

THE QUARRY

The Surface of Arennah

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Pip heaved the hatch open and stepped out of the crashed pod. She raised her hand, shielding herself from the light flooding through her irises. Stretched out before her was an ocean of sand. Golden dunes rose and fell as they stretched out towards the horizon. Her head spun and she went to lean on the side of the escape pod. Alex caught her, and helped her onto the warmth of the sand.

‘Careful, the shell’s still hot from our entry.’

Pip wasn’t looking at him. Her focus was drawn to the horizon. What had just been the Kentoro mountain range here on Arennah was now a bloody mess. Red-brown liquid oozed out of the volcanoes, drowning the mountains and scarring the horizon. Pip sat silently in the sand, taking it all in. It was hard for her to process what had happened. It didn’t feel real.

Alex watched her. Her red curls framed her face, and her head was in her hands. He decided to give her some space. She would be okay. She was their captain, and she could handle anything. In the distance, hazy from the heat, was a sandstone outcropping.

Alex turned back to the pod as Delian stepped out. Their azure robes danced in the wind.

Delian’s hands clenched and unclenched repeatedly. They darted forward, the sand not appearing to slow their step. They cartwheeled, with a grace and elegance like it had been

practiced to perfection. Alex stared in wonder. Delian had been so reserved on the Orbiter. Alex turned back to Pip, running his hand through his mess of black hair.

‘I think we should find some cover in the rocks over there.’ He pointed to the outcropping. ‘Pip, can you walk? I think it’ll do you some good to get out of this heat.’

Pip looked up at him, her blue eyes focused on his furrowed brow. She forced a shaky smile and reached an arm up.

‘Is there anything you need from the pod? I’ve got our water and micro-rations.’

Pip shook her head. ‘The signal went out,’ she said. ‘If anyone’s nearby, they should be able to find us.’

‘We won’t stray too far from the pod then.’

Delian sunk to their knees and dug their hands into the sand. The top layer was sun-warmed and felt like a kiss on their skin. The sand underneath was cool and refreshing, undisturbed for millennia. Arennah was uninhabited and desolate. There was scarce else than oceans of sand, volcanoes, and rivers of bromine that ran like rusty arteries across the planet. The three-person crew of the Orbiter was a private team analysing and measuring the planet for terraforming. It was to be sold to the highest bidder as a salvation planet for a species that had squandered their resources and rotted their homeworld.

After soaking in the sun for a moment, Delian stood, and returned to their crewmates. Delian approached as Pip was rising.

‘We’re going to walk to the outcropping over there,’ Pip said. She looked a little pale, but then again they had all been stuck on the Orbiter for months.

Delian held out their hand, palm-up, in agreement.

‘Are you both all right?’ they asked.

Pip nodded. ‘Just taking a minute to acclimatise. It’s a strange feeling being planetside. Arennah looks very different from down here.’ She looked up to the sky, imagining she could see their ship in orbit.

‘Sure does,’ Alex agreed. ‘Looks like you’re adjusting well Delian?’

Delian’s hand quivered as their muscles tensed in excitement. They nodded, remembering to use the human custom.

‘Yes it is lovely here. There is always a balance to these things. We watched this place from above for months, bending it to our will. And now it is us that are subjugated.’ Delian

saw Pip and Alex's bleak expressions and hurried to amend their sentiment. 'But it is not so bad. The sun is shining, and the ground is beneath our feet again. I know it may seem barren to you, but I promise it is not.' They smiled in an attempt to be reassuring. 'Come, I will show you.' They began walking towards the rocks.

Pip wiped the sweat that had accumulated on her brow and gave a weary sigh. 'Looks pretty barren to me.'

As they walked, Pip reflected on their final moments aboard the Orbiter. Her screens flashed red warnings as seismic activity spiked. Through the viewplate she watched as the Kentoro Mountains exploded in red. Force rocked the ship, and she had to brace herself in the pilot's seat.

Alex had been working at a maintenance panel when he was knocked off his feet. He careened into the wall and jarred his shoulder.

From the floor, he called over the intercom. 'Pip, what in space was that?'

'Seismic activity like I've ever seen. Get Delian and prep the pod, this isn't over yet.'

Pip had used every pilot's trick in the book to try to save them, but the Orbiter was not designed to be manoeuvrable, and its thrusters were not enough.

'We've lost orbit! The ship's drifting away from the planet.' Pip looked at Arennah beneath them. 'We have to go down there,' she said.

She had failed them. As a captain, and as a pilot, she had let them down. She stared at her feet as each one overtook the other. It was her fault.

'It's not your fault.' Alex's voice came from behind her. 'I know you blame yourself, but there was nothing you could do.'

'Thanks, Alex.' Her words had no conviction to them. You can't outrun responsibility. She had brought them here, to this wasteland, and had no clue how to get them home.

Silence descended as they trudged across the sand; each person absorbed by their thoughts. The silence fractured when Pip spoke up again.

'I've never had a ship go down before. Never had a job that went this far sideways. Beyond correction.'

‘You can’t blame yourself Pip,’ Alex said. ‘You’re the best pilot I’ve ever worked with. A seismic event of that scale couldn’t have been predicted. The shape of the whole planet has been changed.’

Pip chuckled. ‘I guess our terraforming data is useless now.’

‘The will of the universe,’ Delian said. They were a few paces ahead of the two humans, leading the charge to the outcropping.

Pip sighed inwardly. She was growing tired of Delian’s chipper attitude. They were stranded, after all.

By the time they reached the shelter of the rocks, Alex and Pip were drenched in sweat. They had both stripped their jumpsuits down to their waists, and their white undershirts were already grimy. Alex collapsed onto his back in the shade of the small cave. He wiped the mat of hair out of his eyes. Pip’s face was as red as her hair as she sat next to him, clutching her knees to her chest. Delian looked lithe, healthier and more olive than they’d seen before. They were pacing, unable to keep still.

‘Rest here, I will go look for something to eat and to replenish our water,’ Delian said, before scaling the lip of the cave and disappearing from view.

‘You don’t actually think there’s water here, do you?’ Pip asked, gesturing at the desert before them. ‘There is literally nothing here.’

Alex shrugged, something only he could do lying down.

‘They seem to want to keep active,’ he said.

‘Yeah, what’s with that?’ A sharp edge crept into her voice.

‘With what?’ Alex climbed onto his elbows.

‘The movement, the gestures, the cartwheels? I never noticed it on the ship, but now it’s too obvious.’

‘Delian is from Axechatta,’ Alex said matter-of-factly.

‘So what?’

‘Axechattans communicate primarily through movement and gestures. Us humans tend to use a lot of words to get a point across. They use a detailed body language to provide nuance.’ He smiled at her. ‘Their happiness runs deeper than a surface smile.’

‘Don’t you find it infuriating,’ she asked, ‘to see them so happy in a situation like this? We’re stuck here, for who knows how long?’

Pip stared back out at the desert they had crossed. Their silver pod was barely perceptible. The wall of red loomed on the horizon. The liquid bromine spreading across the sand looked like a wave of red washing over a beach.

Pip stood up and began pacing in the cave. ‘This place is hell. I’ve brought us to hell.’

‘Come on, you don’t really believe in that old myth do you?’

‘Look around you Alex did you miss the lava? This is a literal hellscape.’ Alex noticed she was breathing quickly and her hands were shaking.

Pip? You okay?’ Alex stood up. His hands clasped hers and her eyes locked onto him.

‘We’re going to get through this. This is not your fault. You are the most amazing person I’ve ever met. Pip, I,’ he hesitated, half-believing he’d come this far. ‘I love you, Pip,’ he finished.

Pip let it hang there, like a feather falling slowly to the earth.

‘I love you,’ Alex said again, a weight lifting off his shoulders as he said it.

Pip looked away.

‘Alex, I...I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.’

Pip stumbled out of the cave, half-seeing, using her arms for balance.

Her mind swimming, Pip found Delian towards the back of the outcropping. They were on their hands and knees, reaching into a crevice between two boulders.

‘Delian, are you all right?’ she called.

‘Phillippa, good timing. I have just found some edible vegetation.’ They retrieved their hand and opened the palm to reveal three small leaves.

‘Are you joking? I’ve never seen you joke before.’

‘Quite serious. We call these revivifiers. They are densely rich in vitamins and minerals. All you have to do is put them on your tongue.’ They demonstrated.

Pip squinted. ‘No really, are you joking?’

Delian held out a leaf. Pip took it, and put it on her tongue. It tasted like a leaf. Delian clasped their hands together in gratitude.

‘Wha-ow?’ Pip asked.

Delian removed their leaf. ‘Beg your pardon?’

Pip removed hers. ‘What now?’

‘Oh you can just leave it for 20 minutes or so and you will feel much improved. I will go find some water if you will give this to Alex.’ They held up the third leaf.

‘Actually, maybe you’d better do it,’ Pip said, ‘He’s not taking this whole crash thing too well.’

‘I suppose it is to be expected,’ Delian said. ‘Arennah really is beautiful. I just wish to show you what I see in this place.’

Pip looked around her. There was another mountain range in the distance. She wondered which was going to break first, the mountain or her.

‘The beauty is not always in the big,’ Delian said, ‘sometimes, it is in the minute.’ They held out the leaf again. It was curved to look like a heart, and Pip could see the weave of thin white veins within.

‘If you say so,’ said Pip.

‘And sometimes,’ Delian said, crouching down in the sand again, ‘it is beneath the surface.’

Pip took a walk through the outcropping, trying to take in the tiny details of the rocks and the almost invisible life between them. Trying to focus on the most important crisis first: What happens if no one rescues us?

When she returned to the cave, Alex was sitting alone. His eyes were red. He made to speak but Pip cut him off.

‘I’m sorry Alex,’ she began with renewed conviction, ‘but my first priority is getting you and Delian off Arennah safely, and I’m going to need your help. We can talk about the other thing after. I promise.’

Alex wiped his eyes and nodded. Despite how badly today had gone, he wasn’t about to let the others down.

‘I need you to head back to the pod, and try to boost the distress signal. I’ll grab Delian and come and meet you. I’m not ready to sit back and wait to be rescued.’

Pip found Delian sitting cross-legged on top of a boulder. Their eyes were closed and their breathing was deep. Pip knew they meditated, but had never seen it before. She sat down as quietly as she could on the stone beside them.

After a minute of silence, Pip cleared her throat.

‘Hello,’ she said softly.

‘Hello,’ Delian said.

‘We need to get back to the pod. I think I can get us off here.’

Delian smiled ruefully. ‘You really are desperate to leave.’

‘I’m sorry Delian, but it’s my fault you’re here. I can’t rest until I get you home safely.’

‘What if I do not wish to leave?’

Pip turned to face Delian. ‘You don’t want to go?’ Why?’

‘Arennah is the closest I’ve seen to home in a very long time.’

‘This place looks like Axechatta?’

‘Almost identical. The system we are currently in is a sister to my own. Axechatta is glimmering and golden just like Arennah. But I have not laid eyes on my home for decades.’

‘Why not?’

Delian hesitated, wringing their hands.

‘I am a heretic. I rejected the traditions of Axechatta, so I was exiled. I glimpsed beauty and destruction in the universe, a terrible balance inherent in all things. Axechatta was drenched in the blood of its neighbours. I was a believer, a soldier. I fought with my commanders, begged them not to bomb Salifax. The war was won, but they couldn’t take any chances, couldn’t see the beauty of that world and its people.’ Delian closed their eyes. ‘I fled to the stars before my trial.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I never thought I would miss it so much.’ They wiped their eyes with the back of their hand.

‘That’s why you took this job?’

‘I told myself I would see home one last time. But in the process I was helping to destroy it. Balance.’

‘Well, if it’s any consolation, I think Arennah is safe from terraforming now. Even if we’re stuck here.’

Delian looked into Pip’s eyes. ‘Balance,’ they said again.

‘But not without beauty.’ Pip held up another of the leaves she had found, and smiled.

‘Do you really want to stay here, Delian? Can you survive out here?’

Delian laughed. It was a light, musical sound and Pip couldn’t help but feel its warmth spread through her body, like stepping out into a wave of sunlight. Delian embraced her in a hug so tight Pip felt her breath leave her lungs.

When Delian finally let go, they said, ‘Of all the humans to have shared in my homecoming, I am glad it was you, Phillipa. I will help you to go home.’

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A cargo barge picked up Pip and Alex three days later. Delian remained behind, carved out a new home, and lived a life of peace.