

Ruins of Eternia

Quick Savant

Introduction

The desert stretched endlessly, a sea of golden sands shimmering beneath Aestara Prime's twin suns. Rylan Kael squinted against the heat haze, his cybernetic eye scanning the horizon for movement. The air was heavy with tension. This planet, barren and desolate, was said to guard a secret worth dying for.

Behind him, the crew busied themselves with preparations. Mei adjusted her neural interface, her deft hands trembling only slightly as she tested their equipment. Elias muttered to himself, flipping through alien glyphs with a mix of excitement and dread. Marcus tinkered with the transport, cursing under his breath. Only Aria seemed calm, though her eyes betrayed a flicker of doubt as they rested on Rylan.

"This place is a graveyard," Elias finally said, breaking the silence. "Every team that's tried to enter the ruins... gone. Disappeared."

"And yet here we are," Rylan replied. "Let's make sure we're the first to walk back out."

The desert wind howled, carrying with it the whispers of the unknown. Somewhere beneath their feet, Eternia waited—ancient, alien, and alive.

Chapter 1: Welcome to Eternia

The desert sucks.

It's not the kind of desert you're imagining—no dunes, no camel silhouettes against a scenic sunset. No, this one's more like standing inside an oven someone forgot to clean for a century. Aestara Prime: two suns, no shade, and an atmosphere that hates you personally.

"This is gonna be great," Marcus said, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he wiped sweat off his bald head. "I love the ambiance here. Dry, deadly, and oh, look, I'm already dehydrated."

"Stop whining, Gadget," Mei snapped. She was perched on our six-wheeled, armored transport hood, tightening a loose bolt on the cannon mount. Her tank top clung to her, soaked from the heat, but she looked about as unbothered as you could get for someone on a baking death world. "I didn't drag your sorry ass here to complain about the weather."

Marcus shot her a look, then muttered, "Yeah, well, next time, send a postcard. 'Wish you were here' and all that."

I ignored them both, squinting at the horizon. The ruins were supposed to be just a few clicks west, but all I could see was a mirage resembling a melted popsicle. The map Sebastian gave us was... vague. Actually, "vague" is generous. It was a blurry satellite image with a red X scrawled like some space pirate's idea of a joke.

"Rylan?" Mei called from the transport. "You sure this is the right direction? I'm not getting any signal on the scanner."

"Nope," I said, popping the P for emphasis. "But hey, if we die out here, at least we'll be nice and crispy." "Fantastic," Mei deadpanned.

We rolled out ten minutes later.

The transport—officially nicknamed "The Beast," unofficially referred to as "Piece of Junk" by Marcus—groaned and rattled as it rumbled across the cracked desert floor. Its engine wheezed like an asthmatic rhino, but it moved, which was all that mattered.

Elias sat beside me in the cab, staring at his datapad like it held the universe's secrets. Maybe it did. He's our resident xenobiologist-slash-archaeologist-slash-guy-who-actually-knows-stuff. Skinny, messy hair, glasses that he adjusts every five seconds even though they're augmented reality and don't fall off.

"You know," he said, breaking the silence, "this planet wasn't always a desert."

"Cool," I replied.

"Seriously," he continued, either ignoring my tone or too nerdy to care. "Aestara Prime used to have oceans, rainforests—an entire biosphere. All gone now, wiped out by some unknown event. Whatever happened here was big. Cataclysmic. And the ruins—"

"Are probably booby-trapped and full of things that want to kill us," I finished for him.

He frowned. "Well... maybe."

"That's Rylan's way of saying he's looking forward to it," Mei called from the turret hatch above.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Nothing I love more than getting shot at in a crumbling death maze."

We reached the ruins an hour later.

I'll admit it: they were impressive. Towering spires of alien architecture rose out of the desert like skeletal fingers, shimmering in the heat. The structures were weathered and cracked, but their edges were too sharp for something supposedly millions of years old.

Elias practically vibrated with excitement. "This is incredible," he said, hopping out of the transport before it stopped. He stumbled into the dust, datapad in hand, scanning the ruins like a kid in a candy store.

Mei was behind him, lugging a rifle that looked like it could take down a starship. "Elias," she said, "maybe don't run headfirst into the creepy alien ruins. Just a thought."

He ignored her.

Marcus climbed out, grumbling under his breath. "Yeah, great. Super alien ruins. Whoopee. Can't wait to see what kills us first."

I stood back, scanning the horizon. Something felt off. The ruins were quiet—too quiet. No animals, no wind, not even a sound from the structures themselves. Just... silence.

That's when I noticed the tracks.

Boot prints.

Fresh.

"Company," I said, my voice low.

Mei was by my side in an instant, weapon raised. "Where?"

I pointed at the tracks. They crisscrossed the sand in a loose pattern, heading toward the largest structure in the ruins. The edges of the prints were crisp, the sand undisturbed by time or wind.

"Mercs?" Mei guessed.

"Probably."

Marcus groaned. "Fantastic. I knew this was going to be one of those jobs."

Elias, oblivious as usual, finally looked up from his datapad. "What? What's wrong?"

"We're not alone," I said.

"Oh," he said, blinking. Then: "Should we leave?"

Mei smirked. "What, and miss all the fun?"

We moved in cautiously, weapons ready. Mei took point, her movements sharp and precise. Marcus covered the rear, muttering something about "hazard pay."

The air inside the ruins was cooler but stifling, filled with the scent of dust and metal. Strange carvings lined the walls—spirals, glyphs, shapes that didn't make sense unless you stared too long, in which case they made even less sense.

Elias stopped to examine one of the carvings. "This is extraordinary," he whispered. "These symbols—they're not just decorative. They're a language. Maybe even a form of... programming?"

Mei glanced back. "Can you read it?"

"Not yet," he said. "But if I—"

The sound of a gunshot cut him off.

It came deeper inside the ruins, echoing through the halls like thunderclaps.

We froze.

"Well," I said, checking my weapon. "There's your answer. Mercs."

Mei grinned, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Let's go say hi."

And with that, we headed into the ruins.

