive life units survived while the others perished, mostly due to restrictions on surface research.

The life studies specialists believe the only time to do effective surface research is now, while the life units are too primitive to integrate our existence into future social structures. We have submitted an official request to the Higher Research Authority for these restrictions to be lifted, however it is unlikely they will grant it.

We will increase scans and see if samples from the surface can be collected in a non-intrusive manner. Arguments have been made to adjust the focus towards the life units present in the water, however, the life studies specialists cannot seem to agree on if this would be a scientifically significant study or a waste of time.

Rethon 4 provided some interesting observations, but conditions do not seem hospitable for life units, therefore passive observation will commence. It is doubtful much will arise.
Loss

Stephan squinted against the wind as he tucked his head down further into the bandana wrapped around his neck, trying to protect himself from the worst of it.

“Come on – we need to keep moving.”

He shrugged his backpack up his shoulders, grabbed hold on a stick for leverage and pushed himself forwards through the torrent.

“But it huuuurts!” a small voice wailed from behind him. He turned around and extended a hand, “Come on Katie, stay with me,” he said. She looked at him and pouted but didn’t say anything else. She knew they had to keep moving.

They’d left their primary campsite behind a few weeks ago to journey out across the ruins in search of any other survivors. There was no hope for them on their own, but maybe if they found others all wouldn’t be lost.

Katie grabbed his hand and used it to clamber over a pile of rocks and metal. If the wind wasn’t so bad he would carry her, but Stephan was having enough trouble staying on his feet as it was. The forceful drafts had picked up all manners of debris and were throwing it about them, metal, sand, wood, glass being pelted against them.

He turned back towards the wind and with Katie’s small hand in his he pressed onwards slowly. The stick turned out to be a great tool for leverage against the wind. It penetrated deep in the ground, serving as an anchor when his feet started to fail him.
Hours passed and they pressed on. Eventually the wind started to die down and all the debris settled. The struggle was over for now. They slowed to a walk and Stephan stopped to check in with his sister. Crouching down he asked, “Hey, how’re you doing?”

He could tell she’d been crying – her eyes were bloodshot, brimming with tears, exposed face red from the wind, and he could tell she was exhausted. She just mumbled, “I’m fine.” He couldn’t help but crack a small smile – she was trying so hard, she was trying to be so strong. God Mom would’ve been proud of her, if only she could see how far they’ve made it.

He patted her on the shoulder and stood up, surveying their surroundings. Buildings lay in ruin, cars strewn across the street, and roads degrading into the earth. A little way away he spotted the remnants of an overpass. It had a building right next to it that looked mostly intact. Either one would provide ample shelter for the evening.

As they made their way towards the shelter Stephan would occasionally pull out the axe that hung from his hip to chop up lamp posts, signs or any wooden objects he could find. They would need the firewood.

It wasn’t long until they got to the overpass. Katie looked more than thankful to be stopping for a rest. Stephan sat down and began to organize what was necessary to start a fire to keep them warm through the evening. Once he got a small flame going he laid out the thin sleeping bags they had and sat down next to Katie. She hadn’t said a word since the wind stopped.

“Hey you, whatcha thinking about?”

“I miss Mom.” She replied with a whisper, curling her knees into her chest and tucking her chin behind them.
He reached an arm out and pulled her closer, so she was leaning against him. “I know Bee, me too.”

For a moment they just stared at the fire together in silence.

“Will you tell me one of her stories? I wanna hear about the before time.” She picked her head up and looked at him with puppy dog eyes he couldn’t resist. Chuckling softly, he let her go and shifted to sit cross legged facing her.

“Alright, let me see, what story should I tell tonight….”

“Tell the one about the park!!”

He smiled. The story about the park was the story about how their parents met, and it was her favorite story. “The park? Haven’t you heard that one a million billion times already?” He teased her, chuckling.

“The park! The park! The park!” Katie chanted, opening up and smiling.

“Okay okay!” Stephan leaned back throwing his hands up in defeat, laughing, “The park it is.”

Katie settled in, beaming. She lay down and curled up with the little cover she had ready to hear the story once again.

“It was the most beautiful day you’ve ever seen. The sky was a crisp blue. Big white fluffy clouds slowly drifted across giving the people below shade. The trees and the grass sparkled an emerald green, so vibrant you could almost feel them breathing. And there was Mommy. Sitting on an old metal bench. The wind, gentle and cool, lightly blowing through her hair, ruffling the pages of her book. It was no matter, she held them down. The wind wasn’t
going to take her story away from her! But as persistent as she was, the wind managed to steal her bookmark! Right from between the pages, up and away. She chased that purple ribbon all around the park, it managing to stay just outside of reach. That was, until it stopped at a worn pair of nice leather shoes. Momma, although stunning, was not the most graceful, and while trying to slow down her chase managed to tumble right into the owner of those nice shoes.

‘Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry – I was just trying to get my bookmark – I didn’t mean to-’

The man chuckled at her, ‘Ma’am you’re alright’ He helped her to her feet–”

Stephan let his voice trail off as he paused and looked at Katie. She was starting to doze off. Her eyelids fluttered as she smiled, dreaming about their Mom and the wonderful man who she knocked off his feet.

“And they lived happily ever after,” he whispered and leaned back, palms against the ground behind him staring at the fire.

Katie barely remembered the before time. The world before it turned to chaos, before everyone seemed to abandon hope.

It had been years since the sky was bright and blue, for too long it stayed a consistent grayish-brown, light in color but soul sucking and dull.

He quietly rummaged around in his bag, taking note of everything they still had: two cans of beans and one can of chicken, a baggie of oats, two full packs of water and a half drained one, one roll of bandages, a fishing hook and line, a warped plastic bowl, and the Geiger counter.

He could figure out more food, probably figure out more water, but the radiation? That was something outside his control. It had been steady for years, a relatively safe level since in the
beginning they were lucky enough to be outside the worst of it. He wasn’t sure what was happening though, because it had been climbing steadily the more they traveled. The air was getting worse too, more particles filled the sky making the already hard journey a nightmare as they fought against the elements.

He looked over to Katie. She would be in eighth grade if things were still normal – looking up to the prospect of high school. Meeting boys – giggling at sleepovers…although, who knows how she would’ve even handled that world. Katie developed a little bit slower than most other kids her age – late to walk, late to talk, and slow to read, but she had such a kindness in her heart. She used to run outside and pick wildflowers for their Mom and come back inside covered with dirt, and holding a handful of bright yellow buttercups.

Stephan sighed, she would never have a “normal” life – what even was normal now? When the chaos hit, her chances of school were destroyed and as much as their Mom tried, Katie struggled, her words and understanding staying very simple. But honestly, it was somewhat of a blessing – no matter their struggle, no matter what they’d come across, Stephan knew he had this little innocent ray of sunshine with him to cut through all those gray clouds.

Stephan himself would have been in college if the world hadn’t fallen apart eight years ago. They’d fought to survive for eight years. It hadn’t always been this hard though. Up until about two months ago they had their Mom to guide them, stay by their side, show them what to do.

They had lost their dad immediately when the war hit. He was off on a business trip in one of the big cities, and of course it was one of the places hit first. Stephan didn’t know a lot of the details of who started what, why everything fell apart, their Mom didn’t think that was
important. She didn’t want them to have hatred in their hearts, just a love for each other. Damn, he missed her. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small chain with a charm. He rubbed the charm between his forefinger and thumb. It was a bumblebee. His Mom loved bumblebees. Katie looked just like her, that’s why he called her Bee. He didn’t know if he would have the strength to keep going if she wasn’t around.

Sighing, he put everything back in his bag and propped himself up against a wall with his pocketknife in hand. He needed to sleep, but he wasn’t going to leave Katie defenseless. So uneasily, he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Luckily, it was an uneventful night. He awoke due to some rustling of Katie turning over and sitting up, yawning. He blinked his eyes to wake himself up as he adjusted to the brighter light of the morning. Putting his pocketknife away, he began to start the fire back up to make them some breakfast. A few minutes later they were sharing a bowl of plain oats. At least it was filling. They took turns scooping up the mush with their fingers, although Stephan let Katie take as much as she wanted; she needed it more than him.

They decided to stay here for the day, getting some rest before continuing their journey west. Stephan decided to try and take advantage of their surroundings. He found a few fallen traffic lights with relatively intact colored lenses. He’d found traffic lights in the past but none with lenses, either looted or broken beyond use. Using his knife, he also cut off some semi useable rubber from cars that lay strewn about. He spent the day attempting to fashion goggles for himself and Katie to protect their eyes should they encounter such a horrible windstorm again.

“Hey, Bee! Come over here, I’ve got a surprise for you”
Katie bounced over from the other side of their little camp, “Whatcha got?”

Stephan held them up proudly, slightly lopsided, held together with a prayer and secured with cut strips from his bandana. “Here, let me help you.” She leaned forward and let him place the goggles on her face and tie them behind her head.

“They’re heavy!” she whined. His smile cracked a little bit. “But I love them!” He exhaled, relieved. She ran away from him excitedly. He looked down at the pieces left in front of him. He used the best glass for hers, she deserved it. He had some salvage pieces from headlights and the traffic lights; so hopefully he could make something usable for himself.

He wanted to protect Katie as much as possible from all the elements he could, because he’d started to notice something she hadn’t. She was coughing. A lot. Just like their Mom had in the weeks leading up to her death. It was just a factor of this world. The radiation, the polluted air…it was damn hard to survive.

They’d made it for so long before by staying put, attempting to grow things in the dead soil, digging their well a little bit deeper every so often, and staying inside shelter as much as they could. But once the well started to go dry and the walls started to show cracks, their Mom decided they needed to get moving. She gave them everything and kept so little for herself. The most food, the most water, the best protection and the most sleep. She did everything in her power to prevent this cruel new world from taking her children from her, and yet Stephan feared he was going to fail her if this world took Katie.

He managed to finish a decent second set of goggles and heated up half of one of the cans for some food. Again, he and Katie shared and watched the fire dim. She started coughing, he just reached over and lightly rubbed her back in circles.
“Stephan? Are we going to be okay?” She looked up at him with those big eyes.

“Of course we are, Bee. We got each other, that’s more than enough for us to survive.” He smiled at her, but his heart sunk. If she was asking, he wasn’t doing as good a job as he thought of keeping his fears hidden. She decided to lay down, rolling over away from him. He watched her for a bit, and every so often she would cough, her small body shaking so violently. It was all he could do not to cry. What would his Mom do?

She would probably spin some fantastical tale, make them both laugh, make them dream about clear blue water and bright green trees and orange pumpkins and red apples. Make them forget for a minute about the world around them. Life was easier when she was around.

Stephan again sat up with his back against the wall of the overpass ready to defend his sister if he needed to. He tried to sleep but his thoughts spun nightmares of their bleak future, so he didn’t get much.

The next morning, he was the first to awaken. The light seemed brighter today for some reason. He got up and started getting some oats ready for when Katie woke up. She slept later than she usually did, and when she finally rose, he noticed she didn’t look good.

Her face was pale and gaunt. How long had it been like that? How long hadn’t he noticed her deterioration? He smiled at her. “Hey Bee, want some breakfast? It’s almost ready.” She shrugged her shoulders at him and groggily rubbed her eyes. As she crawled out from her sleeping bag and sat cross legged next to him, he noticed just how frail she was. She was a spitting image of their Mom, but not in the way he wanted to remember her.

A few months into their mother leading them out in search of other survivors, she started to go downhill rapidly. They’d found a pretty sturdy building and set up camp. Stephan took over
most of the things their Mom would do; search for food, tend to the fire, tell Katie stories, and
guard the camp each day. It took less than a week for her to go from appearing strong and
pushing onwards to being unable to get out of a sleeping bag. God, that week was hard. He took
care of her, tried to make sure she ate enough. He didn’t want to go on without her. But he knew
she wasn’t going to make it; she knew it too.

The worst night was the last night she told them a story. She asked Stephan to prop her
up and she told them the most beautiful story of when Katie was just a few years old, and
Stephan wanted to play pirates. He made her be a parrot but for some reason she wanted to be the
cannon ball and just kept yelling, ‘Boom!’, and throwing her arms up. It was a story full of love
and laughter, but it was the last time they laughed together. When their Mom went to sleep that
night, she didn’t wake up.

Stephan woke up from Katie shaking him in tears stammering something about “Mommy
won’t wake up.” His face went white and he was lightheaded when he sat up. He knew what
happened but didn’t think it would be so soon. As soon as he sat up, Katie threw herself at him
sobbing. He caught her and just held her while she wailed.

They had sat together, unsure of what to do next. All they had now was each other.
Stephan had taken it upon himself to move their mother’s body outside and give her a grave. He
couldn’t dig a hole, but he could move rocks, so rocks he piled. After an hour or so she had been
covered.

They didn’t stay at that camp for long after. It was too hard and so they’d been traveling
since.
Under the underpass they sat together, Stephan looking down at Katie who was quietly eating the oatmeal. “I’m gonna see Mommy soon.”

Stephan opened his mouth shocked. He closed it but before he could open it to speak Katie spoke again, “I know the beeping thingy in your backpack is making the ‘things are getting worse’ sounds, and I’m coughing and it really hurts. But it’ll be okay, I’ll see Mommy soon.”

She looked up at him and put her hand on his knee. “I love you Stephan, Mommy would be proud of you” He just looked at her, his lip trembling, eyes starting to fill with tears.

He grabbed her in his arms and hugged her tight. “One day you will see Mommy but it won’t be today. Okay Bee? You stay with me. I love you, Mommy loves you, that’s why we have to keep going. We have to fight for her.”

“I’ll try” she whispered as she hugged him back.

He pulled away and looked at her with his hands on her shoulders. “Ya know what? Let’s have fun today. What do you want to do?”

Her eyes sparkled a bit, “Can we play tag?”

He grinned, “We sure can!”

He barely had time to stand up before she had clambered up and smacked him on the head “TAG! You’re it!!” and tried to sprint away from him.

“Oh you’re gonna get it!” He lightly jogged after her. Ducking between cars and through the buildings, they played tag, back and forth, laughing and smiling like they hadn’t in ages.

It didn’t last long but it was some of the most fun they’d managed to have in awhile.
They both stopped by the fire circle panting. “I won!” she exclaimed with pride.

“Well, you don’t really win at tag when there’s only two of us, Bee,” Stephan said while chuckling. He rummaged through the bag and pulled out some water for the two of them.

“You’re only upset cause you’re a L-O-S-E-R” she taunted, spelling out the last word.

Stephan threw his hands up in defeat. “You got me! I’m just a big ole loser.” He smiled at her, and she sat down next to him.

The afternoon was upon them, and it was much too hot to be running around. Katie sat in the shade, drawing with a stick in the ground. Stephan had found a pretty solid piece of wood and decided to try his hand at whittling. He’d done it a bit in the past, his dad had tried to teach his several times. So, he sat, wood in one hand, pocket knife in the other and got to work. By the time Katie came to bother him about food he was quite satisfied with what he had. It was crude, but it was a bumblebee that’s for sure.

He presented it to her, “For the brightest Bee I know, this is for you.”

She took it from him excitedly. “Oh, Stephan. It’s so lovely!” She ran her fingers across the carved texture and sat entranced with it while Stephan got their food together.

They sat in silence while they ate. “Would you like to hear a story tonight?”

Katie nodded and settled in her sleeping bag. Stephan could tell her breathing was much more ragged than it was yesterday. She had fun today, but it took a lot out of her. Her movements were slow and her eyes drooping already.

Stephan sat up and went into the best rendition he could of the story of the park, of the beautiful spring day where the lady chasing the purple bookmark knocked over the poor
gentleman. He put as much detail and as much heart into it as he could. By the time he finished she was fast asleep. He rested a hand on her shoulder and felt her body fighting for every breath. “It’s okay Katie. I love you.”

He once again settled in with his back against the wall, pocketknife in hand. As he closed his eyes to sleep, he could feel the tears rolling down his face.

The morning was quiet. Too quiet. The sunlight was there, but dim, a lot more gray clouds to filter through today. He opened his eyes and looked to his right where Katie lay and already knew what he would find. Her body was still, her hand was wrapped around the wooden bee he’d given her yesterday.

He reached out and touched her face with the back of his hand. She was cool to the touch.

His eyes began to fill with tears. He pulled his knees to his chest and just looked at her. He’d tried so hard. “Mom, I’m so sorry. I did everything I could. I tried, Momma. Please don’t be mad at me. Please take care of her.” He sat there as the morning passed, unable to shake himself from the grief. He couldn’t feed himself, he couldn’t move. He felt stuck, alone.

The only person he had left in this world that made things feel okay, that made him feel alive, feel human again, was gone.

By the time the light was reaching the golden hour he was finally able to get up. He gently picked up her body, cradling her head against his chest, and carried her to an open spot on the ground. He lay her down, organized her hair, placed her hands on her stomach holding the little wooden bumblebee. Slowly he found rocks and things to cover her body, to bury her. He wished they hadn’t left where their Mom was; Bee deserved to be buried next to her Mom. Not
alone out here in the wilderness, alone out here in a world that never cared. But he cared, and their Mom cared.

The world may have devolved into something less than human, but his Mom never lost her faith for a second that there were still good people out there. He tried to hold on to that. He sat back at the camp and stared at the pile of rocks that now stood as the only remembrance of Katie. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do from here, but he couldn’t just sit still. The radiation was slowly getting to him, the air was tearing him from the inside out and his strength was fading but he couldn’t fail.

After packing up his bag he stood up. He hung the goggles around his neck with the rest of his bandana, secured his bag to his back and paused. He turned to look at the grave one more time. He was going to push on for Bee, and for his Mom. He couldn’t lose hope. Someone was out there somewhere, and Stephan was going to find them, or die trying.
Log Entry 3  
Year: 7312.10.4 
Location: Rethon 3 

There has certainly been much progress with the life units. Gradually they have expanded across more of the available land masses on the surface. They seem to adapt well to new surroundings. We predict further expansion across the surface, and increasing violence between the leaders of the social structures.

Our Observers finally got the go ahead for surface research and were able to ascertain much more about this planet and its past history. This is a most intriguing case, as these life units are carbon based and would almost be seemingly ill fitted to inhabit many of the harsh climates they now do. A rather peculiar life unit, while clearly not the fastest, or the strongest or the biggest life unit, they are slowly becoming the most prolific unit on the surface.

Another set of interesting life units are those that exist in the water on this world, highly intelligent and with their own social structures. We certainly wish to further observe their development. Unfortunately, we do not currently possess the type of craft necessary for proper exploration of the depths of the water.

Aquatic exploration was not considered in the original Proposal to Observe that was submitted for this expedition, which in hindsight, was clearly a mistake. However, the engineering hand and chemists are working on creating a suitable craft that will allow for deeper exploration and sample collection. Although, it seems we will have to wait several rotations before the equipment is fully suitable for exploration efforts. Until then we will continue to document our findings on the surface and the development of the life units.
Log Entry 4  
Year: 8145.03.9  
Location: Rethon 3  

Developmentally, the bipedal life units seem to have stopped progressing and have reached an uneasy equilibrium with their surroundings. Many of the inhabitants of the water on this planet are still developing and changing. It is truly breathtaking what lies in the dark depths of the water here.

The aquatic exploration craft was successfully completed and has been used extensively due to the vast quantity of water on the surface. We are struggling to keep up with maintenance needs due to frequency of use, but it is worth it for the research.

The bipedal life units do not seem to be interested in exploring the depths beneath them, only using the water as a means to traverse across the surface. Something they have done quite well. There is almost no corner of the land on the surface they have not ventured to inhabit. There is something to be said about the journeys they seem to willingly undertake with no preparation or knowledge of what they will encounter.

Our explorations of the deep revealed creatures of astounding magnitude with bizarre features. Many of them possessed no ability to see, the ability to create light from their bodies, and gruesome mouths with which to consume prey. If these creatures were on the surface it is certain the bipedal life units would perish. Several samples were collected for further analysis on the ship.

Observation is not scheduled to resume at the Rethon system for at least a millennium.

The life studies specialist Observers on the surface were spotted and unfortunately added into the social structures of the life units. We must withdraw and hope our connection or existence is forgotten. Although from observations of these units, even if the larger society forgets, there will remain a subculture that holds close to our memory. Nothing can be done to eliminate this, and the breach has been documented.

Rethon 4 sadly never produced sustainable life units. The conditions on the planet were not suitable for the type of life unit that developed. We also unfortunately might have to attribute the loss of the life units to technical
malfunctions of our propulsion systems which might have aided in the stripping of the protective layer around the surface of the planet when we first arrived.

We wish the best to the life units of Rethon 3. Departure will commence shortly. Certain tasks must be completed before we can depart, and logs must be finalized. One more report will follow before departure, protocol will be followed more closely to avoid repeating what happened on Rethon 4
**Brimstone**
Fire and brimstone will bring the end
Chaos fueled by screaming pain
Smoke will choke, dust will settle
Death is king with a quiet reign

Land of rubble, brought by chaos
Full of monsters wrought with sorrows
Few will fight to stay alive
Silent strength formed by deathly cries

Carry forwards and carry on
Fighting death against the odds
Some will win, see the other side
A phoenix birthed by pain and fire
Suffering

Stephan looked down at the ground as he trudged onwards. Days had gone by, how many? He honestly didn’t know. There wasn’t a point in keeping time, it only made things more painful. Slowly he was moving west. Scavenging for food at every available opportunity, spending his days in the shadows to try and stay cool, and spending nights with his back against something solid.

He had yet to come across anyone alive.

A few days ago, he came across a house that appeared to have some solid fortifications. He got excited. Clearly there used to be people here who put a lot of effort into protecting themselves from the outside world and the elements. Whoever lived or used to live here had certainly made an effort to survive. Stephan carefully made his way up to the front door, watching out for potential traps or snares in the yard. There were a few but they didn’t seem to be maintained. His heart sunk a bit, but maybe someone was still here?

Cautiously he knocked on the door. The knock seemed to echo in the silence. He held his breath and listened for anything. But he heard nothing.

Gingerly he turned the doorknob and opened the door. It groaned with the movement. He stood to the side and let it swing forward, waiting in anticipation of another trap. When nothing came, and the air was still he stuck his head through the doorway. He crinkled his nose as draft blew through, and he was greeted with the stench of mold and decay.

He grimaced; there wasn’t going to be anyone alive here. Still, he pushed forward. There might still be resources he could use. He made his way from room to room and as he did so the stench slowly grew stronger. It filled him with hesitation. Was it worth even continuing? He then
rounded the corner of a room towards the back of the house and almost vomited immediately. The stench of death hit him in the face and overwhelmed his senses. His eyes started watering and he turned around heaving, gagging and coughing. He took a few minutes, stepping into another room, holding a hand over his mouth and just trying to breathe.

Slowly he walked back towards the room and peeked around the corner to look at the scene. Three bodies lay on the ground. Two adults and one clearly a child. It looked like it was a family. He didn’t know for sure, but he could certainly guess at what happened. The man, or what looked like the man, was slumped forwards and to the side. Stephan could make out a gun in his hand. The other two bodies were sprawled on the floor. The woman wrapped around, hugging, protecting the child.

The man probably snapped like so many other people had. The ground and walls were dark with dried blood. The bodies were in early stages of decomposition: bloated, crawling with maggots, just in a horrid state of appearance and succumbing to decay. They couldn’t be more than a few weeks old. Still new enough he could see the wounds on their bodies. The woman and child had been shot in the head, the child from the back and the woman from the front. Clearly the child never saw it coming. It looked like the man had shot himself with the gun under his chin.

He could never imagine falling so low, losing all hope to the point of shooting your family point blank. He sank to his knees, tears filling his eyes. Maybe if he’d moved quicker, he could’ve gotten here while they were still alive, changed the events that took place in this house.
Blinking tears away, he pushed himself to his feet. There wasn’t anything he could do for them now, but they might help him survive. He grit his teeth and cautiously made his way towards the man. That gun could serve him well, even if it only had a few bullets left.

He held his breath and turned his face away as he slowly pried open the dead man’s hand, gagging as the stench worsened when he squished the fingers of the corpse. Finally, he got it free. He backed away quickly, holding the gun in his hand. Without even looking at how many rounds were left, he stuffed it in his bag. He didn’t want to think about it anymore.

He turned away.

Stephan continued through the house and rummaged through the kitchen. He found some decently usable cans of food, some dent’s here or there, a few definitely had holes in them but he needed the food. It would be enough to keep him going for a bit. He didn’t spend long in the house after that. In the backyard he found a well, it wasn’t completely dry, but the water was definitely not clean. He still had some water purification tablets so he took what he could and filled up a bottle.

Stephan shuddered at the memory of the house. God how he wished that family was alive. This world had gone through too much. Fathers shouldn’t be shooting their families they should be protecting them, fighting for them.

He could only think about his own dad. A strong man who never even had the chance to try to defend them. After his father’s death, their Mom used to tell stories about him – he was a gentle giant with the heart of a lion, strong but determined. She wanted to make sure that Stephan and Katie didn’t forget him. If only he was still here, maybe he’d be a force of guidance through this horrid existence.
His Mom tried to hide what happened to the world, but sometimes that was impossible. Whenever Stephan walked in and she was watching the news the TV would always be quickly turned off, or the channel changed. He never managed to get the full idea of what was going on, but he could certainly tell that it wasn’t good. He eventually started hiding just outside the room trying to eavesdrop, but she kept the TV so low. He knew bits and pieces of what went down. World leaders starting to point fingers of blame at each other for the worsening situation of the climate, stockpiling nuclear weapons, espionage, assassination attempts, etc. Each week things got bleaker and bleaker until suddenly everything collapsed. That’s when the bombs dropped.

But how the world got here was in his past, it was in his Mom’s past, his dad’s past, and it was in Katies past. All the deaths of the world were behind him, and it was all he could do to not be just another body decaying amongst the rubble.

The sun was starting to set; he was going to need to find a place to camp for the night.

There wasn’t much in the way of structures around. He’d been walking in a field of nothing but dead shrubbery and random boulders for some time. Luckily, he’d recently found a decently intact tarp. He also had picked up some sticks to help with walking, now something he used to prop up the tarp as a lean-to sort of protection. He didn’t like closing off all sides, he wanted to be able to see if something was going to come at him.

Stephan found a decently flat piece of ground and set himself up a small shelter. Tonight was definitely a night he wanted to set himself up a fire. In the waning light he hacked up the dead vegetation nearby, hoping it would make decent tinder. It wouldn’t be a long fire because he couldn’t find many substantial pieces of wood.
He moved some rocks into a circle and dumped his collection in the center. He started the fire and settled himself under the tarp, staring into the growing flames.

The day faded and the darkness grew around him, and he just stared at the flickering light before him. He didn’t like to think at night, it brought too much pain, too much anger. He preferred instead to empty his mind. Preferred to just stare into the abyss in front of him and try not to wonder when this world would take him too. Some nights he was more successful than others.

He poked the flames occasionally, watching the resulting sparks drift up and away into the night sky. He was finding it hard to continue, he didn’t have the motivation, or the love for life like Katie had. She was such a trooper, and yeah she whined occasionally, but she was young, she understood even less about what happened to the world than he did. But she had accepted it; the bad, evil, ugly world was the only one she knew, but she loved it.

She found beauty in all the little corners. Maybe it was the way a pretty insect sparkled in the sunlight, or shadows that looked like animals dancing in the sky, or clouds that were just a bit brighter than the others, and a laugh that rung out after every stupid joke he made. He chuckled softly thinking about her bright smile, but then he cracked. The chuckles softly turned into tears, breathing uneven as he fought back sobs.

Fuck, he missed her.

Heblinked at the tears that were forming, sending some rolling down his face. He didn’t wipe them away, he just put his fire poking stick down, brought his knees to his chest, and buried his face. How was he supposed to do this alone?
As the fire faded, Stephan lay down on his sleeping bag. He reached his hand into his pocket and ran the bee charm between his forefinger and thumb. He clutched it in his fist, pulled it out of his pocket, and held it against his chest. It didn’t matter what it took, he had to survive for Bee.

The embers glowed softly in the dark night as Stephan finally drifted off to sleep.

He did not awake in a very good mood. It was raining. However, rain couldn’t really be trusted anymore: it wasn’t clean. It wasn’t always acid rain, sometimes it just contained weird particulates and looked gray and dirty.

He pulled himself under the tarp, the soft sizzles that came off the rocks seemed to indicate the current rainstorm gracing the skies was pretty acidic.

There was no way he could stay under the tarp all day; he didn’t know how long it had been raining before he woke up and there was no way he trusted the rain not to slowly chew its way through the material. Stephan scanned the horizon that he could see. Why for once was there no stupid building nearby? He was going to have to travel in this muck or risk injury. Who was he kidding? He was risking injury no matter his decision.

He quickly stuffed what he had back into his bag except the tarp, and his goggles. They were going to be his protection against this rain. He quickly fastened the goggles to his face, and pulled his bandana from around his neck up over his nose. It then took him a bit of maneuvering, but he gathered his feet underneath him, so he was kneeling on the ground. Taking a deep breath, he reached up and grasped the edge of the tarp, quickly balling his fists inwards trying to protect himself from the rain.
He winced as his skin came into contact with the rain and the tarp that had been exposed to the acidic water. Slowly he stood, pulling the tarp in but keeping it over his head and trying to keep his feet underneath the silhouette of protection the tarp offered. He heard the stick he’d been using to prop up the tarp fall to the ground. Oh well, he could probably find another one.

There was no turning his head now, he had to rotate his entire body with the tarp to scan what was around him. He flattened his mouth into a stiff line of determination. Having his field of view reduced wasn’t ideal but clearly nothing was ideal about this world anymore.

After a minute of spinning slowly and squinting through the muck, Stephan spotted what seemed to be a direction that would offer him some protection. Taking a deep breath, he was off. It was a slow departure, but still, he was off.

His steps were shortened because he didn’t want to leave the protection of the tarp. Occasionally the wind picked up and blew it towards his face. He was so thankful for those goggles. His only protection was pulling the tarp closer around his head and reduce the footprint it had on the ground.

The rain never ceased.

He had no idea how much time passed, but that wasn’t unusual. His days were managed by the light of the sun. When it rose, he woke up, well, usually. Sometimes he would just lay with his eyes closed, trying to ignore the light on his face. Those days were hard. Others, when the sun was blocked by clouds, he had no idea how long he slept. Then there were days like today when Mother Nature clearly had other plans for his day.

Stephan slowly trudged up the hill in front of him, and when he got to the top he stopped. Rocks! Never in his life had he dreamed he’d be so happy to see rocks. He hurried down the
other side of the hill towards them. There was a perfect little ledge he could wedge himself underneath.

It didn’t take long for him to reach the small cluster. Rain be damned, he was so close to a decent shelter.

He quickly threw his bag underneath the rock and ended up throwing the tarp on the ground with it.

“Shit,” Stephan mumbled to himself; he could feel the rain irritating his skin.

He fumbled around his newfound campsite and dragged a few decently large rocks up against the side of the outcropping to serve as more protection from the wind and the rain, leaving himself an opening on the narrow side as an entrance.

Finally, he was able to crawl underneath and collapse. His breathing was quick and ragged. He closed his eyes and listened to the storm worsen around the little hollow he’d made for himself. There wasn’t much room to move around, and certainly not enough for him to sit up straight, but he had enough to roll over, and at least he was able to reach his bag.

He slid his goggles off his face and pulled out his sleeping bag and tried to arrange it to be a thin pillow between his head and the harsh rocks.

It was not a comfortable position, his skin itched and burned where it had significant exposure to the rain. As he settled into the enclosure, he felt his hands slowly get worse, until at some point they went numb. He closed his eyes and just let the weight of the situation set in. Heavy…everything felt so heavy.
He tried to control his breathing and let the sound of the storm drown out his thoughts. The exhaustion soon took over him and he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning came and Stephan groggily opened his eyes, well, at least he thought it was morning. It was hard to tell the light level through the rocks he’d barricaded himself underneath.

THUMP

That wasn’t a sound he was expecting. Perhaps the rocks weren’t as solid as he thought they were in the storm. However, he soon froze, he heard something else. He heard breathing.

It didn’t quite sound human; it was quick, short breaths. Something was on the rocks above him, searching, hunting. He had no doubt it was searching for him. He could hear what sounded like claws slowly dragging against the surface of the rock as it moved closer. Stephan couldn’t be sure, but he had a hunch that the creature above him was what his mother used to call a mongrel.

This wasn’t the first time he’d ever encountered one, but it certainly had been a while.

He and Katie had encountered them once or twice on their journey, always using his axe and high ground to stay away. But the first time he ever saw them was burned in his brain.

He must’ve been about twelve or thirteen, just over a year into this mess of a world, and he was playing in the garden with Katie. Their Mom had always maintained a garden, but he noticed in the year leading up to the chaos she had been adding more plants, really taking care of it, making it large enough to sustain their family. She’d also bought chickens and had their dad build a coop for them right next to the house.
Stephan loved the chickens; the way their heads bobbed when they walked, and the weird way they cocked their heads when you squawked at them. The world hadn’t been kind to them though, once the devastation hit, they started to get sick, and they didn’t make as many eggs. Of the eggs that they kept to hatch, fewer chicks survived, and those that did weren’t quite normal. But those chickens were damn tough and survive they did.

The garden and chickens were what got them through for so long, but it also made them a target, to human and animal hunters. He and Katie were outside when their Mom yelled at them to get in the house. At the time they hadn’t seen what she was yelling about, so they slowly got their stuff up and started moving towards the house.

“STEPHAN! NOW.” She stepped outside and held the door open, giving them a death glare to get inside. In her other hand she had a machete. In a panic, he and Katie ran towards her and ducked inside.

She closed the door and stepped forward, adjusting her grip on the machete. Stephan and Katie peeked through the window and gasped. Prowling through the grass towards the house were three huge mongrels. Their Mom had warned them about these monsters, they’d started appearing around the areas where the first bombs fell and were ruthless.

They usually hunted in packs, and had such a high endurance they were impossible to outrun. And yet here they were approaching their home, there was nowhere to run, and their Mom was going to stand her ground and try to fight them.

They were never sure if it was the kids or the chickens that drew the mongrels into the yard, but there they were. It was terrifying. Stephan and Katie watched as their Mom charged at those mongrels wielding the machete and screaming. It was a brief fight, one of them lunged at
her but she caught the side of its head with the blade, pushing it to the side. The other two bolted away, clearly deciding it wasn’t worth dying for.

His mother certainly decided he was worth dying for, and now he was stuck under a rock with a mongrel basically breathing down his neck.

He tried to breathe quietly but was struggling because his heart was pounding. The mongrel had made its way down off the rock. Stephan couldn’t hear it anymore because the claws didn’t scrape in the wet dirt.

Almost to scared to move, he knew he had to try to defend himself. There wasn’t much room, but he was still able to reach his bag.

The gun.

The gun he pried out of a dead man’s hand. It might be his only chance to escape with his life. His bag was pressed up against the rocks and behind his head. He shimmied himself so he was on his back, and then tried to reach over his shoulder to get at the contents. His fingers grappled wildly for the gun because his hand was shaking from the adrenaline and fear.

Finally, he felt the cold metal of the barrel and he grabbed it, slowly pulling it out of the depths. Damn, he realized that he never checked if it was loaded. He couldn’t see very well but fumbled with the mechanism trying to get it open to see if there was anything inside.

Then he heard it, the snarl, it was so close to his head. It startled him and he jerked, resulting in him hitting the rocks around him. He winced as his knee roughly struck the rocks. The mongrel stopped; Stephan could see it turn towards him through the cracks in the rock.
It was emaciated, its ribs clearly visible under the wiry coat. It also seemed a lot smaller than the ones he remembered. How long had it been out here fighting to survive? If he wasn’t terrified for his life he might be sympathetic, he knew how hard it was to keep pushing when the world was throwing everything against you.

He held his breath; he noticed his feet were slightly exposed towards the entrance of the hole he’d made. Slowly he tried to pull them within the protection of the rocks, but that was a bad decision. The mongrel noticed the movement and lunged towards it, locking its jaws tightly around Stephan’s ankle.

“FUCK!” Stephan screamed. He wasn’t thinking anymore, instinct was taking over with the only thought in his head being to get that thing off his foot. Bullets or not he had to try. He tried to point the barrel in the general direction of the opening, his vision blurry, and pulled the trigger.

Click

Nothing. He tried again and again, tears forming in his eyes.

Click. Click. Click.

No, no this couldn’t be happening. He kicked, he failed, he screamed in pain, his voice cracking and failing him.

The panic was real, he couldn’t move much. He thrashed violently, but all he did was throw his body against the rocks around him. With all his might he used his free foot to kick in the direction of the mongrel. Again, and again, and again. He could feel it making contact but the beast didn’t let go, snarling and trying to drag his body out into the open.
Finally, Stephan kicked with such a might that the beast let go and its body reared back, hitting its head on the rock above. He must’ve hit the rocks around him enough to loosen them, or make them unsteady because some small ones tumbled off the surface.

He had an idea. He began to thrash more, still kicking out to try and prevent the thing from attacking him again. Hitting the rocks with all his might.

The most ungodly sound greeted his ears. The mongrel was crushed under a huge rock, letting out a pitiful yelp as its bones were crushed and the soft tissue was pulverized against the earth.

Stephan exhaled with such a relief, tears started to roll down his cheeks. The adrenaline and anxiety were overwhelming. But they soon were tears of tragedy, as he was now trapped. He didn’t have the strength to push any of the rocks away from him. He couldn’t crawl out. He could feel the blood gushing out of his foot. Did he still have a foot? He couldn’t tell.

His breathing slowed as he let his body relax. There was no point in being stressed, he wasn’t going to make it out. He fought so hard, tried so hard to survive against all the odds. Yet here he was, bleeding out in a tomb of rock.

“I’m sorry Bee. I’ll see you soon,” he whispered to himself in the dark. It was getting hard to see. He was really lightheaded.

This was the end.

He closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness that surrounded him. He accepted that this was his death.
Log Entry 5  
Year 10041.12.1

Location: Rethon 3

This is much later than we had planned to depart, there was another issue with the surface research team and it took them some time before they could fully extricate themselves from the society.

Let it be documented they were fully reprimanded for the breach of protocol on all counts. However, they did bring back valuable artifacts and samples which will be considered when determining a proper punishment. Until that is decided they have been confined to quarters since research on this vessel has concluded for now.

Departure will commence within the next passing of the star for best trajectory towards our home world. We have predicted when the Rethon star will expand and consume several of the worlds in this system. The plan is for our vessel to depart and return all of our findings to the Higher Research Authority and return before the eminent doom of the planets here to determine the fate of the bipedal life units.

Our final observation of note is not a pleasant one, these life units are extremely hostile towards one another and do not seem to grasp the concepts of equality of communication across social structures. Several of the largest powers have taken threatening actions against each other, it does not bode well for the future of this planet.

In the last few rotations our sensors have picked up significantly increasing radioactivity on the surface in highly concentrated areas. Our hope is they are developing a new energy resource and not tools of destruction. We are unable to make a determination of the use due to the complicated social structures and issues with the surface team. The crew is finalizing logs and ensuring proper storage of samples.

This is the last research report to be filed before departure.
Log Entry 6  
Year 75846091.05.4  
Location: In transit to Rethon 3  

I spent much of the last cosmic rotation studying the records left by the previous Observers. None have been back to Rethon and its planets for several millennia.

It is truly a great shame, the original Observers fought to return sooner but could not convince the Higher Research Authority to allow the funds for another expedition. Our people did not believe there was anything of significant scientific value to be gained from an additional expedition. Perhaps if the life units had developed enough intelligence to be able to contact us then more research could have been approved.

It should also be noted that lack of communication was not without effort. The original Observers documented events where the life units sent members of their own up into the stars and even walked on the rock that orbits their planet. Yet, every time communication was attempted it was seemingly ignored.

We are unsure if they would have been accepting of outsiders though, one of the atmospheric probes the original Observers deployed got destroyed and the remnants collected by the life units, presumably for study. Although without being allowed to return, our people will never know the heights or depths that the life units reached. Alas, only one final mission was permitted. It was such an honor to be chosen by the Higher Research Authority to lead this mission to document the death of Rethon and its consumption of the worlds around it.

The complement of our vessel is identical to that of the original Observer crew. My team and I have a simple mission: capture the death of an entire system and entire civilizations of life units. Although Observers have witnessed such cataclysmic events before, nothing is more humbling than watching the entire history of a kind of existence disappear.

We will arrive at Rethon 3 shortly.
Hope

Darkness. It surrounded him; it filled him. Darkness was all Stephan had. There was no feeling, everything was numb. Was this what happened after death? It must be: just an endless abyss of nothing. Sometimes he thought he heard words, saw movement, glimpsed a flash of light, but as quickly as these phantoms appeared they vanished.

He could tell something was starting, there was a semblance of a feeling creeping through the nothingness. He was feeling something, and that in itself was weird. He felt like he was moving, like the darkness was becoming layered with shadows of different hues. Suddenly it was shapes – there was no mistaking it. There was light!

He didn’t know what the shapes were, or where the light was coming from, but there was finally something other than the darkness.

There was no concept of time to Stephan as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Every time he gained awareness he could make out just a little bit more of this world that surrounded him: solid outlines, clear shapes, at one point he could even make out that one of the shapes was a person. That realization was immense, he wasn’t alone! Wherever he was, alive or dead, he wasn’t alone.

He fought. He fought to stay with the light and the shapes and the mystery outline of a person. He tried to reach out, to communicate but felt like there was an immense weight on his chest stopping his words, restraining his movements.

Slowly he started to get feeling back; it wasn’t just his mind trapped with a numbness. He could feel his chest as he took in breaths, he could feel his back lying against something. He still had his body. Was he then alive?
But how? That mongrel had basically gnawed his foot off. He remembered seeing so much blood. Thank god Katie wasn’t with him. He probably wouldn’t have been able to protect her, he was so weak.

Even with feeling returning to his body, this didn’t feel real. Every day the picture in front of his eyes slowly got clearer, every day he could feel just a little more sensation. It seemed like he was in a hospital, or medical place of some kind. The walls were a light beige color and the light was just a touch too white for comfort.

It wasn’t just visuals that he started to notice, there was sound. Sometimes it was just the dull beeping of equipment, other times it was voices murmuring. Well, to him it sounded like murmuring, it was like he was underwater just hearing gargled syllables. How desperately he wanted to know what they were saying.

With every little sensation that returned, with every word he could understand and shape he could make out, he fought. Alive or not there was a world around him and he wanted desperately to be a part of it.

Finally, he could start to feel things against his fingers, sheets, his other fingers, he could move them! Therefore, he still had control over his body, he wasn’t going to be trapped inside his mind. Stephan had no idea how long it took but he started being able to make gargled noises, moving his arm from side to side. Each movement was a step and gave him hope that he could pull out of this.

He didn’t know how much time had passed but one day when he opened his eyes he noticed a person next to his bed. He tried to reach out to them, grab their arm. His arm just
slowly crawled to the side as he tried to croak out the words, “Am I alive?” He didn’t know what it sounded like to them but they noticed and immediately left the room with a gasp.

No! He wasn’t trying to scare them away. But then they returned with more people, the murmuring was louder, some of them moved into his peripheral, checking things maybe, he wasn’t sure. But he got their attention.

Things were different after that, there was almost always someone in the room, watching him. Little by little he made progress until he could finally sit up and was actually aware of his surroundings. The people who sat with him talked to him, told him stories, but more importantly they told him where he was and how he’d gotten there.

He was with a group of survivors, how big he still didn’t know, but they had been out on a hunting patrol when they saw the corpse of the mongrel. They were interested in salvaging what they could of the corpse so they moved the boulder off of it. Once they did they noticed a lot of blood, and the mangled mess of his foot. They quickly tried to move all the rocks that Stephan had set up to try and protect his alcove and see if he was alive. His pulse had been very faint, but he was alive. They put a tourniquet on his leg to try and stop any further blood loss, strapped him to the back of one of the patrol members and brought him back here. They’d kept him strapped to the bed for his own safety because they weren’t sure what state he’d wake up in, if he ever woke up.

That was all they’d told him so far. He was in the middle of attempting to eat some oatmeal when a woman entered the room.

“Hi.” She said softly, “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”
“No, you’re alright. I’m still trying to regain my fine motor control,” Stephan said while scowling at the bowl before him. Strewn about on the tray lay clumps of cold oatmeal from his failed attempts at getting it to his mouth.

She chuckled, “I’m sorry, I know it must be difficult. I’m Ella, I just wanted to check in on you. I can help you if you’d let me?”

“Please.”

Ella walked over to Stephan and took the spoon from him, then began feeding him the oatmeal.

“You’re recovering faster than I think anyone expected. Coming out of a coma is not easy.”

“It’s been a journey. But I need to ask, no one will tell me. How long have I been here?”

She looked at him, and then down at the bowl in her hands. “Several weeks, maybe months. It’s hard to keep track of time anymore.”

Stephan laid his head back. Months. Months he just laid here. Months Katie never got. Months he was safe and protected and took up resources and gave nothing in return.

“Damn,” he said quietly.

Ella fed him the rest of the oatmeal in silence. “Well, I’ll get this out of your way.” She picked up the tray and turned to leave.

Stephan touched her arm. “Thank you,” he said.
“Well, you’ll need your strength for physical therapy later. You’re welcome.” And with that she left the room, leaving Stephan to his thoughts.

Like she had said, a few men came to his room later. They explained they were there to help him recover. For the first time that he could remember, the straps that held his lower body in place were undone and the blankets were pulled back.

Stephan stared in shock. His foot was gone. He knew he should’ve expected something like that to have happened, but no one told him they’d amputated it. A few inches below his knee there was just nothing.

“We’ve made a makeshift prosthetic for you. It’s not perfect but it should do,” one of the men told him.

They helped him out of bed and into a wheelchair and he finally left that tiny room. The hallways were just as one might expect from a somewhat hospital. It was a relatively clean facility, but it was clear it had been standing for a while and had seen more than its fair share of death and disease.

Stephan realized as they were wheeling him down the hallway, not only did he have to learn how to walk again, but he had to learn how to walk with a prosthetic.

Everyone was so nice to him. He learned a few more names: John was the guy who’d made the prosthetic, Tommy was the one who’d carried him back from the rocks, and of course Ella who apparently had fought everyone else to use their resources to care for him.
It was painful, god, it was painful. The nub on his leg was so sensitive and the nerves were all out of whack. They gave him sensations in weird places, and sometimes it felt like his foot was still there and just throbbing in pain.

He still primarily lived in that beige room. They were working on getting other arrangements for him, but in a survival base you don’t typically expect an increase in numbers.

Weeks passed, and he got better. His control over his arms was essentially back to normal, although physically he was a lot weaker. His walking however, still needed quite a bit of work. He did finally get the freedom to walk around the compound but with the assistance of a cane. Any cracks or uneven ground would cause him to trip and stumble, but Stephan was determined to not give up. He’d been given a second chance at surviving this hellscape, and he wasn’t about to screw it up.

There were still a lot of things he didn’t have answers to, but mostly he was just grateful to the people here for rescuing him.

He’d found a place where he enjoyed spending his time. Outside, on one of the exposed roofs at night, he would just lay and stare at the stars. Often, he just lay there with no real thoughts going through his head, just existing in the world and feeling it breathe around him. But tonight was different. He was laying down, looking at the stars, and he could see a pattern in the bright dots of light.

His eyes slowly began to well with tears. It looked like a bumblebee, not a particularly realistic one, but it looked just like the ones Katie used to draw for their mom. He tried to tell himself that his brain was tricking him, but he couldn’t, it was too late.
He sat up and buried his head in his hands, sobbing. He pulled his knee up to his chest and held it close. He went to reach for the charm in his pocket but stopped. He knew it wasn’t there.

He’d asked the people here for everything they found him with, and they gave it to him, but there was one thing missing. That charm. It must’ve fallen out of his pocket when they dragged him out from under that rock. The one thing he had to remember both of them by was gone.

“Hey,” a voice quietly asked from behind him, “are you okay?”

Fuck, he quickly tried to wipe the tears from his eyes before responding, “Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

He looked over to see who it was, it was Ella. She walked over and sat down next to him.

“You don’t have to lie to me, I know it’s been hard.” She looked at him sympathetically. Ella had become the closest thing to a friend Stephan had in a long time. She turned to look out at the view, pulling her knees to her chest and crossing her arms over them. “We’ve all lost people. Everyone here likes to pretend they’re okay, but no one is. We’ve become each other’s family. It was that or die.”

Stephan looked at her. “Who did you lose?”

“The better question is, who didn’t I lose. My family is from DC. I was out of town for a work trip. My first one, I was so excited. And then… well you know what got hit first.” She sighed.

“I’m so sorry. My dad was traveling for work when things went down. We lost him first.”
“We?” She turned her head to look at him. Ah, right, he’d forgotten he hadn’t really shared anything about himself with anyone.

“For a while it was me, my sister Katie and my Mom. We did alright. Had chickens, a garden, my Mom did everything she could to keep us safe. Until she realized we couldn’t survive alone. So we set out to try and find others.” He leaned back, leaving his leg bent and his arms supporting him. “Then she fell sick and died so it was just me and Bee… me and Katie, sorry.”

“You’re alright.” She adjusted her body to face him.

He took a deep breath. “Then I don’t know, probably just a few days before you found me, I lost Katie too. We’d survived for so long. Fought so hard, but for what? They died anyways, and I almost did. What’s the fucking point anymore?” He couldn’t stop them, slowly his eyes began to water and tears dripped softly down his cheeks.

“So, you guys left a place of relative safety just to try and find others? That’s pretty incredible.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I still don’t get why you guys saved me,” Stephan scoffed.

“Because no one deserves to die alone.” Ella put a hand on his shoulder, “It didn’t start with all of us. Tommy and his brother found John first. Between them they had enough skills to survive for a while as they tried to find a place to make a good camp. This place started as a school or something I think. Tommy found it on one of his hunting expeditions. Grant was hiding inside with a few other kids. They were covered in dirt and emaciated but the building was intact. So they made camp here. Every time they went out for supplies, if they found people they brought them back. They found engineers, scientists, gardeners, craftsmen. They didn’t try to find those kinds of people. In reality those people found them. Every new addition brought
something new to the place, something to help with survival, or something just to make the time go easier.”

“How many have you lost?” he asked.

With a sigh she responded, “More than I really know. Even small injuries can turn deadly. It wasn’t until we found Gwen, a nurse, that we finally stopped losing so many. There’s a small graveyard on that hill over there.” She pointed off to the right, “Tommy thought it was better if it wasn’t too close to the compound. We need to keep hope in this place, not sadness and depression.” She looked at him. “It may take a while for you to see, but you’re part of the family here now. There aren’t too many of us, but we fight for each other.”

He smiled softly. “Thanks. It’s just hard being here without them.”

“Without them you might not have made it this long. I know it will take a while to adjust, take as long as you need. Trust me, more than you know you’re around people who understand, and if there’s anything I can help with, I’m here for you.” With that she gave him a smile and a pat on the shoulder and left him alone again to stare at the stars.

Once again in silence, the tears flowed. God, how he’d fought. Fought through injuries to keep pushing forward. Fought through hunger to make sure Katie didn’t have to. Fought through fear to make sure they both survived the day. Fought through hopelessness to try and protect Katie from the worst of it. He’d never know if he really succeeded.

He supposed that was for the best; he didn’t want to know how much she understood of the world. How much she actually understood the chaos around them. How much she understood just how dire their situation was.
He would give anything to be sitting on that rooftop with her. To hear her laugh one more time. But he couldn’t. She was gone, but he was still here thanks to the kindness of strangers. People who knew it was better to bring people in and accept the challenges that come with sharing resources, then fighting each other for them.

His mom always pushed to look for survivors but never knew the kind of people they would stumble across. That realization hit him like a load of bricks. The fear of encountering bad or corrupt people was trumped by the fear of being alone in the world. Every scratch, every struggle, every mile was to prove they weren’t alone. But even now that Stephan had found people, he’d never felt more alone.

Maybe slowly he could try to fit in here, be useful, make up for all the resources he used, the dead weight that he’d been. He had to prove to them he was worth saving, if not for his own conscience then to Katie and Mom, that he’d done it. He’d found what they had always been looking for; it had to be worth it.

That night ended and days crawled by. Stephan’s physical condition got better and he was able to do more around the compound. He helped with cooking, helped with morale by telling stories, and his favorite, helping in the garden. The quiet and green of the plants brought him to a happier place.

Slowly he opened up to the people who rescued him. Turns out John was a wizard on the guitar and the hulk that was Tommy had the voice of an angel. He learned more about the people there, and grew to care for them. Faith watched her sister die in her arms and fought tooth and nail to escape the abuse of her dad who tried to keep her captive once the bombs fell. Grant was quite young, high school age, but had a tenacity for science. He was a proper genius. Grant was
the only reason they had a flourishing garden in the middle of a literal wasteland. Jordan was a quiet person, but one who could weave stories about fantastical far-off lands for hours. It just took a few home brewed drinks to get him talking. There were so many people there, and all of them different.

Their skills, their hobbies, their backgrounds, their trauma and their triumphs. It’s what brought them together and what helped them survive. They never thought to prioritize themselves, they knew without the others around them that survival was impossible.

It was clear Tommy was more than the tough guy he appeared – he took on the role of a patriarch, of a protector. Stephan didn’t know how old Tommy was, but he seemed old enough to potentially have kids of his own. But Tommy never liked to talk about his personal life; he kept to himself. Ella had told Stephan about Tommy starting the compound with his brother, but it was clear that his brother wasn’t around anymore. She was right, these people understood his pain more than he would ever truly know.

Stephan eventually began to smile again, he allowed himself to laugh and enjoy the company; after all, he did almost die out in the desert alone.

He always enjoyed visiting that rooftop and staring at the stars. It kept him grounded. Without the sacrifices his mother had made, he and Katie never would’ve made it as far as they did.

It was a cool breezy night on the rooftop when he heard a voice behind him.

“Hey.”

He turned to see who it was and saw Ella standing there, with her hands behind her back.
“Hey, you, have a seat.” He patted the space next to him.

She cracked a smile and took a seat. “So, I have something for you. We’ve all seen how much you’ve been adjusting to the way things are here, trying to be useful.”

“Well, I’m just trying to repay everything you guys have done for me.” He gave her a crooked smile.

“You know you don’t have to do that. But regardless, I asked John for his help since he’s the crafty one around here, but I wanted to give you something to show you that you’re family to us now. So here.” She held out a small box with a piece of twine tied around it in a small bow.

“What’s this?” Stephan asked as he took it from her.

Gingerly he undid the bow and opened the box. He gasped. “Oh, Ella –”

Sitting on top of some recycled paper was a little metal bumblebee sculpture. He slowly reached into the box and picked it up, turning it between his fingers. It had delicate wings and small little legs. The joints were all so delicately bent and welded.

“– it’s beautiful. You guys didn’t have to do this,” he said as his voice cracked, trying to fight back the tears he felt forming behind his eyes.

“We wanted to. I saw the pain in your eyes when you shared the story about Katie and that bumblebee carving you made, and then that charm you had. It clearly meant a lot to you. I thought you might like a new one.” She smiled.

“–Thank you.”
He reached out and pulled Ella into a strong hug, holding her in his arms, and the bumblebee in his hands as the tears began to roll down his face. She hugged him back, tearing up. “Welcome to the family.”

He closed his eyes and just held her close.

He finally had hope that maybe this world wasn’t just a hellscape devoid of life, that just maybe there was still some humanity left in the ruin.

*I did it mom,* he thought. *I found them.*

“I promise I’ll protect them the way I tried to protect Bee, I won’t let them down,” he whispered.

He had finally found the hope he was looking for and he wasn’t about to let it go.
Log Entry 7
Year: 75851091.11.6

Location: Orbiting Rethon 3

There are so few words to describe the devastation. We have spent ages on the surface trying to find records of what happened, but it’s so hard to see. The atmosphere is dark, much darker than as described by the original Observers. Their records indicated they could survive on the surface without protection, however now that is impossible.

The intense high energy waves emanating from the surface tell of a horrid, dark time. From what we can determine, nothing has walked the surface of this world for a long, long time. Even the life units in the water have presumably perished. Locations where before we had documented large sprawling cities have been reduced to ruins, slowly decaying. Large bodies of water on the surface have turned into a gray sludge or they no longer exist, in their place are large ravines.

This time our vessel was equipped with an aquatic exploration craft, and we sent the specialists down in the liquid that remained to document their findings. They were unable to locate any life, therefore we have concluded that none remains. Even the vegetation was destroyed, the occasional large prickly plant was found, but no lush green, no planes of grass, just crumbling, dry dead nothingness.

We excavated the surface in locations where records indicated high population density. Many artifacts will return with us for further study.

I can barely process everything that we have seen.

We have collected as many records as we could safely obtain given the state of the world, and yet are still at a true loss trying to fathom the horrors that took place prior to our arrival. We have found evidence of transit to the other worlds within the pull of Rethon, specifically on Rethon 4 and on orbiting bodies of Rethon 5 and 6. Clearly the bipedal life units did advance, but they also clearly devolved. There is much to log and collect but not much more to report.

We will make a final report once Rethon has begun expansion and consumption of the planets.
Log Entry 8
Year: 76010084.08.3

Location: Observing distance of Rethon

I have never witnessed a more magnificent sight. Slow, graceful and destructive. The way the planets just crumble out of existence is mesmerizing.

We had to move a greater distance from Rethon to ensure our own safety, but this has been the most incredible thing to behold. I am almost glad the bipedal life forms died off, it would have been a shame to see a thriving civilization die. Perhaps they managed to escape into the void of the cosmos somewhere. It’s unlikely though.

There were talks of sending out Observers to look for such a potential craft, but it was deemed a waste of resources. The decision was based on the presumably devolved state we would find the bipedal life units in.

Our surface excursions and collected artifacts only indicated destruction; it appears they turned against each other in such a way that ensured their own demise. How they could allow their planet to get to such a state still baffles us.

This crew would like to make a formal note that the delays caused by the Higher Research Authority have caused a significant gap of knowledge in our understanding of these creatures. Their original society formed because they could care for each other, it appears it fell because they stopped caring about themselves.

Again, I am incredibly honored to have been able to see the transition Rethon underwent, and there is truly nothing that could describe the intense feelings of awe, power, and weakness that the sight evokes.

Once we gather our final readings we will depart and close the observation of Rethon and her planets.
Reflection

Breathe as the night falls
The quiet is overwhelming
Silence drapes the hills in calm
At last, the fight is done

Pause in the recollection
Shed a tear for times gone by
Take relief in the satisfaction
That it’s all been worth the while

From within the view was cloudy
With the outside the picture’s clear
Foundation still stands strong
But the past remains near