

# Parasites

"It's been 2 days," I groaned, "When are we *ever* gonna find them?"

I turned my head up to look at the piercing black sky, trying to find anything to cure my boredom.

"Just a little longer. We've already been out here this long." Wren exhaled long enough that it could compare to how long we'd been walking, "They can't have gotten too far."

I grumbled and raised my hands to the top of my helmet. If only I had just closed the door, we wouldn't be out here in this ... *wasteland*. And right on cue, Wren chirped in her *clever* words of wisdom, not even bothering to turn around to look at me:

"*Maybe* if you'd paid more attention to the glowing parasites in the cage, we would be back at the colony, doing our normal rounds."

I opened my mouth, ready to argue, even though I knew this was my fault. But it didn't make me feel any better when my girlfriend rubbed it in.

"I've already apologized! What more do you want from me?"

She whipped her head around to look at me as she groaned, "To shut up and keep looking, Kate!"

She turned away and trudged ahead as I scoffed, clearly upset, but her eyes were set on looking for the parasites. She was right, of course, but I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of agreeing.

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We've been on this planet for 2 years now, and my opinion of it hasn't gotten any better since we got here. It's barren; covered in red, sand-like dirt and rocky mountains, not a single plant in sight. It felt *suffocating*, and I guess that's why the parasites liked it.

When we had first set up the colony a year ago, a few glowing, green, little worm-like creatures had infiltrated the colony walls and had shown us their true potential.

Those tiny, insignificant looking parasites from underneath the planet's surface were capable of possessing a full-grown human in seconds flat.

They could rewire a person's brain and change the way you thought. They would change your voice to sound like it was underwater; taking over your entire body, turning you into a bloodthirsty monster who's hell-bent on tearing your friends faces off.

And I let them out. What a *hero*....

I was distracted by Wren when I was supposed to be watching the cage they were imprisoned in... *and* they escaped. *Surprisingly*. They almost enslaved the entire population of the colony. That's why we're out looking; those incredibly dangerous leeches and that *urgently* need to be contained. The commander made us go after them following their escape, but I'm beginning to suspect we might never find them. With the way *my* lucks going, they've probably already infiltrated the colony again and are currently trying to take it over. The first time they got in, it only took a few hours to capture them once we noticed the damage they had done to the cadets, not *2 days*.

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The sounds of our footsteps made crunching sounds in the red rubble, like stepping on the first fallen snow back on Earth.

Wren had her fists clenched in her space suit a few feet ahead of me, stressing the fabric. Even though this was partly her fault, she wouldn't accept it. She was a captain. She couldn't be on the commander's bad side, nor make devastating mistakes like this. She could lose her position, or worse, be exiled and taken back to Earth – away from *me*.

With *that* scary thought now making its home in my brain, I ran up to her, suddenly remorseful for not fully understanding the position she was in earlier. As my feet hit the ground with loud crunches, I wrapped my arms around her waist and rested my head on her shoulder. She stopped in her tracks, surprised, but didn't pull away.

"What's this for?" she asked with a breathy laugh.

"I wanted to apologize," I replied, "I know this can't be easy for you, and you're right," I sighed and clenched my eyes shut, "This is my fault."

I looked towards the ground. I didn't deserve to look at her after I potentially destroyed all of her future prospects and at the same time, almost sent her away from me. Tears welled in my eyes at the thought.

She let go of the one-sided hug and turned around, clasping her gloved hands onto my shoulders and pressing her helmet into mine.

"Hey," she whispered, "As much as I hate to admit it..., this is not *all* your fault," she pulled away, now taking my hands and resting them in hers, "I shouldn't have distracted you."

I chuckled lightly as she kept talking.

"You won't ever lose me, Kate, well, just not *physically*, if worse comes to worst."

A choked laugh escaped my lips as I whimpered. *I* was potentially going to ruin her career, remove her from her home. Wow, I guess now *I* won't accept that this was both our faults.

"I'm sorry." I sniffled, wiping my hand across my helmet in an effort to tame my tears, but forgetting that I couldn't reach my eyes.

She pulled me into another hug and rested her head on my shoulder.

"It's okay, I promise. Nothing will happen. I'll talk to the commander... and even though I'm *super* worried, we'll figure it out ... *together*."

I laughed out loud, effectively stopping the stream of tears running down my cheeks, "That's the cheesiest thing I've ever heard."

She joined in laughing, "I know."

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We stayed embracing for a few seconds, scared to sever this precious moment of emotion, until I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. It glowed with a certain brilliance that could only mean one thing: *the parasites*.

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. They'd somehow tripled in size *and* quantity.

"Wren..."

“What?” she said in a saucy, yet joking tone, “What’s so important that you’d ruin this wonderful moment?”

“Wren...”

She was getting fed up now, and let go of the embrace, “Seriously, what?”

I pointed in the direction of the new parasites, that also now looked more menacing than before, with hungry eyes trained on us.

Eyes that looked like they wanted to kill us. *Badly.*

Wren whipped around and eyed the parasites. Her eyes opened slowly as the realization kicked in.

“We...,” She started to hyperventilate, “We need to... RUN- “

Her sentence was cut off as one of the parasites lunged at her.

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I froze. The hideous, glowing, green beasts made headway towards her helmet, and soon enough, they were trying to climb inside.

My heart skipped a beat. I wanted to do something, but my legs wouldn’t listen to my thoughts; they wouldn’t budge.

I stood straighter, white as a ghost on the auburn sand as she screamed my name and teared at her helmet. The final scream knocked me out of my trance, and I cried:

“Wren!”

She dropped to her knees as I ran towards her, both of us violently trying to remove the parasites suctioned to her helmet. She shrieked as more and more kept pilling on. I tried to take as many off as I could, trying to control my rapid heartbeat and abundance of thoughts at the same time.

*What if we didn’t get them off in time? Would I lose her, not to the commander anymore, but to the huge, possessive beasts? If only we’d found them sooner, maybe they wouldn’t be the size of a newborn infant. If I’d just not hesitated for so long while she was in trouble, if I’d just kept better track of the cage, the simplest task at the colony, Wren wouldn’t be roaring in terror, fearing for her life as freakish parasites roamed her space suit, looking for an entrance to strike.*

I kept plowing through the monsters, even pulling out my knife to slice them in half, but they were persistent. After a minute of fighting, I could feel them lose their numbers. I was *confident* that was a good sign until Wren let out one final cry, sounding more painful than the last. Her body went limp, slumping forward into my arms as I caught her. The others retreated, satisfied that at least one of their buddies got the job done.

*Oh no... no, no, no!*

They must've gotten inside through an opening in her suit; her helmet was shut as tight as a jam jar, clouded from her fearful tears. Then I spotted it. On her right forearm was a tear in the fabric, revealing blood seeping from her olive skin onto the suit and across her arm. There was a gaping hole in her skin, made by none other than one of the parasites. My heart dropped to the floor. My grip tightened around her arms in a pursuit to steady her.

They had found a way in. She was as good as gone.

"Wren...?" I pleaded, shaking, "Can you hear me, Wren? CAN YOU HEAR ME!?"

I shook her violently, desperately looking for signs that she was still there; that it was still Wren, not some *worm*.

As tears welled in my eyes once more, I had an incriminating thought tugging at the back of my mind. The size and number of the parasites were three times greater than the ones that had almost destroyed the colony. If even *one* got into her body, would she be ... irreversible? Gone? At least the others healed and went back to their normal selves, but would she? Would the power of the parasites overtake her mind in a way stronger than the others?

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I faced the hard truth. *She wouldn't come back from this.* That wound was the size of a *golf ball*. She really *was* taken away from me, faster than I'd ever thought possible, and it was *all my fault*, regardless of what she said. I should've kept a better eye on the cage. Then none of this would've happened. None of it!

I shook her one last time and embraced her in her last living moments as Wren.

"Don't leave," I cried, "I can't lose you! Fight this!"

I tightened my grip on her, turning my knuckles white as my helmet fogged up, stained with tears; and miraculously, so did hers. My eyes lit up, staunching the flow of tears as she groaned in a voice that could only be hers as she raised her head up.

“Oh my god!” I sighed in relief, “You’re still here! I thought I’d lost you!”

Just as I’d finished talking, her body shot straight up, almost supernatural, and her eyes lit up the same sickly green colour as the parasites, illuminating her helmet with unnatural light; *definitely* unusual. On the other victims of the first parasites, their eyes never lit up like this.

*What was going on?*

“Wren ...,” I said cautiously as I stood to match her movements, “Are you ... okay?”

Her voice sounded gravelly, like she’d just woken up from a hundred-year nap, *absolutely* not hers.

“Of course, *Kate*.”

All of this was unfamiliar. The other victims sounded different than this, *looked* different than this. If the parasites could multiply *that* fast, what would it mean for the colony? They were more advanced, faster and more blood thirsty than the first group.

She said my name with a certain *disgust*, one that made me recoil at the sound of it. I took a step back as she kept speaking.

“*I’ve never been better.*”

She cocked her head to an impossible angle, with malice in her glowing eyes, and lunged at me.

