

The Plague (Excerpt)
by David Kraine

I. The Future (*Mette*)

The Mithra came without warning, just as they had six thousand years ago, when they halted human progression for the first time. Destroying a planet seemed like quite a feat, but the Mithra had done it twice.

Now, New Earth was gone.

Humanity had been inspired after Earth's annihilation to right so much of what had gone wrong the first time. Now, it was facing the same task again. Maybe the third time's the charm.

"Can you imagine having actually lived through it on Earth? Moving to New Earth, waiting for six thousand years—afraid it's all going to happen again?"

"And then it does," Jack said. "I can hardly imagine living through it once!"

I slumped down next to my brother beneath the porthole of the last rescue vessel to leave New Earth. Sitting with our backs to the ship's outer wall meant we didn't have to face what waited outside the window. Jack sighed, rubbing his eyes like he might be able to wipe reality away by cleaning his view of it.

"We kind of saw it coming. I mean, look." I gestured at the massive ship—lovingly, unironically, called a Life Raft. "You don't build Life Rafts the size of small countries and actually expect people to believe, *They're gone. Move on.*"

He laughed. "They're gone. Move on. How long before they start telling us that again?"

"They've got to find a new one now. Maybe, *Enjoy it while it lasts.*"

"Or, *Don't bother.*" This time Jack shook his head, picking up on the same startled smile I'd had since we took off. "We had some good times, humans."

"I'm glad Mom didn't see it."

"The last days before near-extinction? Yeah, I guess that brings out the worst in people."

"She was always so optimistic—it would have killed her to see how bad it got." I looked at my brother, my best friend, and wondered what it would have been like to lose him. "I still feel hope."

"That's the whiskey. Which, speaking of . . ." Bracing himself on my shoulder, Jack stood up to retrieve the bottle and refill his glass. "Another?" I grabbed his hand and hoisted myself upright, but in doing so, my gaze froze on the view outside the porthole.

Everything felt heavier. Jack raised his glass to the framed apocalyptic scene, pointed—with his thumb and forefinger in the shape of an old-fashioned gun—and made a clicking sound. It was a horrible rendition of the "I've got my eye on you" pickup move I'd seen him try too many times. Now, though, it looked as if his imaginary bullet had eradicated an entire planet, its pieces still red hot from the attack. Where once there was purpose now drifted shattered remains, all floating to join the rest of useless, empty space.

"To you, Sis." He wobbled his glass over to me. "You're going to be a hot commodity now that we'll be filling up another planet."

"Gross!" I pushed him away, faking a laugh, and he wandered back to the window.

“Home.” Jack touched the window as if trying to catch the pieces and put it all back together.

“Not anymore.”

My throat clenched. A new planet awaited where the name *Earth* could be forgotten by generations who wouldn’t realize their world was built on a disordered memory.

Jack tried the word, but it sounded so unfamiliar. “Rathe.”

Our new home.



The Distant Future

Admiral Rex Westerly

“We need that planet for expansion.”

“The Flora have lived there for longer than your species has existed! It would be absurd to transplant them for not responding to your communications!”

“*Our* communications, Steward. Unless you have risen above the Democratic Assembly, I believe you are still on our side.”

Chatter ceased in the one-mile-high legislative chamber as Carona, the Assembly’s head of resurfacing, brought Steward Sliop’s argument, and his Column’s ascension, to a grinding halt. Sliop was a guest; Carona was a regular, but still only part of the auxiliary, location-based Intergalactic Authority, not the central, species-based DA she now addressed. Tenure was one of many things working in her favor, including being a member of the species that terraforming would primarily benefit.

“I only meant that we have barely made an effort at establishing contact with a peaceful species that might not even know we exist.” Sliop’s tentacles slithered at his side—he was not yet defeated.

“It’s a simple matter of economics.” Ambassador Carona was always matter-of-fact. She had to be: clearing planets for human expansion was a messy business. I knew firsthand.

“They are a peaceful species!” But the more the Traken steward, Sliop, argued, the farther his Column dropped. Even as head of his species, Sliop was no match for the Columns’ brutal honesty. The Columns were an intimidation tool used to ensure that Assembly visitors knew that their presence in the Nonane was an honor that could be stripped away at any time. Every major species in the universe had a single, anonymous vote to raise or lower a speaker Column, ruthlessly displaying DA approval ratings.

“We simply cannot afford a group of useless squatters leeching off the trade, technology, and security our Democratic Assembly provides. They’ll be relocated, and the planet will be prepped for terraforming.”

The Nonane had already decided in favor of the Flora’s extraction, as was evident by the position of Ambassador Carona’s Column—which had risen almost to eye level with President Jas Bogá and myself.

Steward Sliop was practically shouting objections from his Column, a half-mile below. “Relocation? We all know what that means!” The angrier Sliop became, the more ridiculous it was for any species with Assembly representation to cast their support in his favor, and so he descended even lower.

“Steward Sliop.” The president’s husky voice brought silence to the cylindrical chamber. “This debate is over. I will not have you drag the integrity of our Assembly through the mud in a feeble attempt at swaying its verdict.”

The DA coordinated all of its activities from the Nonane. Each intelligent species, regardless of population size, was assigned a level of the legislative chamber from which to manage its existence within the union. Humans were at the top, a position not unrelated to the fact that few had showed up to discuss today’s rather mundane topic.

“This Assembly of Stewards is adjourned. Terraforming of Beloch—Mère—Legentil is now in the hands of the IA’s Department of Resurfacing. Ambassador Carona, to you as head of that department: Thank you for your service.” President Bogá stood

abruptly, punctuating the Assembly's adjournment with an echoing stomp as a mile of species stewards followed suit.

Bogá was obviously upset. I stepped aside to let her exit the balcony before following behind. Hab, her chief of intelligence, waited on the other side of the door.

"President Bogá, excellent wrangling of that unruly creature. Sliop was completely out of hand. Horrible creatures, Trakens. The way their tentacles writhe when they get upset." He sneered, just for effect. "Disgusting."

Any sane person could have seen Bogá fuming with every word Hab spoke, but Hab was not human. Titans, a *humanoid* species, were particularly lost when it came to discerning human emotions. His glowing teeth wove his own undoing. Hab continued, "You should have seen how mad he looked, shouting and squirming as his Column plummeted. Well done, indeed. Impressive containment of some potentially dangerous comments."

Bogá turned, and Hab stopped just short of collision, bringing them uncomfortably eye to eye.

"Hab, if you would be so kind as to go to Steward Sliop. Let him know that I require his services as my new chief of intelligence."

"Ma'am?"

"I was impressive? *I was totally unprepared!* Your briefing on Beloch left out every bit of information Sliop presented. You didn't even mention . . . whatever life it was!"

"It is a simple resurfacing, President Bogá. Nothing outside the ordinary."

"And yet Sliop seemed to know more about it than anyone in the whole Nonane!"

"It was nearly unanimous," Hab protested.

"Because it's necessary! But that does not discount the counterpoint. It seems only fitting that I should garner at least a sliver"—she raised her hand and defined a tiny slice with her thumb and forefinger—"of information from my team on a planet my kind is about to occupy!"

"I don't understand."

"Well, then." She grabbed Hab by the hands and pulled him to the side of the hall that connected the humans' Nonane balcony with the rest of the Assembly ship. "Let me put it to you this way. You see, I don't have time to research every planet, every squabble, every vote that occurs in that chamber. That is why I have my ministers. As a member of that team, your job is to keep things running, to do your homework, so that I can attend to matters of greater importance. Now, if the removal of an entire species from a planet they've called home for millennia does not hold your interest as a subject of study, than I require a more studious advisor. Steward Sliop seemed riveted by this *ordinary* occurrence."

"But he was against it."

"At least he knew what was going on!" she shouted.

I suppressed a smile. The hem of Bogá's violet dress trailed behind her as she walked out, a tug of war that conveyed power and beauty, leaving me to follow the swift clicking of her heels in the marble hallway. Other spokes leading away from the Nonane and deeper into the DA's mobile home were not so sumptuous.

Technically, the Assembly was a ship, but actually moving the nearly planet-sized hub and all of its security would be an impossible task. Some forward-thinking individual

had positioned the universe's headquarters in Dar—Valladrian, orbiting a young sun, which meant it wouldn't need shifting for a long time.

Jas Bogá and I stepped inside the president's elevator at the end of the hallway after a microsecond retina scan verified our identities.

"President Bogá," said the elevator in greeting.

"My quarters," she said simply.

"Right away."

IT, the assembly's intel system, analyzed the pitch of her voice before obeying. This elevator existed solely to take the president from the ship's heart to her distant room without disturbance. Had IT detected any incongruence in identity or stress signs, we might already be dead. IT was the eyes and ears of security as well as the mouth, arms, and heart of the DA.

Jas seemed to deflate; her shoulders dropped.

"You did well."

She turned around, addressing me for the first time since leaving the Nonane: "Don't."

I reached out and grabbed her hand, giving it such a small squeeze that I thought she might not even have noticed.

"I can't believe you made Hab fire himself."

She cracked a smile. "You heard him."

"Oh, I heard him. You should have heard yourself. Stone cold."

"Stop it!" She playfully backed away, an equally small movement. "You know how much I hate expansion votes."

"Well, I'd say they're your least contentious," I joked, skirting the species issue.

She rolled her eyes. "Imagine that. Oh, well." She moved in closer. "I cleared my schedule for tonight."

Then she grabbed my hand.

"Can't."

"Rex!" She let go.

"Sorry! It's your war!"

"My and *war* are both exaggerations," she said. "The Defiled are hardly worth going to war over."

"Well, you *are* the president."

"Don't remind me. Don't you think calling it a war is a bit of an overstatement?" she asked seriously. "What Defiled nonsense now?"

"You'll love this. The *Vanguard* has been receiving messages from some unimaginative Defiled trying to convince us that he can lead us to their heart."

"And you don't believe him?"

"There *is* no heart of the Defiled—just lowly scum pretending to feel righteous about murdering, kidnapping, and stealing. They're tricking themselves into believing there's a purpose to unplugging from the Feed. There's no plan behind it."

"Strange attempt at a trap, though."

"Ridiculous. Though I might have better luck with that than what I'm doing next. D'Vor has requested the *Vanguard* in Dra Nook Cia."

"The admiral of the Assembly Fleet flies across the universe on request by an IA ambassador. Powerful," she teased.

Sometimes I forgot how young she was. This was partly her fault. Not that I wasn't to blame.

"You know D'Vor is not just another ambassador. I still need to establish myself as an effective chief admiral."

"Well, I don't think catering to his every whim is helping you establish any healthy expectations."

"Jas. You make for an incredible politician, but an awful soldier." She backed away again—ever so slightly. A trained pleaser.

"Well, I didn't know we were at war with our own ambassadors."

"Politicians are at war with nearly everyone around them."

"Especially the IA," she responded.

Most of Jas's time was spent mediating IA and DA confrontations. It was rare the Democratic Assembly of species stewards made a decision that wasn't at odds with another the Intergalactic Authority's galaxial ambassadors hadn't just decided for the opposite. Jas hated trumping her Auxiliary government.

"But you are *the* chief admiral of the Assembly Fleet."

"Now you're reminding me," I laughed. "That's my point anyway."

The elevator doors opened, and we were in Jas's private quarters.

"Hello, Ma'am." The mirror image of President Jas Bogá stood waiting in the main room.

"Hi, Em."

Her twin: "Dinner is on the table."

"Thank you, Em, that's plenty, please. I'll be fine."

Em smiled at me and left with the same dominant stride as her other half. It must have been genetic.

"How long before you have to go?" She clasped her hands around the back of my head and pulled closer. I backed away, letting our combined heat diffuse back into the room.

"You just fired your minister of intelligence and appointed the Traken steward."

"He has an interesting background—studied the multiverse at the First Academy of Physical Sciences. Besides, the appointment will help in Goldilocks. The Traken are everywhere in our sweet spot."

"Aha, so firing Hab wasn't as uncalculated as it appeared?"

"My ministers are not selected on a whim." She looked away, clearly bored with my questions.

"And everything checks out?"

"Clean enough. Sliop's done some interesting work on parallel universes. There was one paper, a bit outlandish, something about these universes actually posing a threat." She must have seen my face, because she hurried to defend her position.

"Bizarre, but not dangerous. The front runner for his replacement as Traken steward is perfectly mundane."

"So the universe's intelligence is wrapped in an eccentric's idea of *another dimension*. Powerful."

She smiled, pulling me close again before responding: "And terraforming continues. Small price to pay for the space we'll have in Legentil."

“Fascinating.” I tried to sound intelligent. “That just leaves one question, then! In how many universes have I fallen ludicrously in love with you?”

“At least one.”

And I kissed the most powerful woman in the universe.



Forge

Great Dovanna!

Something was wrong. I knew it before opening my eyes. Orange heat drew beads of sweat that trickled onto my lips.

“*Mikasha!*”

Fear pushed her name from my mouth as great red-orange flames leaped in front of my perch fenestra.

“Help! Fire!”

I took the scion from next to my bed and spun it, creating a whirlwind that pushed a hole straight through the flames. Without thinking, I hurled myself through the closing gap.

The Woodland did not catch me with its soft life as usual; instead, I landed with a crunch into charred, crumbling ruins. Choked by black mist, I rose from the ashes to take in the inferno my home had become.

“Forge . . .”

A murmur drifted into my ears above the crackling blaze.

“*Mikasha!*” I shouted back.

How like the Woodland, to fight bellowing fires with mere whispers.

“Forge,” the wind called again.

I ran in the direction of her voice. If only I were faster! If only I could move like the Flora!

There were bodies—burned, dead bodies—everywhere! The Woodland was dying. The Flora were dying!

“Forge.”

The wind led me to Mikasha’s perch and to her pale, fragile body beneath the still-burning tree.

“*Mikasha!* What happened? I’ll get you out of here.”

I put my arm around her shoulder and began to hoist her away from the fire. She wasn’t heavy, but she resisted.

“Forge . . . the Orchard! Save the Orchard!”

Of course! That was the only way to save them.

“What happened? Who did this?” My own frantic words seemed to catch fire.

“GO!” she coughed.

The burst of energy in her voice urged me away. If Mikasha’s tree could be saved, so could she. Running the same path I had countless times before, I saw the Flora—Saplings and Elders alike—all pale and weak, scattered throughout the burning Woodland. Who would do this?

Dovanna would know what to do! But why hadn’t she already acted?

A queasy feeling stretched my stomach up into my throat—what if something had happened to her? Why else wouldn’t she do something? A menacing haze glowed in the direction of the Orchard. I wasn’t far now from the sacred ground.

I burst through the thin line of trees surrounding the Orchard and froze, horrified.

“No!”

Pillars of fire lifted a silver monstrosity off the ground as white figures stepped up onto a retracting walkway into its innards. The Orchard blazed beneath the machine as it lurched away from my home. Trees, connected to the very lives of each Flora, crackled in

orange fire that spread out from the Orchard. Almost every tree in the Orchard was ablaze—almost every Flora in the Woodland was dying.

Dovanna was our only hope.

Remembering my friends, who were weakening with every second of destruction, I sprinted away from the Orchard and toward our Woodland mother.

“Dovanna! Please. Please. Please. Oh, Dovanna!”

The forest changed as I approached the source of the entire Woodland, and my spirit broke. There were no more fires. They had already died out for lack of fuel. Instead, warped, bare branches twisted and snapped as crumbling undergrowth disintegrated in the wind.

“DOVANNA!”

I hurdled her stream, worried that even its cleansing waters could not hold the fire at bay.

She was there, untouched. A glorious white tree juxtaposed with the deathly conflagration. Pink and blue flowers adorned the ends of each of her branches among red leaves quivering in the blistering wind.

I screamed as I approached. “Dovanna! The Woodland!” Each of my hurried steps splashed foul-smelling water onto my legs and face. “Dovanna, what happened? You must do something! The Saplings! All of them! Everyone is dying.”

The bark and knots of wisdom twisted with a low groan into a smile, and tired eyes opened to acknowledge me.

“Forge, my child. The Woodland is lost.”

Her complete lack of haste surprised me so much that I didn’t hear her words.

“Tell me what to do.”

I unsheathed the scion staff from my back, wielding it with white knuckles. I would do anything.

“Leave the Woodland.”

“I will fight!”

Two roots sprang up from beneath me, twisting around my scion and prying it from my grip. Dovanna held it between us as she spoke, not rushed, but shaking. She was scared. Her weathered face grew sad.

“You may, but I pray that you do not. Though the journey I send you on now may leave you no choice.”

“Tell me what to do. I will do anything!”

“Listen carefully, Forge. Time is against us. You must find the Council of Dishanyu. It is as secret as it is wise, and it has been so long. . . what was not safe for you has become unsafe for all. You mustn’t tell anyone that you seek the Dishanyu.”

“And what do I do when I find them?”

“Hear me, Forge. You mustn’t tell anyone that you seek the Dishanyu Council.”

“I understand.”

“Finding them is only the beginning,” she continued.

“Of what?” I heard Dovanna’s words without fully comprehending.

“Your true pursuit. This purpose can only be revealed to the Dishanyu Council, which can only be found safely without revealing that you search for it.”

“And what do I tell the Council when I find them?”

“In order to save those who love you—to save yourself—you must find a creature named Ezekial—and kill it.”

“Wha—? Dovanna, I don’t understand. What are you asking? How will that save the Woodland?”

“Do not question me, Forge. You were raised as one of my children, even though you are not.” Her words stuck pins into my greatest insecurity. “Now I ask this of you: Find the Dishanyu Council, and then, only then, reveal your true purpose—to hunt and kill the creature Ezekial. The Dishanyu will help.”

I could barely think with the flames eating away at the Orchard behind us. “Leaving now, when I am needed most, goes against everything I’ve learned from you!”

Her smile returned as the glow of orange fire cast sinister shadows around us.

“Forge. No one must know that you are from the Woodland except for you. We raised you as one of us. We raised you of the forest. You ate of us and drank with us. You lived on the essence of the Woodland, growing with the Saplings themselves.”

“But you said it yourself. I am not one of you.”

“That is why you must leave—because you can.”

“How will I find the Dishanyu?” Just uttering the words felt like betrayal. “How will it save the Woodland?”

“Things are in motion that I thought had fallen into slumber. This is bigger than the Woodland, Forge. This is bigger than me or you, yet we must play our parts. Mine ends today where yours is just beginning.”

“I don’t understand.”

The flames seemed to lean closer to listen to our conversation, and Dovanna’s words became short.

“It doesn’t matter. Remember: find the Dishanyu Council; they will help you kill Ezekial.”

“But how?”

“Trust. You are loved, Forge—so much more than you know. Let that be your guide, and when all is dark, turn to the universe and trust that things are as they should be. I love you, Forge; if nothing else, trust that. This may seem cruel, but what I do now is out of love.”

The fire finally reached the foul wetness flooding around Dovanna’s trunk and galloped over its ripples to reach us.

“Go! Beneath the Woodland!”

Her twisted roots slithered and shook apart, creating a staircase like the ones we played on in the Orchard.

“Thank you, Forge! Thank you!”

The flames held back, blocked by some hidden power, and I ran for the passage beneath her.

“The power of the Woodland runs through your veins. Find the Dishanyu Council! Kill Ezekial!”

Heat leapt at my back as her roots closed behind me, locking me in complete darkness, which only the Flora—and I—could navigate. Something rolled over in my stomach. Behind me Mikasha was dying. I felt the cool dirt and Dovanna’s roots holding me back. With my first step forward, my heart tore, opening a hole that could only be filled by returning to the Woodland.

Fresh tears refilled riverbeds beneath both of my eyes, and I pushed the obvious from my mind. I ran down Dovanna's roots, wondering what could lay at the bottom, wondering why she would force me to abandon the only thing I knew—wondering if Mikasha might still be alive.

Just get to the bottom. My trained eyes saw the small room, even in pitch black. I hurried, half falling, as if the flames pursued me with intent.

Ting. Ting.

My footsteps clanged on the solid metallic floor of the room beneath the Woodland, and colored lights whirred to life. A door slid shut behind me, and I was alone in a space just big enough to stand.

“Wha . . .?”

My vision was blurry through tears, but I could make out a single seat embedded in the wall. A voice screeched over the commotion: “Evacuation pod—ready. Launch in—thirty—seconds.”

“Who are you?” I screamed above the clatter.

“Launch in—twenty—seconds.”

The tiny room began to vibrate. I braced myself on the wall above the chair, careful not to touch anything that blinked or glowed.

“Prepare for launch in—ten, nine, eight—”

The room began to shake more violently, and a tiny panel opened to my left, revealing a window that showed only the dark dirt of the Woodland pressed up against its side.

“—five, four, three—”

I jumped into the seat—”two”—and something hissed as a bar dropped over me.

“—one.”

A deafening roar filled the room. I tried to cover my ears, but the bar only allowed my arms to reach the multitude of buttons in front of me and no higher. I was a prisoner now, in mind and body.

“*Let me go!* Who are you? What is this?!”

I had already failed. Maybe this was Dovanna's test to see if I was worthy of the task she'd given me—to see if I could escape this tiny room.

Dirt rushed by outside the window until a sudden orange light flooded in. The last few specks of dirt vibrated off the rising room, and all I could see was fire. My stomach and heart stayed below, but my body hurtled upward.

The same voice continued screeching over the racket. “Nearest compatible ship—*Tanker. Alpha-five-three-seven.* Rendezvous in approximately—three days.”

My mind spun and my head screamed. Find the Dishanyu Council? Kill Ezekial? Even if it all suddenly made sense, the Woodland was still gone. Unable to wipe my tears, I fell asleep with nothing but the taste of pain and the memories of what I had left behind.

