

# THE QUARRY

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## Playing Catch-Up

*'Playing Catch Up' is part of a novel-length YA work, set in the not-too-distant future. Incorporating elements of dystopian and steam-punk fiction, the novel follows the journey of Scout, an Australian girl plucked from an ordinary life to attend the Dorsay Academy. Dorsay Academy is part of a global company involved in researching and harnessing 'extra' mental capabilities that have been emerging around the world. Scout, along with her friends Lily and Conor, are part of this new generation where their talents could be used for good - or for darker reasons yet to be discovered.*

Scout was standing in a crackly, dry space that she didn't recognise. For as far as her eyes could see, there were tall, sparse eucalypts undulating gently, stretching upwards to a cerulean-blue sky. Blackened stubby grass mounds pushed up from the

dusty ground. There was a slight breeze picking up the scent of eucalyptus and hot earth, making her stomach contort with homesickness. In the distance, she heard the faint sounds of cockatoos screeching in the trees. This was home, but definitely no home that she recognised.

The sun was beating down, searing the crown of her head. She tried to shield her eyes to get a better look at where she was, but found one of her hands being held by a small child. Not just any small child – her. A much smaller version of herself with a confident grin plastered across her face. Scout dropped her hand and stared. Ok, this was weird.

‘Uh, hey’, Scout said to her.

‘Hey,’ Mini-Scout replied, squizzing one eye up to better look at her in the bright sunlight. She was dressed in what Scout remembered as being her favourite outfit – jeans and a red Elmo t-shirt. She’d loved Sesame Street when she was a kid and that t-shirt was a prized possession. Seeing her smaller self was bizarrely strange and familiar all at the same time.

‘Why are we – you - here?’ Scout asked the small version of herself.

‘I’ve got a message.’ The little girl drew out the last word.

‘Yeah, ok,’ Scout drawled, ‘course you do. Because why else would we be standing in the middle of nowhere?’ She fought off an overwhelming urge to laugh.

‘I have!’ Mini-Scout scowled at her.

‘Ok, keep your knickers on. So, who’s it from?’ Scout was definitely finding this amusing. A small part of her brain registered regret at not having a smaller sibling to do this to in real life.

‘Who do you think? Mum, of course,’ the little girl shrugged, looking around.

‘Sure it is,’ Scout said. *Of course*, she thought to herself sarcastically. *Who else would it be from?*

Mini-Scout peered closely at Scout, not quite sure what to make of the eye rolling that this statement induced.

‘I can’t tell you here,’ she said. ‘Come on.’ She tugged at Scout’s hand, urging her forward.

‘Where are we going?’ Scout asked her. The small hand holding hers was hot and dry. The simple touch brought back long-forgotten summer afternoons of carefree

bike rides around neighbouring streets, along with the dawning realisation of her ability to see the world in a different way to everybody else.

‘You’ll see,’ Mini-Scout said and kept walking. The ground between Scout’s toes began to change to a sandy texture, and she saw the tip of a sand dune rear up out of nowhere.

Scout followed her up the incline, puffing slightly. She watched as the little girl laughed joyfully as she ran down the other side, legs and arms akimbo and she found herself laughing as well by the time she’d reached the bottom. Her small doppelganger was waiting impatiently for her, feet twitching on the hot sand.

‘Hurry *up!*’ she grabbed Scout’s hand again, and headed towards the water. The tide was coming in and the shining water hurt her already sun-sore eyes.

They came to a stop near the shoreline, littered with seaweed and shells dumped in piles after a recent storm. Scout glanced around, seeing nothing and no one in either direction. The sea’s mercurial surface slithered around her feet, flashing fleeting images at her. She stared at them closely, only to see them disappear as quickly as they’d appeared. Frustrated, Scout turned her attention to the little girl in front of her.

‘So, how old are you?’ Scout asked her, crouching down to make eye contact with her, ignoring the silvery water around them. Mini-Scout was humming happily as she scooped shells together in the wet sand.

She looked up at Scout steadily. ‘I’m seven,’ she said. ‘You don’t remember being seven, do you?’

‘I guess not,’ Scout shrugged. ‘I don’t remember a lot of things. But that’s ok, I mean, who’d want to remember everything anyway?’

‘I do,’ the little girl announced importantly. ‘And I know why you have to remember now,’ she told Scout.

‘Why? Is that why Mum sent you?’ *It’s just a dream*, she told herself, *dreams are meant to be weird*. But if it was just a dream, why did everything feel so real?

Mini-Scout shook her head at the older girl’s stupidity.

‘Mum says you need to remember who you are,’ she said, suddenly sounding much older than seven. ‘She said to tell you that you’re going to have to be ready.’ Mini-Scout looked pleased, as though she’d remembered the message word for word.

‘Ready for what?’ Scout had no idea what the little girl was talking about.

‘You *know*.’ Mini-Scout scowled at her. ‘But you have to be careful.’ She sat back on her haunches, jeans soaking into the sand and waited expectantly. Scout couldn’t find anything to say, her mind racing to try and figure out what she meant.

‘You’re such a scaredy cat,’ she said derisively, dismissing her older self. From the distance came a sharp clap of thunder. The sky on the horizon had become dark, with clouds that resembled grey waves slowly waiting to crash down. The sparkly sea had turned a bleak grey, a waiting mass of menace.

‘I have to go now,’ Mini-Scout announced.

‘Wait,’ Scout scrambled to get up, tripping over piles of shells and tangling her feet up in seaweed.

‘I can’t,’ she said. ‘But you’ve got to promise that you’ll try to remember and go back to being us. Do you promise?’ she asked fiercely, holding out her pinky for Scout to shake.

‘I promise,’ Scout said solemnly.

‘Ok then,’ she said. ‘Bye,’ and began walking away, up over the crest of the dune. She waved once from the top before disappearing behind it.

‘Wait!’ Scout called out but she didn’t hear. The clouds had crept in closer, forming a dark ring hovering above her. The waves rose up and ropes of seaweed tightened around her ankles with a swirling tug, pulling her out into the cold water.

Quickly losing her footing, she fought back with flailing arms, reaching for the surface, only to be pulled down further into the dark depths.

Entangled in the malevolent swirls, Scout gulped salt water into her protesting lungs, choking. Panic started to set in, and her lungs burned.

Scout kicked hard, freeing herself of the seaweed, reaching the surface when another giant tug pulled her even further down. She was drowning. And there wasn’t a damn thing that she could do about it.

*Come on*, she screamed at herself, *just keep kicking!* Every muscle screamed for mercy. *Not yet, dammit*, she swore to herself, *I’m not going to die yet*.

Scout woke up gasping, trying to draw in deep lungfuls of air. The blissful realisation that she could breathe again helped to slow her panic. Her damp hair was mashed to her head and she hastily pulled her wet pyjamas away from her, trying to rid her body of the clammy, wet feeling that they were swaddling her. *Come on*, she

told herself, *you're okay. Breathe in, breathe out.* Swinging her legs over the edge of her bed, she rested her throbbing feet on the floor, enjoying the coolness of the concrete.

Glancing a little more closely, she noticed sand stuck crusted to her toes. What the hell? Before her brain could start processing this latest detail, there was a knock at the door, startling her. Shit! She caught sight of herself in the mirror opposite her bed. Disaster zone didn't even begin to cover what she saw reflected back at her. She grabbed a hoodie and pulled it over the saturated pyjama top, her skin crawling at the feel of the clammy cotton fabric plastering her body.

'Hey, Hambleton.' A muffled voice came loudly through the door, accompanied by another set of heavy bangs on the flimsy wood. 'Come on,' she thought she heard the voice mutter impatiently. Hunter, by the sounds of it. Great. The last person she wanted to see.

She swung it open, embarrassed, partially hiding behind the door.

'Wow, you're not really a morning person, are you?' Hunter's eyes ran a quick scan over her, taking in the full effect of her bedraggled, literally just-washed-up look.

'I didn't pick you for one, either,' Scout replied, pulling the sweatshirt closer around her. 'What do you want?' He was taking *way* too much interest in how she looked.

'We've been called in to some big-deal early meeting before breakfast. Everybody's been called in to it – students, staff, pretty much everyone in Dorsay, I think. I'm just letting people know,' he replied.

'Wow, that's weird. Okay, uh, thanks. I didn't pick you to be the messenger type. Not really your thing, is it?' She bit her tongue. Don't keep him talking, she scolded herself. Just shut the damn door! She suspected that there was more to this seemingly altruistic act than met the eye.

'Yeah, sure, whatever.' It appeared that her curiosity had got his attention in some unexpected way, given the amused look on his face. He looked at her more closely, a slight smile ghosting across his face.

'You might want to rethink the showering with clothes on, though.' He gestured at her with a casual sweep of his hand. 'I'm guessing that even in places like Australia, being fully clothed isn't what most people do – but that's just a guess. And

maybe try to ditch the sand.’ He looked pointedly at her hands, wrapped around the door.

Remnants of the sand that she’d hastily wiped off her feet had clung to her fingertips. Scout went scarlet and opened her mouth, but before she could reply, he got there first.

‘We’re in the Atrium in half an hour.’ He walked off down the hall and she shut the door with a sigh. This day was getting weirder by the minute and she hadn’t even made it to breakfast yet.

Half an hour later, Scout was standing at the back of the Atrium, Dorsay’s central meeting hall, properly showered and stomach grumbling. She caught sight of Lily and Conor sitting near the front and made her way over to them, plonking herself gratefully on the seat that Lily had saved for her.

‘So, what’s up?’ she asked them.

‘Dunno,’ shrugged Conor, ‘but whatever it is, it won’t be good.’ His gloominess reminded Scout of Eyore, always slightly down about the world around him, regardless of the time of day or situation.

‘Maybe it’s something awesome, like an overseas field trip?’ Lily suggested, her perkiness a deliberate contrast to Conor’s phlegmatic gloom. She looked perfectly groomed in her uniform, as always. Lily always made Scout feel slightly untidy and she found herself smoothing her hair surreptitiously in response.

‘Maybe they’ve flown in our parents for an early parent-teacher conference,’ Scout suggested. After this morning’s nightmare and visit from Hunter, a bit of positive news would be a welcome relief. Conor’s face darkened and he looked away. She glanced at Lily who shook her head very slightly. What had she said?

Stealing a glance back at Conor, he’d already begun picking viciously at the edge of a nail already battered, ignoring them both.

Boys, she sighed to herself. They were so bloody complicated sometimes.

The buzz in the Atrium was beginning to pick up. Glancing around, Scout saw that it had filled up with hundreds of the company’s employees from the surrounding compound. Though Scout and the other students had seen the elegant structure many times from their wing, this was the first time that they’d actually been inside it.

Everyone in the atrium was wearing differently coloured uniforms, the Dorsay logo displayed prominently over the top left sleeve. Scout felt pretty drab in her grey uniform, compared to some of the other uniforms clustered in the large conference hall, which ranged from dark blue to red, green and black. Somehow even though the style was exactly the same on everyone, the colours made them look exotic and vibrant by comparison to the students.

Her attention was brought back to the front of the room by a judiciously placed poke in the side from Lily. Before Scout could register a protest, Lily tilted her head to the front of the room.

‘Ladies and gentleman.’ It was Cerys Westwood-Jones, CEO, Dorsay’s equivalent of the Emperor in Oz’s Emerald City. Wow, that was unexpected, Scout thought. A huge rumour mill surrounded her and, though they’d gotten a brief overview about her when they’d arrived at Dorsay as part of their orientation program, she’d remained pretty much a mystery.

Westwood-Jones stood confidently up on the podium, calmly surveying them all. A woman of relative youth, she appeared to be a woman of tight control and confidence. Her uniform, unlike everyone else’s, was white. More Glinda the good fairy than Oz, Scout thought, wondering if that she could really be that obvious in her choice of colour.

‘Thank you for coming,’ she continued when the noise had settled down. Her voice was smooth with a slight huskiness to it, as though she’d been talking or arguing for ages before she’d gotten up to address them. She had that quality that made people sit forward and take notice of her, despite her relative slightness of build. The energy seemed to flow off her and Scout found herself leaning forward, straining to not miss a word.

Westwood-Jones swept a smile over the assembled crowd below her. The weak English sun streamed in, bathing the room in light if not warmth.

‘As we all know,’ she began, ‘Dorsay has been at the forefront of scientific and technological advancements for over forty years. The best scientists in the world have undertaken our research and experimentation in human evolution and genetics. The next generation is here, ensuring that these advancements continue.’ At this, she swept a glance at Scout and the students who were sitting near her, lingering for a

millisecond longer on Scout. ‘The progress that we have made in the last few years has shown us that we are on the brink of something spectacular.’ Looking at them all, she paused and took a breath. Scout couldn’t help but feel the defiance leaking out of Cerys’ mind, underpinned by a feeling of adrenaline, despite the tight clamp she was keeping on her thoughts.

‘The purpose of calling this meeting is to prepare you for our next step. The ultimate step for Dorsay. We will be launching Stage One of the Alpha Project.’

A collective gasp rose up from the hundreds of people gathered in the atrium. Scout glanced at Conor who shrugged, looking as baffled as she felt. Lily, on the other hand, sat as though she’d expected every word of what she’d just been told. The pitying look she gave Scout told her that she and Conor were seriously behind the eight ball on this one. Just once, Scout thought, irritated, just once I’d like to feel as if I’ve got some idea of what the hell is going on around me.

‘I know that you will have many questions. Rest assured that the Corporation values your contribution to our shared vision.’ At this, Westwood-Jones shot a lightning-quick look in the direction of what appeared to be the Dorsay board, all wearing purple. Not a flattering colour for most of them, Scout noted, especially the short, sweaty man standing closest to the podium.

‘The next phase of Dorsay’s history will not only be challenging but immensely rewarding. For now, I will leave you in the capable hands of our Director of Strategic Planning, Will Taylor. He will be outlining our program over the next few days and weeks as we work towards the most important step that humanity will take.’ With that, she stepped down, nodded to a podgy, purple-encased man and exited through a side door, leaving behind her an increasingly excited crowd of people.

Before Scout could discuss any of this with Lily and Conor, Will Taylor stepped up to the podium and cleared his throat. The sudden silence that fell in the room spoke volumes about him. His expression was harder and more watchful than his CEO’s had been, and his tight collar made his florid face bulge even more, pushing his eye sockets into ever-smaller slits.

‘Good morning.’ His softly accented voice was at odds with the solidity of his frame.



‘Each company sector will have a follow-up briefing, immediately following this meeting. Your sector leaders will be able to answer any immediate questions that you have. This process will be taking place using clear guidelines designed to minimise disruption.’ He glanced around the massive room, enunciating his next words precisely. ‘This information must not leave the compound. Any leaks to the media or other organisations will result in swift consequences for the responsible parties.’

‘That’s all for now. I would ask that you now make your way to your sector meeting rooms.’ At that, the barely-held back murmuring broke into a surge of heated talk. Waves of palpable anticipation bounced off the walls.

‘Um, what the hell?’ Conor leaned forward to voice what Scout was also thinking.

‘I’ve got no idea.’ Scout confessed. Lily started to say something but was interrupted by the sound of mocking laughter coming from behind them.

Conor stiffened and Scout turned around to see her early morning wakeup call sitting with his elbows balanced on his knees, chuckling to himself as though amused beyond all measure by their ignorance.

‘What’s so funny?’ Scout leaned over the back of the chair and eyeballed him. What was this guy’s problem, anyway? She just couldn’t get a handle on his erratic mood swings and superior attitude.

‘I’m just not sure how you two made it in here. She,’ Hunter nodded towards Lily, ‘knows what’s going on. Didn’t you two do any research into the place that you were given a scholarship before coming? For two supposed ‘geniuses’, his fingers twitched in the air around that last word, ‘you’re working the ‘Dumb and Dumber’ angle pretty well. I’m really looking forward to seeing the pair of you get to grips with this.’ Still chuckling, he unfolded his lean frame and slipped casually out into the departing. Scout sat, dumbstruck. Did he really just say that?

‘Man, I thought I had problems, but that guy has some serious social issues,’ Conor said. ‘What’s with him anyway?’ Lily patted him on the shoulder.

‘Who knows?’ she said, dismissively. ‘Don’t listen to him, okay? He gets his kicks out of being an asshole.’ Scout and Conor burst out laughing, both shocked that

something so crude could come out of someone who looked so perfect. Conor looked over at Lily, still smiling at her assessment of Hunter.

‘So, Lil, help out an imbecile. What’s Alpha One?’ he asked.

Lily sighed.

‘Please don’t call me ‘Lil.’ It makes me sound like I work in an East End chip shop,’ but Conor just shrugged.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘I think it kind of suits you.’ Lily grimaced.

‘I’ll explain what I know as we head back. But could we please not be there late and get shamed again by the mentors?’ Her plea was interrupted by Scout’s stomach rumbling loudly.

‘I’m going to need some breakfast if I’m going to get through these next few hours,’ Scout looked pleadingly at Lily.

‘Yeah, me too,’ Conor nodded vigorously.

‘Fine,’ Lily sighed, ‘but if we’re late, then you two can explain why to Chewy.’ Conor snorted in disgust.

‘We’ve been here three months and the guy still hates me,’ he said.

‘Yeah, might have something to do with the fact that you give him shit every time you see him,’ Scout said wryly.

Conor launched into his best *Star Wars* impression and the girls cracked up. Scout realized that Conor wasn’t bad looking, once he relaxed a bit. Catching Lily’s eye, she blushed and shook her head. Lily laughed and stood up.

‘Enough drama for one morning, please! Come on,’ she pushed Conor to get him moving, ‘Let’s get out of here. You two are making me more nervous by the minute,’ and they left the almost empty hall in search of something to eat, Scout heaving a sigh of relief. She didn’t think that she’d have a very good answer if Lily asked her about Conor. Come to think of it, she didn’t have a great one for herself, either.