

THE QUARRY

Ebony Troon

Drifting

The air made it hard to weep.

Even the plant in the teacup curled in on itself, green having long since turned to brown. It was curious how the plant was even able to wilt while surrounded by such a thick layer of dust. Ara herself felt weighed down. Laying on her stomach, she carefully took in every inch of discolouration. She would liken moving to crawling through molasses, without the sweetness, and instead with the bitterness of a decaying plant.

Was bitter the right word? Ara rested her cheek against the cold floor. *I don't really care.*

She was unsure how much time passed as she lay there, staring at the plant like it would come back to life. The other nine didn't. They used to be impressive where they sat on the wall of shelving, all bearing various shades and shapes, a display of vibrant green in the cold expanse. The first had died on a Monday. (*Or was it a Sunday? Maybe Tuesday... I washed my hair that Tuesday*). The second to die was on a Friday.

She stopped noting the days after the fifth.

Ara managed to push herself onto her elbows. Her eyes watered as she inhaled a chunk of dust, her sneeze causing spittle to fly across the sea of dead plants. She wiped her nose on her thumb, then wiped her knuckle on her worn jeans. Ara wondered if the plants ever got the urge to wipe themselves down after being watered. She shook her head. If she had the strength she'd laugh at herself. They're dead, they don't need watering, or wiping.

She noticed just how fragile the plant was as she cradled it in her hands. Ara was sure it was wilting further with every passing second, but she knew there was nothing she could do. She was low on water, and she simply couldn't risk it. There was every chance it would die. There was every chance she would die. The plant would have to wilt, and she would have to move on. She had every intention of doing so, and would have if not for the sudden beeping.

Ara looked up at the control panel to try and pinpoint the origin of the shrill noise. It wasn't the beeping that alarmed her, no, it was always the colour that came with it. This button was blue. *Green means company, red means fuel, blue means... I don't remember blue. What the hell is blue?* Ara quickly understood when she struggled to take in her next breath, the rattling wheeze like a broken fan. *Blue means oxygen levels.*

'Shit.'

Ara scrambled to the control panel, wiping away stray space junk to peer at the calendar. It was the sixth cycle. The ship's purge was well overdue. She usually timed it well, always finding a planet in time to let the ship reset. Unfortunately, this time she hadn't been so clever. Ara would end up like the plants if she didn't screw her head on. It was easier said than done when she hadn't seen her head in three cycles, maybe four.

Nuts and bolts fell out of the emergency cabinet when she ripped it open. She riffled through it, holding her breath as she did. Eventually, she felt the mask's familiar groove. But the cord was wrapped around something, and tugging it out was a struggle. Ara didn't care if she tore open her hand. Her lungs were aching, her eyes watering, and it was taking all her remaining energy just to move.

Eventually, it came loose. Ara fastened the mask around her face and took a deep breath.

She took a long moment to collect herself. The pounding in her ears thrummed alongside the beeping. Ara used it to control her breaths, trying not to be greedy with her inhaled. Her breath stuttered when she noticed the abandoned plant lying limp on the ground, forgotten in her haste. She reached for it, frantically covering its leaves like it also needed to breathe. An image of the plant wearing a mask flickered in Ara's mind, and she couldn't help her wet chuckle.

In a way, they did wear masks. *Used to*, Ara reminded herself, *they used to wear masks*. Ara would cover the plants with neat little domes during purges, turning them into small greenhouses. She was unsure where they'd ended up; after the fifth plant had wilted, Ara threw a couple at the wall in a fit of rage. Perhaps she had known they would become unimportant, perhaps she had just been impulsive. Perhaps the domes reminded her too much of her own ship.

When the beeping stopped, so did Ara's musings. Dirt was scattered across the floor, and the teacup was cracked and jagged. Ara couldn't recall dropping it, let alone smashing it. She wondered if that was a symptom of the fear, or the simple callousness of self-preservation. She wondered if things would have been different if the plant was still alive. Ara stared at it, hopeful that the answer would be scrawled on its leaves. There were no letters, no words, but there was something...

Hidden under the leaves of the wilting plant was another plant. Small, green, so fragile Ara feared it would wither away into nothing if she touched it. Ara waited until her hands stopped shaking. She scooped it out of the dirt, careful of its roots. They were spindly, finger-like and reaching out to her. Old fingers with wrinkles, divots, and stories to tell. She looked closer, noting the plant itself was misshapen. Its leaves were naturally jagged, its stem bent.

It wasn't the prettiest, but it was alive.

Ara threw the old plant at the wall, its sad descent unimportant. She got to work giving the seedling a new home, digging a hole into the cup and repositioning it in the centre. It was as if the other plant was never there, nothing left of it to even sustain a memory. Ara kneeled on something as she placed the new plant on the shelf, but she paid it no mind, far too focused to care. The seedling, lively and bright, was impressive among the cemetery of dead plants.

She emptied a few droplets into the dirt, careful not to tip her flask too high. The plant needed to live, but so did she. Ara took a tiny sip herself, satisfied with the three droplets. She felt a new vigour, and couldn't blame it all on the water. She shook her fringe out of her eyes, carefully strapping the flask back onto her thigh. Ara kneeled there for a long time, so long that the moon's shadow started to creep into her peripheral. She itched to *feel*, so she reached for the teacup.

Humming along to a tune she couldn't remember, Ara shuffled to the window. It was the only one on her ship, and its grime was no match for the blinding light. It was fading, but Ara would have to make use of it. She held up the plant, knowing that was how they used to survive on Earth. Sprouting under the sun, preening under the rain, then bidding the sun goodbye as it left to make room for the night.

She wondered if plants liked sunsets.

Ara thought sunsets had lost their novelty. Every planet was the same, and this one was no different. It had a moon, small and grey, the patches of green on the surface familiar. She tried to picture what the plant would look like down below, comfortable in soil and surrounded by others like it. Ara held the plant tighter to her chest, unashamed of the sudden wave of greed. Up here there was nothing to be afraid of, up here she could protect the plant.

Her eyes darted to the collection of dead plants.

She took in each of them, only counting four before looking away. Guilt was an unpleasant feeling. It simmered like a boiling pot, the unsteady water rising high in her throat. She swallowed it down, letting her gaze wander to the plant to ease her mind. Ara's hair fell over her eyes, her hunched figure like a marionette with snipped strings. Her thumb toyed with leaves, gently prodding, and she was unsure if she imagined the leaf nuzzling into her palm.

It was likely a trick of the eye, or her own staggered breathing. Ara, having spent so long without the touch of another, didn't mind either way. Bathed in

the fading light under the stale, artificial air, something fluttered in Ara's stomach. It was a warmth she had never felt from the moon, or the stars, or the other ten plants.

As she stared out the porthole, Ara imagined a heartbeat, and the expanse of space became a little less quiet.