

# THE QUARRY

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## **The Ring's Travellers**

The Ring's suns had provided the citizens of Navoe planet with yet another perfect day. Trisella had been shopping with her mother in the Apollo district in the city of Drita. Her family lived in a small town called Perplexion, on the outskirts of Drita.

Big cities were even more alien to Trisella than the tiny planets orbiting her home world. Dozens of multi-coloured orbs could be seen if you looked right up into the sky, and every single one had a name, a story, and a population. However, those who had the knowledge of all of those things were few and far between, and their numbers dwindled with each passing year.

The Pocket Travellers—an ancient, evolved race of humans who flitted, with the assistance of their portals, from one planet to the next—were rumoured to have

passed into extinction, and the ‘accidents’ that caused the portals to close were known as the main reason for it.

Her mother had given her permission to walk down the next street and window-shop. She was to stay in sight at all times, and after her mother had paid for her new books, she would take her daughter to lunch. Trisella strolled down the street, her boots clicking against the iron slabs. She kept her mother in the corner of her eye, and peered into windows and displays, her gaze catching the sparkle of something that wasn't a jewel. The fractured piece of crystal was shaped like the letter C, curved and jagged at the edges, frayed in places that crystals shouldn't be frayed. It had seen heavy damage, but it was resting on a red velvet cushion like it was some kind of sacred artefact.

Pulling away from the window and its odd crystal prize, Trisella continued down the street after checking with her mother, who hadn't yet pulled away from the book stall. She was striding along, minding her own business, when she walked straight into someone, even though the path in front of her was empty and there was no one to be seen.

A voice cried out, ‘*Blast it!*’ and suddenly, Trisella was being yanked forward, the sensation like a hook beneath her ribcage, and then she was falling down, down, down through a black, airless void until her feet found the floor, her legs trembling with the impact, and she pitched forward to her hands and knees before she'd even opened her shocked-shut eyes.

Her hands were stuck in some awful goo-like substance, and the floor didn't feel like a floor at all, because it was warm and *moving* and...

‘*Ugh!*’ Trisella yelped, and scuttled backwards, away from the goo, wiping her hands desperately on her dress, letting out tiny whimpers of disgust as she went. ‘What *is* that? Where am I? Hello?’

‘Be quiet, you moronic human!’ the voice from before hissed. ‘You'll wake it up!’

Trisella felt a familiar shiver of indignation, but the sensation of dampness won over, and she looked down at herself again. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness of her new location, and the pulsing of the walls around her was almost soothing in their rhythm.

‘Why am I all soggy?’ Trisella asked. There was a huff, and she was suddenly hauled up and propped against the wall by a large hand on her shoulder.

‘If you hadn't walked right into me and knocked me off-course, you wouldn't be soggy at all, let alone in the stomach of a *Waleos*,’ the voice muttered, and Trisella's guts roiled at the thought.

‘The... *stomach*...? Of a *what*?’

‘A *Waleos*, you idiotic child! You know, swims in the acid lakes and has terrible gnashing teeth and likes to eat small humans for snacks? A mutation of the whales of the old world.’

‘I’ve – I’ve never – what,’ Trisella stammered. In all honesty, she thought she would be far more panicked, for someone in the company of an invisible stranger, trapped in the stomach of a lake-monster. Maybe the panic would set in later.

‘Who are you, anyway?’ Trisella asked. She was quite sure that the stranger was next to her, pressed up against the wall of the... stomach. *Shudder*.

‘Name's Crag,’ the voice replied, and Trisella felt her hand being shaken, even though when she squinted, she couldn't see anything more than a vague shape before her. ‘And you're... Trisella.’

‘How do you know my name?’ she demanded, caught off-guard.

‘It's the duty and responsibility of a Pocket Traveller to know the names of all of the Ring's inhabitants, no matter how small or insignificant their lives and experiences may appear.’

She scoffed. ‘Crag’ was clearly having her on. ‘Pocket Travellers aren't *real*. Everyone knows that.’

‘So, do you have a better explanation for how, one moment, you were on a side street in Drita, and then you bumped into me and ended up in the stomach of a creature who lives halfway across the Ring?’

‘I...’ She didn't, in fact, have an explanation for that. She did, however, want to get out of this... *Waleos stomach*, and back to her mother.

‘Pocket Travellers are very real, thank you very much, small, insignificant Trisella. Our numbers grow smaller every year, but we still exist. There are still

planets to take care of and portals to fix, so we keep on going, for as long and as far as we can.’

‘Is that what you're doing, then?’ Trisella asked, choosing to play along for now. She wished there was some light, or that they weren't invisible, so that she could see their face. ‘Fixing portals, or taking care of the planets?’

‘Both,’ Crag answered, and pulled on Trisella's sleeve, nudging her down the wall, and she felt the air grow hotter somehow.

‘Ewww, why are we moving? Where are we going?’ The flesh beneath her shoes squelched unpleasantly; Trisella tried not to think about it.

‘I thought you'd knocked me off-course, but it seems as though the thing I've been searching for is here after all,’ Crag muttered. ‘There's a tiny planet, up in the fourteenth sector of the Ring, called Creos. Its portal—its *pocket*—was displaced by some inter-planetary disruption. I was dispatched to retrieve it, and the path took me through Drita, and, apparently, you.’

‘So, did you leave from Creos? How did you leave if their pocket is displaced? Do Travellers *really* have their own portals? Can you take me back to Drita? My mother is surely worried about me. I was supposed to stay within her sight and Drita is such a large city and she'll think I've gotten lost and it will be awful and she'll be so mad—’

‘Do you ever shut up?’ Crag snapped, exasperated. They grabbed Trisella's wrist and pulled, and Trisella felt the fleshy floor beneath her move as the stranger hopped over something, yanking her after them. ‘Yes, I left from Creos. I have my own portal, on my wrist, like a watch. I can either use that, or use the aligned portals on the planets. Pocket Travellers are called that for a reason. We travel through the portals, and our sole duty is to ensure that they remain functional, because if they don't—if they get broken or lost in space, like the one I'm looking for—the entire planet is cut off from the rest of the Ring.’

Trisella was gaping. She knew she was, but... she couldn't seem to close her jaw. Pocket Travellers have their own portals? She supposed that made sense, given their name, but it seemed so absurd and impossible that she could barely understand it.

‘The hows and the whys are extremely complicated and you won’t understand so I won’t go into them here. I’ll take you back to Drita when I find the portal—if we activate my portal here, I might never make it back to this particular creature. Hopefully your family won’t think too poorly of me. We’ll make this as fast as we possibly can. Do you know what a deactivated portal looks like?’

‘No,’ Trisella replied. She’d never even seen an activated one. Perplexion was far removed from Navoe’s portal temple.

‘Well, then, you’re in for a treat!’ Crag cried out, louder than their conversation warranted, and the Waleos’ stomach rumbled in reply. Trisella would have told them off for making noise when they had told her off for the same thing not five minutes ago, but there was light coming from a hand and a face was swimming into view through the sudden, blinding brightness.

A long, pointy nose set in a narrow, impish face, wide green eyes and wild black hair, Crag was every bit the oddball that Trisella assumed him to be. His eyes seemed to be fractured, as if they were carved from gems. His skin was unnaturally clear, and almost shiny. His outfit was as patched together as her quilt at home, every single article of clothing sported a wide pocket, buttoned and zipped to oblivion, bulging in strange places and looking completely out of sorts. It was a smorgasbord of colour. His boots were the only things that matched—heavy, black ones, laces and metal and hard edges. Trisella suddenly felt extremely conscious of her plain blue dress and brown boots, her yellow hair seeming plain next to the black corkscrews on Crag’s head.

‘So, Trisella,’ Crag said, and she could count every single straight tooth he had, he was so close. ‘Shall we find ourselves a portal?’

‘And if we find it, you’ll take me back to my family?’ Trisella asked. She felt that it was probably a good idea to get all the facts before she went along with a no-doubt crazy scheme.

‘PT’s honour,’ Crag promised. ‘I’ll even show you my portable portal—here, *don’t touch it for the love of*—it’s here, on my wrist.’ He held out his arm to her, pointing the small, handheld light away from their faces and towards the throbbing, wet, pink floor of the Waleos’ stomach... Gross. No.

Trisella moved closer to examine the shining slab. Smooth, faultless crystal shined from a dark band encircling Crag's wrist, looking for all the world like an extremely large wristwatch, minus the hands and the knobs. It shined with power, and Trisella was reaching out before she'd even started to think about touching it.

A hard rap on the knuckles with the back of his other hand deterred her from that path. Trisella yelped and drew her stinging hand back against her chest, hissing, 'What was that for?'

'You could have activated it!' Crag snapped. 'I want to stay in this stomach for as long as it takes to find that portal and get out of here, understand?'

Trisella glared. The light was still so harsh on Crag's face, but she could read determination anywhere—she saw it on her little brother's face, sometimes, when he'd decided to do something that their mother and father wouldn't approve of. Crag might seem to be a bit of an idiot, but he had a job to do, here. She may as well go along for the ride, seeing as she had no choice and no other way out.

They made their way along the stomach wall, which looked uncomfortably like a bunch of thick, velvety, pink swathes of fabric stretched across a prison of bones. She felt like a mouse in a trap. Crag's eyes were fixed forwards, and when Trisella focused on where he was looking, all she saw was piles upon piles of pink, acid-melting waste. She had no idea what a massive creature like this would find to eat in an acid lake, but it couldn't be safe. The puddles of formerly-whole things that it had apparently eaten were in the centre of the stomach floor, and the part which Trisella and Crag walked on was slightly raised, still disgusting, but safe from the toxic contents of the *Waleos*' diet.

'There!' Crag whispered, shining the light into a mountain of pinkish bones and chunks of flesh, some of it visibly, rapidly rotting. Something glinted within.

'It's in *there*?' Trisella groaned. '*Why*?'

'You can't always get what you want,' Crag replied, and pressed the light into her hands. 'Stay here, and keep shining that light where I had it.'

He slid down the wall and into the waste, and Trisella cringed at the sloppy sound his heavy boots made. She watched, holding the light, as he donned gloves and rifled through the pile, finally coming up with an extremely filthy, possibly pre-

digested crystal chunks. Trisella instantly recognised them—the velvet-cushioned item in the shop window looked just like these, if only a little cleaner.

As Crag scrambled back up the bank of the stomach-river, the *Waleos* let out a rumble, and Trisella almost dropped the light. The ground started to shake and roll.

‘Would you hold onto these, please, Trisella?’ Crag asked, pressing the crystals into her hands and bracing her against him with a hand on her shoulder as the rumbling of the *Waleos* increased.

Fear bit at her throat and pulled the air from her lungs, but Trisella gripped the crystals with both hands against her chest, and gritted her teeth against the roiling vibrations of the gooey cavern.

‘Hang on!’ Crag shouted, looping his arm through her left elbow, and a flash sparked out of the corner of her eye as he slammed his palm down on his wrist-portal and then everything was gone in a burst of darkness.

The void lasted longer than it had the last time. It still felt as though there was a hook under her ribs, but this time it felt like a harpoon, dragging her underwater, the heaviness of the air making it difficult to breathe. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it stopped, and Trisella was lurching forward once more. This time, however, Crag’s hand clamped down on her shoulder and kept her upright as she swayed, dizzy and nauseous.

The sky was red. The stars were the same, but the sky was red, not blue, and not enough time had passed for the sun to be setting already. Trisella looked around, confused. She appeared to be standing on a great stone slab, red dust flurrying from where she had landed. The sky was red.

‘Welcome to *Creos*, Trisella,’ Crag announced, sweeping the portal crystals out of her hands and giving them to a hooded figure off to the side of their landing place. ‘This guard will restore the crystals back to their place at the foot of the portal, so I can now take you back to your family. Shall we?’

Trisella nodded, and took the offered arm, drawing breath before Crag yanked her back into the void.

The bustling streets of *Drita* were a harsh change from the sinister silence of the *Waleos* stomach and the crimson serenity of *Creos*. The knowledge of what she had

seen in such a short amount of time seemed to press on her brain, and her lungs felt too tight, as if she was still holding her breath from the void. Her nose seemed to burn with the acid stench of the stomach waste. She had no idea how long she had been gone—it could have been half an hour, it could have been two hours. But she and Crag stood in the very street they had collided on, and he gave her a two-fingered salute as he stepped back into his portal void.

Trisella returned it, watching as he faded, knowing that she'd probably never see him again and wishing that she had asked more questions, and only turned away when she heard her mother's cry of relief from down the street. When she looked back, after receiving a hug and a scolding from her mother, Crag was gone.