

Outside the gate

Pia and Emma sat in silence as another unbelievable report appeared in their visors. It had never been done and was all but impossible yet Pia had convinced herself that the system was hacked and the reports were faked. For three days, they had been horrified at the stories of an outbreak coming from the Osage News Service. ONS was the only broadcast since the emergency protocol had been enacted. No other reports were coming across and all attempts at communicating with their facility group had been in vain. Pia tried once more to open the communication channel but got no response from her arm unit.

“Emma, Its still not working.” The disheartenment obvious in her voice.

“Pia. Stop. None of the systems have worked for almost three days now. We have to accept the possibility that this is real.” Emma tried to sound more calm than she was.

Pia was running on an entirely different level of adrenaline. “No. It...” She scrambled for anything to say that would make the reports untrue but she couldn't. Some type of virus was sweeping through Osage and people were dying in droves. Not just people, her co-workers, her friends. “They don't even know what is happening. How can we believe that they have no idea?”

“They will. We have the best..” Emma was cut off.

“I don't care. They said we should quarantine ourselves. We are fifteen kilometers out. Why is this happening? Why? Why now, when we are out here?” Pia was pacing and becoming more frantic with every question.

“Pia, sit. I think we should stay out here until they do have some answers.”

Pia exploded. “What? We can’t stay out here! We can’t...” She trailed off unsure of what to say.

“Yes, we can. We always bring enough supplies for three weeks. We have gone over this before. All we have to do is regain our composure, we are trained for this.” Emma was working to restore calm.

“We didn’t train for this. We worked through scenarios of getting lost, or one of us sustaining an injury, not some insane outbreak.” Pia argued.

“No, of course we didn’t consider this exactly. That doesn’t matter. For now, we just need to stay here. We just need to wait. We can’t help anyone if we show up now. Whatever this is, we would just get infected ourselves.” Pia tried to interject but Emma continued. “We have enough T-patches and hydrotesters for three weeks easily. If we are out here we might as well continue to collect our samples.”

Pia had all she could take with Emma’s last suggestion. “Samples? You still want to collect samples? Who cares if the flora is being affected? We are dying. Our people are dying and its probably this planet or these plants that are doing it. What if we are already infected?”

“Pia, have we sen any evidence of change or any defensive mechanisms in any of our specimens?” Emma waited already knowing the answer but hoping to bring Pia back to reality. Pia didn’t answer immediately so the two sat across from each other locked in a stalemate.

Pia felt herself calming, felt herself regaining control. “Alright. You are right. We can do this. Sorry for the little breakdown, let’s get back on task.”

“Little breakdown?” Emma asked snidely.

“Shut up. Like you said we might as well get back to work.” Pia was still terrified but there was no other way to keep their mind off of what was happening.

The two worked for the next several hours, collecting specimens for comparison in terrified silence. Every other week they took the trek to a selected location and gathered samples for the mandated testing. One of the major protocols agreed upon during the Osage mission’s inception was that all research projects had to be monitored to include their effects on the native species. Emma and Pia were one of seven teams that assigned to the environmental regulations division. Under any other circumstances they would be thoroughly enjoying the trip. They were allowed to add one day of personal time on to the start of their collection runs. Before coming to Osage, both Emma and Pia were avid hikers and outdoor enthusiasts. Their travel across the universe to be involved in the most important scientific endeavor in the history of humankind did nothing to diminish their love of communing with nature. When they discovered that they shared this interest, they solidified their own team and volunteered to take more missions away from the research facility than all the other teams combined. This trip was to be the same until everything went wrong. Now they were out and alone.

Finally breaking the silence, “I have to stop, Emma.”

A little too quickly, “Me too. I need sleep. When we wake up in the morning, this will all be over. They will have a handle on this and we can get back to the facility.”, said Emma.

“Do you think so?” Pia instantly regretted asking as soon as the words had left her lips. Emma didn’t answer. Neither choice would have helped the situation and she truly was tired, physically but even more so mentally. Emma crawled into their tent and Pia was close behind. The tent was more than large enough for the two of them and was of a quality they could have only dreamed of during their excursions back on Earth. Pia diverted from her side of the tent and nestled herself as close to Emma as she could manage. In light of what was happening Emma, didn’t mind the intrusion of her personal space. There was nothing between the two romantically, that option had been explored early on during one of their first trips into the alien wilderness. There seemed to be some sort of spark initially yet both were thankful they hadn’t forced anything as it would have made their friendship awkward when it failed. They decided later that they both believed they would have made a horrible couple but did make great friends. Neither said a word as they both fell asleep quickly.

The next morning Emma was the first to wake and check her visor for the news reports. It was the same. No answers and emergency protocols were still in effect. She tried to send a message as many times as she could before Pia stirred and sat up. They were all unsuccessful. Pia caught her fiddling with her arm unit. “Any luck?”

Emma reluctantly answered. “No. Actually it seems that they are just repeating the same broadcasts as yesterday.”

Pia thought through the implications. “That could mean that the system is down, or just malfunctioning. They may have already regained order and are just unable to disseminate the information. This could be a good thing.”

Emma wasn’t convinced but didn’t want to throw herself or Pia into a panic so she went along. “Quite possibly.”

“Let’s go back. I want to see. It may be all over. It might have just ben an overreaction.” Pia sounded optimistic for the first time in days.

“Hold on. We need to think this through. You may be right. It may be all over, maybe it was not as bad as they made it sound, but I’m not sure. I just don’t know.” Emma wanted it to be true. “It may be over but let’s be safe. We need to wait.”

“I can’t. Let’s go back now. Our friends, if the reports are even partially true our friends could be.... I have to know.” Pia was on the verge of pleading.

“Ok, we can go back. I still want to be safe. Will you just wait until tomorrow? Just give it one day, please, for me.”

Pia couldn’t imagine sitting and waiting one more day but knew despite the brave facade Emma was just as scared as she was. Emma had stayed with her last night when she was falling apart. The least she could do was be patient with her now. “You win. Let’s wait this one last day and then head back tomorrow morning.”

“Agreed. What do we do now?”

The two friends and colleagues spent the rest of the day doing everything they could to mentally escape from their situation. They hiked and traded stories of their life before the Osage mission. If they came to a repeat, the other was nice enough not to point it out. When they ran out of stories and it was obvious to both that they were on a loop, they hiked in silence for the next several hours. By the time they had returned to their camp it was dark and they were both eager to sleep and more importantly wake the next

morning. They wanted the nightmare to be over. They were asleep within minutes of crawling into the tent, both using the same side again.

The next morning came quickly and the camp and all of their tools were packed quicker than on any previous trip. The start of the trek was completed in silence as were the next fourteen kilometers. It wasn't until they were within sight of the facility, that they realized they had made a mistake. The scene was unreal. The gates to the facility were open. There was smoke rising from somewhere inside the facility. Equipment was scattered and turned over throughout the courtyard and no one was around.

"Where is everyone?" Pia squeaked under her breath.

Emma replied without thinking. "They must still be in quarantine. We need to go. We have to get out of here. Its not over."

Pia continued walking toward the facility and through the open gate, locked in a trance at the utter impossibility of what was in front of her. She had never seen the main courtyard of the facility devoid of people, much less in such disarray.

"Pia let's go." Emma urged her again.

"Pia?"

"Pia!" This time loud enough that Pia registered that Emma was tugging on her shoulder.

"What? No, you're right. Let's go. I'm sorry. We should have waited." Pia was speaking but still hadn't moved.

Emma spun her around so they were face to face. “Pia. We have to go now.” This time Pia shook her head and was able to get her feet moving. After a few steps Pia’s shuffle turned into a walk and then progressed into a frantic run. “Pia, slow down, wait for me.”

Pia continued to run at full speed until she reached the gate and turned to head back to their trail. Just as she was making the turn, Pia slid to a stop, stumbling slightly before regaining her balance. Emma could see her and was only a few steps behind her as Pia stood frozen in place. Emma covered the ground as quickly as she could her eyes trained on Pia.

Pia had been made catatonic by something she was seeing. That something was just out of the line of sight for Emma as she crossed the courtyard back to the gate. Emma felt more fear slamming into her than she had since the beginning, more than she imagined was possible. How could anything be worse than what they had already seen?

Seconds later, Emma reached Pia and shook her as she tried to get her attention focused back on her.

“Pia.”

“Pia.”

“Pia?”

Pia didn’t react, she just stared blankly back at Emma refusing to look back at whatever she had seen that put her in this state. Emma knew she needed to push past Pia to look around the corner but she couldn’t. Emma

couldn't look. She couldn't handle anything worse than what was already happening.

Seconds ticked by and she couldn't bring herself to turn around. She had to look. Emma closed her eyes in an attempt to steel her nerves enough to turn. With her eyes closed she could hear something. The sounds were confusing. They were the sounds of movement. She listened harder, closing her eyes even tighter. The sounds were disgusting, wet, and furious. She struggled to make sense of what she was hearing. It sounded like a large animal, no a group of animals eating something. Her mind was playing tricks on her. There were no carnivorous species native to the planet. She was letting her imagination control her. The horror of the last few days flooding into her all at once.

She willed herself to open her eyes. Pia was still standing in front of her locked on the sounds. They had to leave, they were in danger. Whatever had made everybody sick could still be present. She had to be strong for both of them. She had to turn around.

Emma gave herself a mental count.

“Three, Two, One.”

Emma Editi

08.04.2685 - 09.04.2718

Pia Kris

03.02.2686 – 09.04.2718