

# THE QUARRY

## The Valley of Mortiro

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*The following are excerpts from the journal of the renown cartographer, Jonathon Montes (2197-2248).*

**Day 1:** 8<sup>th</sup> Welna, 2247

Basecamp

The day has finally arrived. Today we begin our expedition to uncharted lands. I am with my trusty team: Marsha Wilkins, my geologist; James Parton, my assistant; and Samuel Bertolli, my botanist and lifelong friend. We have also befriended a local guide, Helor, who will take us through Anson

Forest and even further, if he is able. I believe we will find the valley in approximately eight days on foot.

The purpose of this expedition is to find a hot spot for the rare, superconducting mineral, loxite, which is rumoured to lay in the untouched jungle land beyond a valley that no other explorer has been able to cross. This particular mineral functions as a superconductor at room temperature, making it an extremely valuable find indeed! Think of the reduction of our global footprint and the potential for a sustainable future.

My father had dedicated his life and finances to this project. As today is officially one year since his passing, I cannot think of a more appropriate time to begin. I can barely contain my excitement.

### **Day 9: 16<sup>th</sup> Welna, 2247**

#### Anson Forest

Nine days ago, we began our trek on foot through the depths of Anson Forest. I had expected to have found the valley by now, but something is causing our equipment to give us inaccurate readings. The air gets thicker every day with a stinking heat and my maps seem pointless at this stage. Helor seems to think he knows where he's going, but right now it feels like the blind leading the blind.

This trip was almost like a wedding gift to both Samuel and Marsha, who remain ever-optimistic about our future with this project. James and I, however, don't seem to share the same positivity, although we do not voice it. He assists me with my maps and knows that we don't seem to be getting anywhere in particular. He's a quiet chap, but I can see his emotion in the way his hands shake and his fingers fumble with my papers.

I begin to worry that perhaps I've let my father down.

**Day 15:** 22<sup>nd</sup> Welna, 2247

### The Valley

We have found the valley. It appears as though both mine and my father's calculations were incorrect. It was not exactly where I had predicted it to be, but perhaps that could be blamed on my useless equipment. I saw the disappointment in my fellow explorers' eyes, and I was afraid that I, too, shared some of their emotion. As I eyed endless, barren lands covered with a smog so thick that the other side of the valley could not even be seen, only one thing came to mind. The Valley of Mortiro; a word in the ancient language meaning death.

**Day 16:** 23<sup>rd</sup> Welna, 2247

### The Valley of Mortiro

Due to our inability to fit the schedule and find the place within eight days, we have limited resources. We had expected to find a natural source of sustenance by now. The water harvester keeps our thirst quenched, but the others are starting to get anxious. Marsha believed we would be able to find some traces of loxite within the valley itself, but so far, she hasn't been able to identify anything remotely close. It's too late to turn back now, and if we don't find a source of food in three to five days, we may be too weak to travel on. This land takes its toll on our bodies.

**Day 18:** 25<sup>th</sup> Welna, 2247

Last night we set up camp and huddled around a fire. We shared our rationed food and most of us gave up hope. Samuel held Marsha close as silent tears fell down her cheeks. This trip has started impacting their relationship to the point where sometimes they can't even look at each other. James sat with his back turned to us, pouring over my inaccurate maps, trying to make sense of where we are. Helor sat beside me silently, staring up at a make-believe sky beyond the pungent smog, and

praying with his hands pressed to his chest. His foreign words had an almost soothing effect on our dampened spirits.

I want them to be remembered for their strength and courage; their ability to follow me blindly to their certain deaths. I told myself I would not be angry if one of them betrayed me because I simply could not blame them. So why? Why did I wake up this morning with a fire in my chest when I found our remaining rations missing along with Helor? All he left was a single note with the words ‘fero si’. Forgive me.

### **Day 19: 26<sup>th</sup> Welna, 2247**

We grow weak. Marsha’s skin has reacted to the thick air and our first aid is running low. Her fingertips are always bloody from the scratching and she claims she can see and feel something moving just beneath the surface of her skin. Something about shining eyes. The sound of her jagged nails against wet, infected skin is starting to make James nervous. I’m too weak to hold my pencil. There has been absolutely no trace of loxite anywhere. Was it all just a fantasy? Everything about this valley—the razor-sharp rocks, the air, the dirt, the lack of vegetation—seems almost designed to kill us. I am losing hope.

### **Day 20: 27th Welna, 2247**

#### **The Jungle**

Today as we were walking, I saw a figure in the distance. It had tendrils that reached up to the sky and loomed over us. Upon closer inspection it was a tree, but even Samuel, our botanist, was unable to identify it. It was the strangest thing. Its vines grew upwards and appeared to sway in a non-existent breeze. He was over the moon, with Marsha leaning close to his side. After moving in a hopeless mess through the valley for days, finally he was alive again, he was my best friend again.

We continued to approach the strange trees until we were standing in the depths of a wild jungle. The smog still penetrates this area, but not as much. I can see clearer now. The Jungle of Sanctoria, offering us sanctuary from the Valley of Mortiro. We have made it.

**Day 22:** 29<sup>th</sup> Welna, 2247

### The Jungle of Sanctoria

Samuel was able to find us some edible bark. Our strength is returning. These trees offer shelter and a comfort we could not find in the valley. The nights are worse, however. We hear sounds; guttural and unnatural screeches. James has not slept in three nights and the hot days and frozen nights are starting to get to all of us. Marsha found a piece of rock in her leg. She was able to identify that one of the elements within the mineral from the valley was toxic to us. I know an infection when I see one. I grow tired, but I know the loxite must be close. This was where it was supposed to be all along, wasn't it?

**Day 23:** 30<sup>th</sup> Welna, 2247

I have found something. Something that could make this all worthwhile. It's a girl. But she's not like us; she's different. It's in the shape of her eyes and the length of her limbs. It's in her hair that flows like teardrops down her delicate back. She is weak, but I will fix her. Today is my daughter's birthday. I have found a girl in need of a father.

**Day 25:** 1<sup>st</sup> Narto, 2247

We will make it through this, I know. When I am with her, she makes me feel strong. I see my own daughter in her eyes and I know I must protect her from the others. They started complaining

about her the moment I let her join us. She could not walk so I made a little stretcher for her and dragged her along.

I never asked the others to help, but still they complained. They said they couldn't stand the way she smelled, but all I could smell was roses. In my eyes, she is what I came here looking for: the real treasure. Who gives a damn about some precious mineral? I have asked her if she knows where the loxite is, just to put the others at ease. Her eyes fill me with promise and I know she will lead me to unimaginable riches, but right now, I just don't care. I've decided to name her Doe. I love the way she looks at me with those eyes.

#### **Day 26:** 2nd Narto, 2247

Samuel was able to find a plant with antibacterial properties for Marsha's leg. We all know that it's far too late as she's showing signs of septicaemia. James is slowly losing his mind. I found him last night trying to, well, take advantage of Doe. He had lifted her and was carrying her into the bushes. I took her back from him. His eye is swollen now, but will heal. My knuckles have started to itch. The complaints of the smell of Doe are getting to the point where I've had to set up camp a few meters away from the others tonight. It has even made Marsha throw up a couple of times. Last night I saw Samuel whispering to Marsha while constantly glancing over at me. He held her in his arms and stroked her face, stray tears sweeping down his cheeks. She constantly weeps from the pain. Doe is getting stronger and happier. She does not speak, but I can see it in her eyes.

#### **Day 29:** 5<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

Last night by the fire, Doe kissed me. She seems to have grown over the last few days. She looks like a woman now. But still, something about her is just so inhuman. Her skin has changed colour and her scent is growing stronger by the day. She's beautiful, yes, and last night I could not help

myself. We have all accepted that we will never see our families again. The life that we knew is gone. We will spend the remainder of our days in this godforsaken jungle.

**Day 31:** 7<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

Marsha is dead. Something about her discoloured skin reminds me of Doe.

**Day 32:** 8<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

I was lured here under promise of a better future. Now one of us is dead and another is presumably lost. Has it been worth it? My heart begins to clench when I see how the others are not coping. But, when I look at Doe I feel like it was all for something. She is more valuable than any amount of loxite.

**Day 33:** 9<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

Samuel does not talk anymore and James continues to cry into the cold nights. Doe is getting bigger and heavier and she still cannot walk. She kisses me every night and I feel content sleeping with her in my arms. I can hear running water nearby. The smog gets thinner and then heavier depending on the thickness of the trees. Samuel has stopped documenting new species of plants. He's found enough for us to survive on a daily basis, but his heart isn't in this anymore. He buried Marsha on his own and did not let anyone touch her body.

**Day 34:** 10th Narto, 2247

Scarlet Falls

We woke this morning to find James' sleeping bag empty. We went to the river, assuming he had gone for a bath. There we found the shallow waters tinged pink. His body was floating face down with blood still leaking from his wrists. Scarlet Falls. I sat with Doe under a tree as Samuel dug a hole. I told him to remove the scarf that was covering his mouth and nose so he could breathe better, but he just ignored me. I held Doe closer to me as Samuel kept shouting something at me. 'Let me bury the body!' he screamed again and again. Doe was scared, and I wasn't stopping him from burying the body. Except when he got too close to me.

**Day 38:** 14<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

Jungle of Sanctoria

Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe Doe, eyes of glass, skin of pale... (illegible)

**Day 39:** 15<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

I feel his eyes on her body. I know he wants her. I won't let him have her. She is mine and I will bring her home no matter what. I want to... (illegible)



*Over the next three days, Jonathon has lost all coherence in his words. There are simply random phrases and crude drawings of eyes. This figure was repeated numerous times throughout the journal:*



**Day 42:** 18<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

The trees are growing thinner and the smog has been clearing for the last day and a half. An aroma follows me and it makes me want to throw up. I feel sick and a pain in my head is erupting. I cannot look at my paper, let alone anything else.

**Day 43:** 19th Narto, 2247

We are back where we started. I could not believe my eyes when I saw that horrid little tin shack sticking out of the ground like an overgrown weed. Within hours of our return, the paramedics and cameras had swarmed the area. I can barely breathe.

**Day 49:** 25<sup>th</sup> Narto, 2247

### Basecamp

The smog in the valley appears to have been some kind of hallucinogen. We found traces of it all over our clothes and supplies. It took me a few days to get it completely out of my system, along with the splitting headaches of withdrawal after being on the gas for almost two months. The Jungle of Sanctoria was simply Anson Forest under the influence of the hallucinogen. It seems as though we had accidentally made a loop somewhere in the valley and never really made it to the other side. The smog somehow followed us back through the forest. Everything we saw, it was all a lie. Samuel had discovered the effect of the smog and covering his nose and mouth appeared to help. Apparently, he had tried to cover mine but every time he did, he said I would become violent. Their deaths weigh on me, all three of them. Samuel has vowed never to see me again and I don't blame him. I will never be the same again.

Doe, the girl, the body: it was Helor's.

**Day 55:** 1<sup>st</sup> Verti, 2247

It has been a while since my last journal entry. I am alone at basecamp now, ruminating over the mistakes I have made. The smog approaches every night, its pungent odour seeping into the cracks of this damn shack. I saw a beautiful and familiar set of eyes glancing at me at the edge of the forest, beckoning me to come closer. Who am I to refuse? Father, I'm sorry.

*Jonathon Montes' journal and a series of illegible maps were found at the edge of Anson Forest. His body was discovered three months later, unclothed, near basecamp with his skin covered in weeping boils and what appeared to be deep, self-inflicted scratch marks. His finger and toe nails had all been chewed or torn off and placed in a straight line beside his body. Scratched into a rock beside him was the phrase, 'eyes beneath the skin'.*

*Transcribed by Ryan Montes, 2249.*