

A Lot Can Happen In Six Minutes

Iris had thought it was a bad idea from the beginning.

“Oh, come on, Iris. It’s not like anything ever happens out there.” Beryl knew, just as Iris did, that this was far from the truth. But in a relative sense—relative to what life on Columbina had been like when they first arrived—the jungle was shockingly safe. At least the Vos generally left them alone. And they knew most of what else was looking to kill them.

OK, maybe they didn’t know most of everything that was looking to kill them. But they knew a lot more about what was trying to kill them than they had once known.

Plus, nothing on the planet had killed anyone recently or even severely injured anyone.

Oh, wait, Beryl thought. She had forgotten about that unfortunate incident involving the tidal stream near town a month or so earlier.

Still, that wasn’t so bad, considering exactly how many animals in the jungles of Columbina wanted to eat and/or tear them apart.

“I just don’t want something to happen where I can’t get you help right away.” Iris’s voice had the stern edge to it that Beryl normally got from her mother.

“And are you going to follow me around the rest of my life trying to keep me out of trouble?”

Iris didn’t immediately say anything in response, suggesting she might be considering doing just that.

“Besides, Vlad will be in the vicinity if something happens.” The plan was to have Vlad drop her off before he took some other people to explore a system of nearby caves Iris’s analysis showed should have some gemstones that might be entirely different than anything that had existed on Earth. “And I’ll have Camp with me.”

“FYI, ‘in the vicinity’ is a lot different than close enough to save your ass if something happens. And also, unless your dog has magically gained the ability to perform emergency medical services, he is not going to be of any use in most emergency situations. And he might even attract some of those animals I would rather you stay far away from.”

“Out of curiosity, is there any point in my life when this would be OK?”

Iris again considered what Beryl had said. “Probably not.”

Beryl heard the resignation in Iris’s voice with her last statement. She knew Iris was going to let her do it—her first time truly in the jungles of Columbina on her own.

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There was a moment, when everything went entirely wrong, that Beryl blamed her mother for everything that happened. After all, Beryl never would have been in the position in which she found herself if her mother hadn’t loved flowers so much.

It was a convenient excuse as Beryl tried to think of a way to save her life.

It had been mid-afternoon when Beryl had seen it.

She had been wandering, looking for any new fruits or vegetables that they might be able to use. It was tough work, hacking through jungle, but Beryl enjoyed something about the rhythm, the search and, especially on that day before everything happened, the sounds of nature around her, undisturbed by anyone else.

That said, she was going to have Iris make her a jungle-hacking drone if she ever got out of this mess.

And if Iris ever let her go into the woods alone again.

“Beryl,” Iris’s voice came through her phone, startling Beryl. After a couple hours alone, she had gotten used to the silence—or at least, she had gotten used to not having the near-constant presence of Iris and her phone. She seemed more aware of everything around her somehow, from the way Camp avoided certain sticks on the ground to the sounds of unknown birds in the canopy above her. “I wanted to give you a heads up. You’re getting close to a rather steep cliff. Actually, it’s more of a gorge or canyon. It’s maybe half a mile to the east of where you are.”

“And that’s which way?”

Iris sighed, though it wouldn’t be for the last time that day. “To your left.”

Beryl immediately took off to her left.

“That was supposed to be a warning, not an enticement.”

“What part of what you said wasn’t enticing?”

“How about the part where you somehow manage to fall into the gorge and plunge a hundred feet to your death?”

Beryl ignored Iris and began hacking a path to her left, her curiosity about the gorge piqued to a point where there was no way she was not going to see it.

“Dammit, Beryl, I should have just let you keep walking. If your goal is just to do whatever I don’t want you to do and piss me off, I don’t even know why I try to keep you safe.”

“Just let me know when I’m getting close. I’m still planning to avoid the gorge edge and, you know, that whole plunging to my death thing. Also, I don’t always do exactly the opposite of what you want me to.”

“Fine,” Iris said, clearly less happy than she was resigned to what Beryl was doing.

It took Beryl over half an hour to make her way to the gorge, hacking through the jungle. Her arms and shoulders ached from the effort, but as Beryl grew closer to the gorge, the foliage gave way to rocks and cliffs.

And then, Beryl came out of the woods to a deep gorge, its top cutting a line through the jungle as if a crevasse had opened up in the ground as part of an earthquake, swallowing up everything on either side of it for ten or twenty feet.

Heeding Iris’s warning, Beryl crept carefully toward the edge of the gorge, which was only a few feet wide in most places, almost close enough in some places that Beryl was sure she could have jumped from one side of the gorge to the other. As soon as she got close enough to see over the edge, she looked down and saw a river rushing in whitewater through the narrow opening in the earth, a plunging, careening mess of water 100 feet below. It was far enough away that if you fell, it would be bad—as Iris suggested—but close enough that Beryl could smell the water wafting toward her, humid and wet and fresh in her nostrils, as if the spray was actually hitting her.

“This is stunning.” Beryl spoke out loud, even though the only ones who could hear her were Iris and Camp.

“Stunning and dangerous. I wouldn’t get any closer to the edge of that gorge. If the drop doesn’t kill you, the drowning will. And then the creatures that probably live down there will tear you apart and make sure we don’t find any bit of your carcass when we fish you out downstream.”

Beryl was about to make a snide remark back to Iris, but then she saw it.

A flower.

But it wasn’t just any flower.

It was the most amazing flower Beryl had ever seen.

The flower was red and spiky, the flower itself at least a foot across. The red petals were arranged against a bright orange and yellow center, as if the sun was setting and had created a perfect image of itself in a giant blossom.

Beryl had to get the flower for her mother.

Unfortunately, there was one immediate problem with obtaining the flower.

The flower was not just on the other side of the gorge, it was a foot below the edge of the gorge, clinging to the side of the rock.

Iris was definitely not going to like what Beryl was planning to do.

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Beryl saw the dead tree stretched across the short gap of the gorge after only a few minutes of walking.

Iris must have been paying attention to what she was doing, because almost as soon as Beryl saw it, Iris piped up, likely having seen the natural bridge through Beryl's phone, though Beryl was somewhat unsure whether Iris used her phone or the satellite systems to keep tabs on her when she was out of town.

Not that it mattered enough to Beryl to ever inquire as to which it was.

"Beryl Roberts, do not even think about it."

"Think about what?" Beryl asked, even though she knew Iris would see through her obvious lie. Everyone always saw through her lies, even, apparently, when they weren't with her.

"You know perfectly well what I am talking about."

"Oh, come on, Iris. It looks totally safe." Even as Beryl said those words, she knew they sounded absurd.

"Crossing a gorge on a large, dead tree which could break and send you plummeting to your death looks safe? Or off of which you could slip and plummet to your death? This looks safe to you?"

"OK, maybe not perfectly safe, but pretty safe. At least, safe enough that it is more likely than not that I cross without dying."

"I'm not even confirming that statement with odds, because I don't want someone here to get wind of that and decide your death is an appropriate thing to gamble on." Beryl almost asked Iris to do so anyway, just because she was curious. Not that Iris would have let her know, though Beryl suspected from the way Iris had stated the matter, it was more likely than not Beryl could safely cross the log bridge.

That was enough to convince Beryl she should cross it.

Her mother really would love that flower.

Beryl ignored the protests of Iris and headed for the log bridge, though Iris didn't stop lodging her complaints with Beryl. It was mostly a repetitive string of comments about her potential death and, when that was not working, showing her gruesome images on her phone of people who had plummeted to their deaths, either decades ago on Earth or since humans had gone to space.

Beryl just ignored the video coming out of her phone.

And then, Iris brought out the big gun.

"I promised your dad I would keep you safe. You're not making my life easy right about now."

"And I'm just trying to keep his promise to my mom to find her flowers if ever they got to a planet with something more interesting than grasses and mosses."

“That wasn’t your promise to her, Beryl,” Iris said. Beryl noted that Iris didn’t say anything about her own father not doing something like this to get a flower. Both she and Iris knew he would have done something twice as dumb if it meant making her mother happy, or if there was a chance to get a new or interesting specimen.

Not that he ever had a chance to do either of those things.

Beryl touched the emerald hanging on her neck, even though she already had made up her mind. Perhaps it was just to reassure herself that her father would have done exactly the same thing.

Apparently, Iris saw the gesture and realized that Beryl wasn’t going to pay any attention to her warnings.

“Just be careful.” Iris sighed. “Super careful.”

“I always am,” Beryl replied.

They both knew that was a lie, too, but Iris let it go.

Beryl tested the log crossing the gorge. Everything about it felt sturdy. On her side of the gorge, the tree seemed to have grown incredibly tall on the edge of the jungle, then tumbled down at some point. She didn’t see any sign of lightning or other trauma; presumably, it had been some sort of strong wind. On the other side of the gorge, the branches of the tree had withered at some point. It had clearly not fallen recently, but it hadn’t been too long before, either. In the jungle, everything went back to where it had begun life quickly.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.” The scolding tone in Iris’s voice was obvious.

Beryl ignored her and stepped on to the log where it was still on solid ground.

The log didn’t move at all, which Beryl decided was a good sign.

Beryl pulled all of herself onto the log, and it still didn’t move. The surface of the log was slippery, but nothing she didn’t deal with all the time. Her shoes were meant to deal with slippery surfaces. She had no doubt she could easily make her way to the other side of the log without a problem.

Unfortunately, as Beryl started across the log, she realized she did have one problem.

From the ground beneath the large log, Camp whined.

Beryl looked at her constant companion, and the dog sat on the ground.

“No.” The translator on her phone expressed Camp’s succinct thoughts on crossing the log.

“Are you kidding me?” Beryl tilted her head at her dog in the same way he sometimes looked at her, when the translator didn’t quite give the dog the correct meaning of what came out of her mouth.

“Good to know there’s something out there with half a brain when it comes to common sense,” Iris said. Beryl would have suspected Iris put the dog up to this, but she knew Camp well. When the dog didn’t want to do something, he wasn’t going to do something. She could sometimes coerce him into agreeing with her viewpoint through the use of copious numbers of treats—he was a dog who thought with his stomach—but she didn’t have anywhere near enough treats with her to make him do anything, and she knew he knew it.

“Fine,” Beryl said to the dog. “You stay here. I’ll get the flower and come back to you.”

“Are you shitting me? You’re going to cross that log twice?” Iris was not even trying to hide her annoyance.

Beryl ignored her. Instead, she looked at her dog. “Fine. Stay here. You’re a little coward, do you know that?”

In response, Camp laid down on the ground. Apparently, a little name-calling wasn't going to faze him.

Beryl took another step on the log. She still wasn't over the gorge, but it was comforting to know that the second step still didn't move the log or otherwise cause her any issues that might lead to her death on the rocks or in the waters below.

Eight more steps, and Beryl was on the other side of the gorge.

"Did you see that, Iris?" Beryl asked her friend through her phone. "I didn't die or anything."

"I will count that as a win. But that's only a win for now," Iris replied.

As soon as Iris finished speaking, Beryl heard a crack behind her. Her immediate thought was that something had happened to Camp, behind her and on the other side of the gorge. As Beryl turned, she pulled her gun from her hip.

She didn't know if the gun was somehow wet, or if she just wasn't paying attention to something she had done tens of thousands of times, but as she pulled the gun, it flew out of her hands, as if pulled by some mysterious force.

Beryl saw exactly where it was going before it went there and before she could do anything about it.

The gun hit the ground once, then bounced straight into the gorge.

Beryl couldn't hear it as it hit the water below.

"Oh shit." Beryl whispered, as if Iris wouldn't hear her. Or as if Iris wasn't keeping an eye on her and knew exactly what had happened.

"Oh shit is fucking right."

Considering the circumstances, Beryl thought Iris's reaction was quite calm.

After all, she was in the middle of the jungle, at least ten minutes from the ability of anyone to get to her, if not more. Vlad was close, but he wasn't that close. And he would still have to get back to the Bird if anything happened, which would make the trip that much longer.

All it would take is the arrival of one Vos, and Beryl would be toast.

Beryl decided the flower could wait. She didn't have a gun, but she did have a dog. She liked the idea of two of them against one, should a Vos show up.

Granted, they would both die then, but at least they would die together.

"I'm sending Vlad to come get you ASAP. Because, you know, I don't want you to get eaten by a fucking Vos." Iris still sounded relatively calm, and at the very least, calmer than what Beryl had expected.

Beryl stepped toward the log again, when she heard a second crack, like the first one she had heard.

For a second, Beryl thought it might be something in the woods across the gorge from where she was. She considered trying to cajole Camp into crossing the log toward her.

Thankfully, before she could pressure Camp into crossing the log, she realized what the crack had been.

It was the log, breaking in two.

A third crack, like lightning hitting a tree, sounded from the log.

Beryl watched it crack, like someone had taken a giant hammer to its center. The now separate halves of the tree fell into the gorge, crashing along the walls as they fell to the water below. As they fell, they took rocks with them, causing miniature avalanches of soil and rocks.

At the bottom of the gorge, the two halves of the tree fell into the water, loud enough to be heard—unlike Beryl's gun before them. The water was not strong enough to move them,

though, and it began rushing over the new obstacle in its way, rushing to its eventual destination of the single ocean of Columbina.

“OK, Iris,” Beryl said, “I will admit something. Perhaps this wasn’t my best thought out plan.”

“I shouldn’t even dignify that statement with a response, but I am going to anyway. No shit, Sherlock.”

On the other side of the gorge, Camp crawled toward the edge, as if he wanted to look to see what had happened to the tree, but was too scared to get close to the edge in case it crumbled and took him with it.

Beryl realized that might be a distinct possibility and took several quick steps backward. “Camp, back it up! I don’t want you to fall over the edge.”

On the other side of the gorge, the dog started backing up, the words Beryl said apparently translated properly by his translator. “Good boy.” The dog wagged his tail, though he was still crouching low to the ground, as if he was worried about something.

He half-whine and half-growled, and Beryl’s translator went off.

Whatever it was, the translator didn’t quite understand what Camp was expressing.

It did, however, understand enough to suggest that Camp could tell something was in the vicinity—and it was something Camp did not like.

Beryl’s first thought was that there was a Vos nearby. But almost as soon as that thought crossed her mind, she realized that not only had the translator not told her it was a Vos—which was something it definitely understood on Camp’s end—but that she didn’t even need the translator. Beryl knew what Camp’s Vos growl sounded like, and the sound that had come out of him was not what she had just heard.

“Iris, please tell me you have a better idea what is nearby than Camp does.” Beryl heard herself whisper to her friend, without even realizing she had intended to whisper.

The jungle next to the gorge went silent.

This was not good.

Not good at all.

Beryl turned to face the woods. Her hand flew to her side, looking for her gun.

“Shit!” Beryl was so used to her gun being right there, she had moved her hand to her side even though she knew full well the gun was somewhere at the bottom of the gorge. “Shitty shit shit!”

Beryl put her hand up to her necklace, only slightly comforted that it was still around her neck.

“Beryl,” Iris whispered, even though the only person who could hear what she was saying was Beryl herself, the phone’s speaker only in her own head. “Turn around.”

Slowly, Beryl turned back toward the gorge, her hand still on the emerald around her neck.

There, she saw what looked like a claw edge over the lip of the cliff on her side of the gorge. It wasn’t large, which was a relief.

It was not much of a relief, but Beryl would take it.

A second claw-like appendage appeared a foot or two to the left of the first one.

And then the creature to which the appendages belonged pulled itself up over the cliff ledge, coming to rest on the edge of the gorge and staring at Beryl.

She stared right back at the creature, even though she worried the action might be interpreted as a threat.

The creature was about the size of a large turkey, and shaped in a similar way. It was not, however, as fat as a turkey. Except for the feathers that covered its body, Beryl thought the creature actually resembled a Vos in shape, just in smaller form. The claws Beryl had seen were on its wings, like pictures of archaeopteryx she had seen. Except these claws looked like the sort of claws that could tear something apart very easily.

As did the claws on its feet.

The thing also had a beak.

Which it opened, so Beryl could see its two rows of sharp teeth lining the beak.

The creature made a noise, something like a screeching bird.

“Any idea what this thing is? And whether it is going to tear me apart?” Beryl whispered to Iris.

“No idea on both counts,” Iris replied. “Though I would not get any closer to it, if I were you.”

“I’m not planning on it.”

Beryl and the turkey-like creature continued their staring match. Beryl wasn’t sure what would happen if she looked away, but she didn’t want to find out.

Finally, the animal tilted its head and let out a sound that sounded almost like a chicken cluck. It was a far more pleasant sound than its previous screeching. Beryl thought it sounded almost motherly.

Across the gorge, Camp made a similar noise to what he had made before the creature appeared.

This time, the translator had come up with a better translation to the noise.

“Ugly clawed turkey things.”

“Things?” Beryl said out loud and immediately worried that the statement would bother the turkey-like creature.

It seemed unfazed and clucked again.

And then Beryl saw movement behind it at the edge of the gorge.

Claws.

Dozens of them.

The turkey-like creatures began pulling themselves out.

As the group of turkey-like creatures gathered at the edge of the gorge, Beryl slowly knelt down.

She didn’t think it would do her any good, but she did have one option left. She pulled the knife she kept in her boot out, while the original turkey-like creature watched her.

Beryl stopped counting the creatures when she got to twenty, but they kept coming.

“Any advice?” Beryl asked Iris. She knew if the creatures came after her, she was going to be lucky just to take some of them with her. They could definitely do some damage with those claws.

“Avoid the claws. And the teeth. Beryl, I just wanted to tell you...” Iris started to speak, but she didn’t get to finish the statement.

Beryl screamed as the turkey-like creature which had come out first let out a series of three chirps, and all of the others began running toward her.

The scream didn’t seem to stop them. Beryl raised her knife, trying to decide whether to throw it at the lead turkey-like creature and maybe take out the leader.

She didn’t have time to decide.

All the creatures spread out to avoid her, running at high speed toward the jungle behind her. The one that had first climbed out of the gorge had started toward her, but had now stopped just a foot or two in front of her. From there, it watched the other turkey-like creatures run away, letting the rest head to the jungle before it followed them, letting out a few more chirps as it did.

“Holy shit.” Beryl drew out the syllables, smiling and putting her hand holding the knife to her side.

“You are one lucky bastard, did I ever tell you that?” Iris sounded as relieved as Beryl felt.

“I’ll take all the luck I can get.”

“As a heads up, you lucky bastard, Vlad will be there with the Bird in six minutes. I think we’re done with your fun for the day.”

Beryl knew a lot could happen in six minutes.

On the other side of the gorge, Camp growled.

“Are you shitting me?” Beryl shook her head.

Then, the translator let her know what the growl meant. It was not good.

Not good at all.

Now it was Iris’s turn to swear. “Are you shitting me?”

It was a Samjack.

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They had discovered the Samjacks on the absolute first trip they had ever made to the surface of Columbina.

It was only later that Iris had figured out that the creatures were attracted to a very specific sound frequency that humans could not hear—a sound that happened to be emitted by the lifters on the Birds that allowed them to fly. Once they changed the frequency, the Samjacks left the Birds alone.

But until they figured that out, the Samjacks had been a major problem.

That first day, though, the first people who had gone to the surface of Columbina returned to the Bird they had taken to the planet to find three of the creatures wrapped around the lifters.

And they were truly wrapped around them.

Because the Samjacks were, appearance-wise, very large snakes.

Very large, red and black, snake-like creatures with giant fangs.

Iris assured them that the venom in those fangs couldn’t kill them, but considering the size of the fangs, it didn’t really matter. They were more than capable of killing a person on their own, even without venom.

The only thing that made humans able to live with the Samjacks was the general aversion Samjacks had to humans. Most of the time, the Samjacks made active efforts to avoid humans.

With two exceptions.

The first exception was the frequency issue. When the Samjacks got wrapped around one of the lifters, they would lash out and attempt to kill anyone who came near them.

The other exception?

When you got between a Samjack and something it wanted to eat.

The things were very fond of the chickens and turkeys the Columbinians had brought with them. So fond of them, in fact, that all of the chickens and turkeys on Columbina had to be kept inside.

“At least if I die here,” Beryl said, “we figured out why the Samjacks are so into the chickens and turkeys.”

The Samjack slithered up and over the edge of the gorge, curling itself up at the edge of the gorge and hissing as it did. Iris assured them that the Samjacks weren't snakes, but no one on the planet really believed her.

Normally, Beryl and anyone else in this situation would take care of the Samjack with a shot, before it could lash out and kill whoever was standing in between it and its food.

Obviously, that was not going to work in this situation.

“Any suggestions?” Beryl had her knife raised in front of her, as if showing the Samjack the only weapon she still had would somehow scare it off.

It was not working.

“Maybe,” Iris hesitated just long enough that Beryl knew it wouldn't be a good idea, “you could try to throw the knife at it. If you can sink the knife into its forehead, it will be long enough to kill the thing.”

The Samjack pulled its head back a little, as if it was about to strike.

Beryl knew this was it. The Samjack was going to strike. It was either she make an attempt to kill it, or her life would be cut very, very short.

Beryl pulled her arm back and hoped her aim would be true.

She only had one shot at this.

Like she had done many times before—at targets—Beryl let the knife fly out of her hand, snapping her wrist in a familiar motion.

As if in slow motion, the knife flew through the air. Beryl could see it flip, so the blade pointed toward the Samjack.

The blade hit the snake-like creature directly on the forehead. It made a sickening thump, and Beryl closed her eyes. If she hadn't hit the thing square on, she didn't really want to see the Samjack coming toward her.

“Holy crap, that actually worked!” Iris shouted. Beryl opened her left eye, then her right eye. The Samjack was still curled up, but its head was circling around, as if it was about to pass out.

And then the Samjack's head crumpled toward the ground, the entire blade buried in the creature's skull, up to the hilt and handle.

“You really thought that might not work?” Beryl questioned Iris, finally realizing what she had just said to her.

“I was pretty convinced it wouldn't work. You're better with that knife than I thought.”

“I'm glad you had such confidence in me.”

“You have to realize the chances of that working were virtually zero.”

On the other side of the gorge, Camp whined.

For a moment, Beryl thought the dog had sensed yet another creature that had come to kill her. But then her translator went off.

“Bird.”

The dog must have heard the Bird headed their way before she could.

“How long before Vlad gets here with the Bird?” Beryl asked.

“He's still a minute out. That dog can hear well. And just FYI, I'm having him pick you up first before doing a quick hop over the gorge to get Camp. If you want to head back upstream a bit, too, that would be good. There's a better place for him to land up there. More cleared area.”

“You know, a lot can happen in a minute,” Beryl said. “I mean, I could see about getting that flower for my mom. It didn’t look that far into the gorge...”

“Beryl Roberts, if you so much as think about getting that flower for real, I will tell Vlad to take the Bird back to town and leave you to whatever other crazy animals in the woods want to eat you. Because at that point, I will officially have grown tired of trying to keep you alive.”

For a second, Beryl considered pushing Iris and at least going to get an up close look at the flower, even if she didn’t really want to.

“I swear, Beryl, if you go looking for it...”

“Iris, I’m not going to go after it.”

Beryl walked over to the Samjack and pulled her knife out of its head, yanking it hard to get it out.

It really had been a good and lucky hit.

Beryl wiped the blood off of the knife’s blade on her shorts, leaving a nasty red streak along her thigh. She held the knife up before replacing it in her boot where she kept it, amazed that something so seemingly small and relatively non-deadly had just saved her life.

She didn’t think she would be leaving home without a knife any time soon.