

# THE QUARRY

## Peak of Silence

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### Part I: The City

A chorus of roosters crowed outside her window, disjointed, long and loud. Her eyes snapped open and the hustle of the city outside crashed into her room, exploding her temples. Vendors shouted over each other: *Bananas! Melons! Pineapples! Beef! Chicken! Fish! Carrots! Potatoes! Corn!* Dogs barked, hurtling after stray cats that hissed and wailed as they fled. Small children giggled, kicking up dust, dodging the outstretched hands of their mothers. Stampeding kids in school uniforms with bags slung over their shoulders shouted greetings to one another from bus doorways. Melodies drifted upwards from the river as women trudged along balancing baskets on their heads, bars of soap clutched in their hands. Tuk-tuks and cars greeted the morning in an orchestra of blaring horns.

The noises reminded her of home and the heartache that awaited her there. Anger and hurt flooded her mind but she forced it aside and squeezed her eyes shut, breathing deeply. Brows furrowed, she growled in frustration. Rising quickly, she grabbed a bottle from beside her bed, the cool water washing the dry taste of morning from her mouth before dressing and shoving her gear into her pack. Sweeping the room with a keen eye, she headed to reception.

She strolled towards the bus station, savouring the smells that met her at every turn. The scent of meats cooked in spices wafted out from small shops. The earthy aroma of fruits and vegetables lingered at stalls lining the road. She gasped, hit by the bitter odour of vehicle exhaust, and held her breath, until she let it out in disgust. With that, came the stench of animal faeces and rotting garbage rising from the gutters, making her lips curl. She gagged, hurrying past a particularly fragrant patch of urine until relief encased her in the heady scents of the orchids and jasmines at the end of the street.

Around the corner, the bus station appeared; a plain building with mini buses parked out the front, whose white paint and blue characters were half-hidden by dirt and dust. Between the buses and the building sat several stalls, stocked high with pineapples and pawpaw, sweet little bread rolls and cakes, and unknown liquids stored in large square containers: yellow, orange and red in colour. She wandered around, selecting a few items, including a red drink, her eyes widening at the small plastic bag with protruding straw handed to her. At the first sip, the familiar sweetness of watermelon flooded her mouth. As she bit into a round cake ball, the crispy outer layer of fried batter gave way to a burst of liquid coconut. She moaned and gobbled it down, eyeing the next one. She sat heavily on a nearby cement block, letting the flavours of the city carry her away, forgetting for a moment the events that had brought her there.

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Her shoulder hard against the bus window, she fluttered the front of her shirt away from her sweat-soaked skin with her forefinger and thumb. As she stared out a slick, black Mazda cruised past, the driver in a suit and tie speaking rapidly into the Bluetooth headset over his ear. Next, a tattered-looking tuk-tuk pedalled by a tattered-looking man, pulled two young men in white cotton shirts, sipping from water bottles, their expressions hidden behind dark Ray-bans. After them, on a small, wooden-slatted cattle truck too many goats shuffled against each other, bleating in unison. She spotted a scooter moving slowly through the morning traffic, heavily laden and piled high with green bananas, its rider obscured beyond her vision. As the ocean of humanity crashed into the city, her forehead fell against the window and her eyes glassed over.

Barely a few hours later she reached the entrance to the national park; it's headquarters a mauve building with white trims in a classic style. The air outside the bus hit her like an early morning wave: fresh and cool. She breathed it in, her chest rising and falling. She adjusted her pack and opened the heavy-set door to the building. Her accommodation sorted, she hurried back outside, relishing the wait-time until a minivan displaying the hotel's blue logo pulled up.

## **Part II: The Mountain**

A lone rooster crowed outside her window, long and loud. She woke slowly, stretching her muscles and sighing as the world outside seeped in. The high-pitched ding of the elevator signalling its arrival on her floor and the thump of a suitcase brought furrows to her brows. The drone of a vacuum cleaner and the clatter of something metal careering along the tube into the dust bag forced her eyes shut, worry lines creasing the corners. The pounding feet of children chasing each other, and the thud of parents following them brought images unbidden to her mind. She rolled over, pressing her ear to the pillow but the splash of water and the echo of a sinister tune played relentlessly in her head.

She tensed when the thoughts of home threatened to engulf her. Her lips narrowed, and she gritted her teeth, willing her thoughts to order. Small pockets of fresh air found her lungs and slowly the anger receded, though intense pain still strangled her heart. Flinging aside her sheet, she rubbed her cheeks hard and packed her bag with newfound determination.

The smell of roasted coffee beans and bacon cooked until crispy, with eggs and sourdough bread, meat cooked in savoury spices with herbs and the sweet scent of pilau rice bombarded her the second the elevator doors opened. A smile spread across her face at the sight of pineapples, bananas, and lychees with goat's milk yoghurt and laced with honey. Her mouth watered. Sighing, she pulled a muesli bar from her pocket and imagined it as well-cooked bacon. A frown from the receptionist broke through her daydream and she returned the bar to her pocket.

Seated atop the stairs outside, she returned to her breakfast, ripping at the bar and squirming in the still air. It soon became suffocating even in the early morning, and her skin and face already flushed red. Rolling the tension from her neck and shoulders, she closed her

eyes. The faint sound of running water and the stream of chatter from the restaurant slowed her breathing, and she chewed with less urgency.

She jolted at a blaring horn. A minivan with chipped silver paint around the door handles had pulled up, its engine whining for her to get in.

A half-hour later, she swung down from the bus and gazed up at the single-tiered pagoda that marked the start of her trek. A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth and a shiver ran through her, as she read the yellow words of welcome painted on the aged wooden beam above the entrance. She scanned the area, taking in the unfamiliar species of trees and undergrowth and settled the backpack on her shoulders. Taking two steps, she began her ascent.

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Her feet ached from hours of walking, and the weight of her pack bruised her shoulders and hips. She took the last few weary steps into the campsite, dumped her bag and slumped against a fallen tree trunk, her chest aching from the uphill climb.

From her prone position she surveyed the area: a bamboo forest, broken only by the path back down the mountain, marked one side of the clearing. The other side disappeared over the edge of the ridge on which the campsite sat. If she craned her neck she could catch a glimpse of tiny buildings in the valley far below. Across the open space before her, charcoal and half-burnt planks were encircled by charred rocks, and around those, makeshift log seats. The rest of the site lay empty, and the ground bare, worn through to the dirt floor by pitched tents and heavy boots.

Above her, blocking the late afternoon sun and casting a shadow over the area, the mountain loomed; an intimidating statue that cut through the blue sky in a jagged line of rock. She whistled in awe, forgetting for a moment her fatigue, anticipating the spectacle from the mountain's peak.

She leaned to her left, dragging her bag closer, and tossed out some clothing and her camping stove, before hauling her tent from the bottom. She assembled it with ease, relying on muscle memory from a childhood of camping, and stood back ten minutes later smiling,

hands on hips. The fading daylight prompted her to light her camp stove and soon the air filled with the vague scent of freeze-dried beef curry and rice, a far cry from the real thing but stomach filling.

She relaxed against the tree trunk, savouring each mouthful before washing it down with water from her bottle. She sighed, patting her belly and burping before placing her dirty plate and cutlery on the ground. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she inhaled the woody whiff of bamboo. Somewhere in the forest, she heard the rasping call of a warbler to its mate. Closer, the undergrowth rustled where a small mammal ambled through it, already hunting for its dinner.

Pushing off the tree, she stood and wandered towards the edge of the ridge, gazing down at the buildings in the valley below, their tiny lights like fireflies. The thought brought a crease to her brow and a pinprick of pain to her heart as she remembered her family and her home: at once haunting and enflamed. But this time it felt different. More fleeting. Less intense. Here, its hold on her weakened. As if the mountain distanced her from the raw feelings of despair and loathing. She didn't push the memories away this time. She let them flow freely like the leaves she'd watched earlier in the day, floating on the current of a stream. Her mind's eye settled on each picture along with the emotions they evoked, but released them just as quickly, disappearing downstream.

She stood still for some time, reliving her past until she blinked and released a shuddered breath, tearing her gaze from below and turning towards her tent. Her mind now as spent as her body, she shed her clothes and stumbled into bed.

### **Part III: The Peak**

She stirred in the early hours of morning wondering briefly what had happened to the rooster and its long, loud crow. She strained to hear the explosions of human activity familiar to her in her half-awake state. She cracked an eyelid on the muted world, where the faint beat of leather wings and distorted cries of bats replaced the stream of blaring horns and motor engines. Where the hoot of an owl and shriek of its prey played out instead of the ceaseless chatter of people and the clanging of metal. Here too, the rustle of foraging animals replaced the thud of incessant footsteps.

It was early, 4am by the brightly lit numbers on her watch, and she lay still atop her sleeping bag, her eyes closed and her breathing even. Her mind wandered back to the view from the mountain peak, and a surge of energy pulsed through her body, bringing life to her limbs. She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands, dragged them open and stretched awake.

Grabbing her torch, she dressed quickly and wolfed down a breakfast of cereal and powdered milk, the cold liquid dripping down her chin in her haste. She dismantled her tent in record time and gathered her scattered belongings; yanking on her boots. She donned her pack, securing it at her waist, the straps on her shoulders and hips digging into her tender skin. Sweeping her torch over the campsite she nodded and turned towards her final ascent, confident in the coming hours of the new dawn.

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After two hours walking up a winding path, and another two climbing over boulders, her skin was once again coated in sweat and her shirt soaked through. Her pack weighed heavily on her with every step, and her calves and biceps ached from the effort. But each painful breath brought her closer. Twenty or so metres ahead the mountain changed from an almost vertical climb to a more horizontal gradient. She gritted her teeth and ran a hand over her damp hair, pulling it back from her face and retying the loose ponytail. Sucking in a few more breaths she manoeuvred her left foot into a small crevasse, testing it with her weight before reaching out with her hand and finding grip on the cool, rough surface of the next rock.

Short, sharp intakes of breath; her mouth half-open as she panted. Her heart beat fast, booming in her chest, a continuous thump, thump, thump in her ears. Her boots scraped against rock and water swished against the insides of her half-empty bottle. Soft grunts burst from her lips as she pushed with her legs.

One final heave, pushing on tired legs brought her over the edge of the last boulder. Standing on shaky limbs, she unclipped her pack and let it slide down her body, uncaring as it fell to the ground. Wobbling up the final five metres to the peak, she collapsed just as the sun poked out over the horizon.

Golden rays spilled across the mountain, casting shadows where the peaks stood tall and blocking the light from chimneys of rock below. A sea of crests lay scattered around her, rising and falling like waves where a million years of weather had shaped it. Beyond those, valleys of green rushed forward to meet the grey, contrasting starkly against the dull tones of the mountain.

She gazed at the beauty before her and breathed in deeply, relishing the cool air and catching the faint hint of bamboo mixed with the sea. She turned to the left and squinted, spotting the weak blue tinge of the ocean far off in the distance. A sharp cry to her right drew her attention and she swivelled, her eyes following the outline of an eagle gliding on warm air currents before disappearing amongst the boulders on a neighbouring peak.

She closed her eyes, basking in the eagerness of the sunrise and the promise of day. Her muscles ached beyond measure, and her bones barely held her upright, but she accepted all the summit had to offer. She focused on the warmth of the sun on her skin and the steady beat of her heart. Slowly, her muscles eased, and her thoughts no longer darted around images of fear and pain but remained in the present, gathering in the beauty of the mountain. Climbing the peak had brought her release—from her past, from her doubts, from her sadness—for the first time in her life. She laced her fingers in front of her mouth and revelled in the silence.