

THE QUARRY

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Storm Sounds

Suzy is woken by hands shaking her shoulders.

‘There’s something wrong with the roof.’ Her little sister’s voice digs into the space behind Suzy’s eyes and twists like a knife in her ears. Suzy kicks the blanket away from her legs and winces as loose threads cut into the fine skin between her toes.

Anna’s worried eyes are framed by a frizzy-haired halo; the kind Suzy imagines the angels that stand at the doors of the cities churches used to have. Their halos now lie, with their shattered wings, crumbled and down-trodden in the ground beneath shrieking preachers.

Under Suzy’s palms the acid scars that lie across her face feel like smooth cross-stitching. If she had a mirror she might trace out shapes. She sighs.

‘What’s happening?’ Anna’s finger twitch and curl against the sleeve of Suzy’s shirt. ‘It’s making so much noise.’

A corner of the metal roof is crashing up and down, setting an uneven background beat to the storm. The rain is running down the walls to soak into the spare blankets. A

leak isn't unusual, their mother was often in and out as she tried to patch up the holes, but there's so much water streaming down it looks like the wall is covered in horizontal puddles.

Suzy and Anna would sit on the bed and try to guess which rain drops would get to the bottom of the wall first.

'When that one wins.' Anna pointed at the wall. 'You have to do my chores for the afternoon.'

'I can't even tell what you're pointing at.'

Anna poked her tongue out of her mouth and wrinkled her nose. 'That one, the one that's winning.'

Suzy ignored her, listening for the sounds of their mother moving about outside. She always ended up doing Anna's chores in the end.

'I'm not sure what's happening.' Suzy feels the pressure on her arm build as Anna clutches it. 'I'm not sure yet.'

'It sounds bad.'

The hut walls shake like that old rattle their mother's mother had given Suzy when she was born. The wind seems to like playing games. She turns to look at Anna and tries to aim her voice at the reassuring tone their mother had perfected.

'How about you move the food? Just in case.' The words come out toneless and colourless; a blank canvas she cannot mark no matter how she tries. Anna takes careful steps towards the grain bags anyway, her finger scrabbling to find enough purchase to drag them back to the bed. They won't be much safer.

There's a pile of old synther clothes by the door; hard, cracked, and smelling of vinegar. Suzy remembers the long hours their mother worked up and down the machinery lines, the way she looked like she was bleeding oil and grease out of her pores when she got home. Synther's as good as it gets when you can't afford the fancy post-plastic protective suits. And if you could afford the suits you could afford to live somewhere other than the shambles of the shanty town. The clothes seem okay, functioning, if nothing else. Suzy slides her arms into one of the coats and thinks about the pock-marked men and women who sit up and down the main paths during the dry season. Their skin looks like wax; translucent, pale, and dripping. Functioning is more than enough.

‘What are you doing?’ Suzy can see Anna where she sits on the bed, her palms pressed together in unconscious prayer. She pulls Anna’s coat and gloves from the pile and holds them out to her.

‘Put these on.’

The dark synther is a stark contrast to Anna’s skin. She looks colourless in the flickering light of the lamp, like the cold statues that line the front rooms of the City Museum. Their mother took them there once, before she... a few years ago now. The statues scared little Anna so much she screamed and cried until they were asked to leave by security. They never did get to go back to see the rest.

‘Suzy, the storm’s so strong, you can’t go out there!’

The soles of Suzy’s shoes are thin, but she doesn’t feel any holes as she pulls them on. ‘I have to take a look at what’s wrong before the storm eases. I’m sure it’ll be an easy fix.’ She’ll be fine.

‘But what if-?’

‘Just sit on the bed away from the leak. I’ll be back soon.’

The old timber door sticks in its frame, swollen from the hot air and rain. It reminds Suzy of when her mother was pregnant with Anna, slick with sweat and trying to squeeze through alleyways that didn’t used to be so narrow. With a kick the door creaks open and she’s able to slip out into the storm.

In the heat of the wet season storms, the canvas and rope that wind tightly around the wood and metal hut chafe at Suzy. They bind her up, constricting her chest until it becomes a fight to keep breathing deep and even, and her fists free of wood splinters and blood. The hut is typical of the shanty town that fills the spaces between the factories. A sea of uncoordinated spider’s webs, holding everything down against the wind. It provides just enough cover from the muddy, acidic rain that pours out of the storms and sings everything it reaches. The wet heat that follows makes it feel like you’re drinking burnt tea with every breath.

Something flicks past Suzy’s face, then swings back to nip at her arm. She grabs it and looks at the frayed end of rope. Their mother used to tell them stories about the animals that lived before the storms. One time she told them about little rope creatures that ate dirt. Worms. The head’s been torn off this worm.

‘Check the ropes, every chance you get,’ their mother had told Suzy.

After the last storm, when the thunder and rain had quieted like the drunk men by the Church depot who yell themselves hoarse in pursuit of a right hook or a soft body,

Suzy was too busy fetching clean water and food to check them. Anna could never seem to learn the difference between acid-wrecked rope and the good, clean kind. The canvas is billowing open, water sloshing around the roof underneath, and one of the walls is shifting from side-to-side more than it should.

Suzy wishes her mother was here to deal with this.

There's a creaking, underneath the storm sounds. It sets her bones jittering and her teeth on edge; her heart banging painfully against her ribs. The roof is sliding, the fixings that keep it attached to the walls have snapped, vanished. It scrapes against the tops of the walls, pulls on the remaining ropes and snags on the canvas. The walls are shaking, gaps forming at the corners and wind rushing into the new spaces.

'Suzy!'

The house is falling down. Isn't there an old nursery rhyme about that? Suzy is sure their mother used to sing it to Anna when she was a baby.

'Suzy!'

The door to the hut opens a crack, pale flickering light stretching out into the path. Anna's face is pressed as close as possible to the gap. There are tears spilling down her cheeks, and Suzy frowns. She steps forward and pulls the door open and Anna outside. The wind is whistling down the pathways around them and Suzy's fingers and palms are clammy inside the synther gloves. She breathes deep, too deep; the moist air rolling down her throat makes her want to cough and heave.

You promised, she reminds herself, you promised her.

'We have to go to the Church.' She holds her sister's hand as well as she can with the stiff gloves. 'Stay there for the night.'

'What about the house? We have to fix the house!' There are more tears building in Anna's eyes. 'Mum would have fixed the house.'

'Stop crying!' Suzy hisses and Anna gulps and chokes instead. 'We'll come back in the morning, talk to Mr Whitley, and you know how good he is at these things.'

Anna nods and grips Suzy's hand tighter, squeezing the blood out of her palm and into her fingertips.

Suzy takes off running, dragging Anna behind her. Their boots splash through the mud. They slip every few steps and catch themselves up against walls. No time for careful footing, they ricochet down the paths; it's like being one of the shuttles that hurtle through the city on their tracks, threatening to overturn on every corner. Their clothes aren't meant for the height of the storms.

The main path that runs through the town will lead them to the Church, now an old store and shelter, where they'll hopefully be able to find space. It'll be crowded this time of year, full of strays and lost causes. Which are they, her and little Anna, with a house about to fall down and almost nothing else?

There's more mud now, ankle deep sludge that tries to grip their feet and stop them from going any further. When they were younger, she and Anna used to cling to their mother's hands and let her swing them in and out of the mud. They would giggle and smile, all three of them, doing it over and over again until she had to go to work.

The world lights up in bright gold as lightning hits the conducting pole. Suzy stumbles when she realises the mounds slumped by the side of the path are people. Her gaze meets a pair of washed out blue eyes. Can they even see them running past?

The rain has been streaking its way underneath her hood and Suzy's face is stinging. Water drips off her nose and when she breathes out it sprays from her lips. She hopes Anna isn't as bad, her hood bigger and her face smaller. There's a chance the water is streaming past her face without touching it. She glances at her sister, but Anna's face was already wet with tears and Suzy can't tell if the rain has joined them. Their mother used to dab vinegar on her acid burns.

Towards the end their mother took up less and less space, her fingers slowly turning to spider-leg thinness; brittle and spindly. Every cough, every jerk as the retching started, Suzy worried she would fall to pieces. Her eyes would barely open, but when they did the colour seemed to leak out of them in watery tears that splashed down her face and off her jaw. Suzy wished she would keep them closed, keep the colour, the life, inside them.

The Church is ahead of them now, the sign blinking red and green.

'See Anna, everything'll be fine.'

Her sister nods, her hand still tight in Suzy's as they bang on the door. The light from the sign catches on Anna's face, glinting in the wetness that coats her cheeks. On either side of them old marble shapes loom, the angels standing sentinel in their judgement.

Suzy can still remember the last conversation she had with their mother.

'Suzy,' their mother croaked, 'Suzy, promise me you'll look after Anna.'

Suzy took their mother's hand, so careful lest it crumble to dust. 'We'll look after her together.'

‘Promise me you’ll look after her,’ she coughed. ‘I always thought one of us should grow up not worrying.’

Suzy pretended not to see her wipe away the speck of red and nodded. Their mother smiled and closed her eyes. Her breaths were harsh and rasping, filling the hut with sound of her life slipping away. Suzy shut her own eyes to stop them from losing their colour.