

THE QUARRY

Patrol 4

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Shadows stretched and strained as two cycles sped over the uneven red terrain of Teramis-IVB. Bea scanned the landscape easily, having become accustomed to the eight-hour twilight during the course of her deployment. The horizon was indistinguishable, but the ground that stretched towards it was littered with dead technological beasts, slowly being swallowed by the scarlet vegetation. In her first month on this planet, she'd marvelled at the alien landscape; by the third, her enthusiasm had ebbed from the mundane uniformity of it. Now in her eighteenth month there, she longed for the brown mud of Earth.

Bea moved her cycle with dexterity over the terrain between Sectors Two and Three. Her partner Khali kept formation behind her, matching pace. Despite any homesickness, Bea knew the area they patrolled was dangerous. There were rebels, creatures of the land, and the greedy *Kaiat* to watch for, so she kept her eyes keenly trained on the surroundings.

Spotting something on the horizon, Bea cut her engine and allowed her cycle to drift to the ground. Her hand slid to her handgun. Khali followed her actions, her cycle falling silent.

Staring intently through the wild red forest, Bea used the control panel on her wrist to zoom her visor in on the black object in the distance.

‘See that?’ she asked Khali. Her partner reached over and pulled her rifle from the back of her hyper-stealth armour, peering through the scope into the distance.

‘Yeah,’ Khali replied. ‘No overgrowth, can’t have been there for too long.’

‘Call it in,’ Bea instructed.

While Khali switched to the communication channel, Bea kept her visor zoomed in on the object, searching for any sign of movement. Resting in a valley between the thick trunk of a tree and a derelict battle cruiser, the shape on her display showed no signs of activity. Still, the anomaly unnerved her.

‘They want us to investigate,’ reported Khali, dismounting from her cycle. ‘See if it’s worth sending out a Reclamation Unit.’

Bea nodded in acknowledgement, swinging her leg over her cycle and pulling her rifle from the magnetic clips on the back of her armour. Leaving their cycles behind, the two moved in silence, keeping low to the ground. As they closed the distance between them and the object, it began to take shape. A crashed ship. The exterior was dark and sleek, but indistinctive, meaning it could be one of theirs or the enemy’s.

‘Cloaks up,’ commanded Bea.

One after the other, they disappeared, reaching the unidentified ship and fanning out to circle it. Confident there was nothing hiding around the perimeter but debris, Bea headed toward the gaping hole in the middle of the ship, carved out during its descent.

‘Scanners aren’t reading anything,’ Khali offered.

‘Through here.’ Bea stepped over the threshold. Her finger rested on the trigger but she remained clear-headed.

The interior of the ship was as dark as its exterior. Wires hung from the ceiling, sparking with electricity, but apart from that the craft felt dead.

‘Must have dropped from some height,’ muttered Bea, assessing the damage.

They moved further forward and it began to open out, revealing a large cavity that seemed to make up the majority of the ship. Two corridors branched off towards the front and back. The inside had been cannibalised, stripped down to its bare minimum and then retrofitted with all sorts of junk. It was a stark difference to the outside of the craft. Both soldiers were drawn to what had been housed in the repurposed space. Tall vats made of metal and frosted glass—with extensive tubing running from them—lined the room. Most had fallen over in the crash. Tubes were loose and glass had smashed open during impact, letting the liquid run over the floor. A few were completely open, but empty. Only two stood against the wall as they should.

‘*Kaiat* cargo ship?’ Khali suggested, approaching one of the vats.

Bea nodded. It was likely; the retrofitted interior suggested their work. Back at the base, they tended to melt down whatever they recovered. But the *Kaiat* were resourceful and could move through the forest and salvage the ships better than they could. A *Kai* could blend into the planet’s surroundings better than anyone, though they did have the advantage. Bea felt the need to keep moving.

‘Let’s finish up. You take the back.’

Khali moved quickly to clear the rear of the ship whilst Bea turned her attention towards the front. The corridor was long. Any lighting that may have once illuminated it was now dead, leaving Bea to rely on her visor’s scanner as she moved through the pitch-black interior. She cleared two storage rooms along the passage, which were empty apart from some meagre provisions.

At the end was the cockpit. The sliding door that should have sealed it off was frozen between open and closed. Bea turned and slid through the doorway before pivoting to assess the room with rifle raised. It was quite small, and the oversized console was clearly not made for the space. The thing was a relic, with more transplants than Bea could count. She was surprised it ever worked in the first place. Looking closer, she noticed a thick black sludge pooling in the controls. She stepped around and saw a body lying next to the console.

‘One *Kai* here,’ Bea reported.

She edged closer, inspecting the alien. Slumped on the floor it appeared almost human, if not for the length of its limbs and the translucency of its skin. The usual bright orange of its internal organs had dulled to grey.

‘Looks like the pilot, probably died in the—’

The sound of scuffling made Bea whip around. She searched for the source, but the pitch black worked against her. Keeping her gun raised and eyes ahead, she swiped the control panel on her wrist. Her visor flickered, hesitating before switching to infrared. Scanning the room, the residual heat of the dead *Kai* registered on the visor, along with one other heat signature. The signature, a vibrant red amongst the otherwise black of the room, sat unmoving, crouched underneath the control panel.

Khali’s voice came over the helmets communication channel. ‘Bea?’

Bea crouched down slowly, keeping her eyes on the signature. When she became level with it she waited a moment to see if it would move. Satisfied it was still, she aimed her gun and switched off her infrared. She waited one, two, three heartbeats before flicking the switch and shining her helmet’s bright light on the heat signature.

‘Beatrice? What’s going on?’

Bea stared in confusion at what she had found.

‘Nothing. Have you cleared the rest of the ship?’

‘Yeah, crew quarters but not much else back here. All clear,’ replied Khali.

‘Okay, wait for me outside.’

Keeping the light on, Bea lowered her gun and switched to project her voice outside her armour.

‘Hey,’ she said softly, ‘are you okay?’

The child turned toward Bea’s filtered voice slightly, sneaking a glance from between tiny fingers. Bea swiped another button, lifting her visor and revealing her face.

‘It’s alright. You don’t have to hide,’ she prompted, stretching out her hand.

The child watched Bea carefully, eyes moving between her hand and her face, but didn’t make any move.

‘Would you like me you show you the way outside?’ Bea offered.

The girl lowered her hands slowly. Bea wondered briefly if the girl understood any of what she was saying, but then she began to crawl out from under the console. Bea stood up from her squat, clipping her rifle to her back and allowing the girl some space to crawl out and

stand up. Bea's helmet light illuminated the dead body of the *Kaiat* and the girl turned to look at it, moving to take a step closer. Bea grabbed her by the arm, pulling her away from the body.

'Come on,' she said, facing the girl towards the door. 'We're going outside, remember?'

In the light outside the ship, Bea looked the child over more carefully. She was filthy, the only clean skin on her made by the tear tracks down her cheeks. Her red hair was matted and she wore a dress of rough fabric. Khali lifted her visor and looked down at the small girl as they approached.

'Well, that's not what I expected.'

The girl either didn't notice or wasn't bothered by the scrutiny, not even bothering to look at Khali. Khali tuned to Bea.

'You think she's one of the rebel's kids?'

'Doesn't matter.' Bea shrugged. 'I'm going to call it in.'

She slid her visor shut and opened the communication channel on her helmet, connecting with base.

'This is Patrol 4.'

'Go ahead,' came the reply.

'The ship is *Kaiat*,' she informed them. 'Carrying unidentified cargo, one live passenger.'

The line fell silent and Bea swiped at her wrist control, calling over the cycles while she waited.

'Understood. A Reclamation Unit has been deployed. Maintain the site until their arrival.'

The line shut off and Bea turned to Khali.

'Rec team is on their way,' Bea said as the cycles rolled to a stop beside them. Bea gauged their surroundings. Raised on a hill sat a battle cruiser, one of the first, crashed a few decades ago by initial *Kaiat* resistance. 'Let's wait it out up there,' she decided.

The Reclamation Unit was not a subtle group. Consisting of heavy trucks that struggled to move through the dense scrub, they were often heard before they were seen. The individuals that comprised the unit matched their convoy. Heavy-set workers prepared to lift, remove and haul whatever they were tasked with. Each unit came with a director, deciding what was useful to take and what was worthless. In this case, the vats would be taken for further investigation and the ship drive and communication box would be ripped out of the console for analysis back at the base, but everything else was rubbish to be left. Bea, Khali and their charge sat and watched them get to work from atop their hill. Bea stood as the director approached them.

‘You got a passenger for me?’ the director called.

Bea nodded, gesturing toward the girl behind her, who sat cross-legged in the dirt next to Khali.

‘Huh,’ said the director, briefly amused by his unusual cargo. ‘Come on then, we’ll let these soldiers get back to work.’ He called out to the girl.

She made no effort to move, even when Khali stood up next to her. She sat still in the dirt.

The director tried again. ‘Come on kid, I’m not keen on hanging out around here. You know, trees have eyes and all that.’

Khali reached down and helped the girl to her feet, gently pushing her towards Bea and the director. Once she was close enough, the director reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

‘Wonderful,’ he said, smiling down at his new charge. ‘You’re going to have such a good time at the mining base. The facilities are second only to Earth’s.’ He looked up and nodded at Bea and Khali before pulling the girl back down the hill. They remained perched on the hill for a while longer, surveying the area before they boarded their cycles, heading off to the next sector.