

Halcyon

Rose heard the happy chirp of her slip alerting her to the credits deposited into her account. She pulled the transparent device from her bag, flicking it so the animated glyphs sprang to life. A breath thicker than a sheet of paper and much more solid, the crystal screen fed her the news, the quarantine zones, and the air density. She moved her thumb over the banking glyph and saw the balance, just enough for a new life.

She had been saving for months working the back room of her aunt's salon, waxing sprouting hairs and tattooing makeup onto sagging faces. She arched eyebrows and lined lips, applied shadow that never smudged and placed beauty marks on the apples of their cheeks. Rose kept working when the pulsing gun made her hand cramp and the copper smell of the charged needle made her sick. It was weeks of staying late and charging extra but now she would never have to pick up a needle again.

She walked through the lower district, a breath filter pressed against her nose and mouth. Below the smog line it was impossible to get around without one. Even through the filter each inhale felt weighted and coated her tongue and cheeks with the feeling of grit. Rose checked her directions against the dimly glowing street signs bolted onto the corners of buildings. Through the haze, she found the next street and followed it past shop fronts and security stations to a display kiosk surrounded by print ads for the colony worlds.

Stepping up to the display, Rose fit her slip into the retracting slot and listened to the whirring sound of the machine as it extracted information. The advertisements plastered to the machine were Norman Rockwell-like paintings of workers lounging, taking their lunch breaks on the great terraforming engines and small children looking up in wonder, the twin moons of a new world reflected in their wide eyes.

“Come to Halcyon,” a synthetic voice repeated at intervals. The planet was the newest acquisition of the Exploration and Settlement Foundation. The ESF created new worlds. Exotic resorts, corporate retreats, manufacturing super-structures for cheap, off-world products, all were built on the land they created out of the desolate rocks hanging in the void of space. When the terraforming engines had done all they could to shape the land into an approximation of Earth, they brought in settlers to take care of the details. Employees whose only job was to create a new life, and Rose was going to be one of them. Everything would be taken care of once she arrived. All she needed was a ticket.

The whirring stopped and Rose’s slip was returned to her. Her account balance read as zero, but a new glyph had appeared on the screen. In the right corner, between the scrolling social feed and her identification number, was a minimalist horizon. Two overlapping circles rose behind a thin blue line and when Rose opened it, it listed the boarding codes and departure times for the colonization shuttles.

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“You’ll feel some slight pressure,” the attendant said. He had a light blue lab coat with the same design as the shuttle glyph embroidered on the chest. “It might make you feel nauseous. Count backwards from a hundred and you’ll be asleep before departure.”

After presenting him with her slip, he had lead Rose through the aisles of poly-resin capsules. Now lying in her own translucent yellow container, her stomach churned and cold sweat made her skin prickle under her paper gown. Rose shifted against the spongy gel lining the sides, trying to settle into a comfortable position around the twisting wires.

The attendant gently placed a hand on her shoulder to still her.

“Try not to move around too much.” He had a reassuring face. Something in the creases of his eyes or the lilt of his voice made Rose’s clammy skin feel warmer.

“How long does the flight take?” she asked.

“For the crew, it will take about two months.” He wrapped a latex strip around Rose’s fore arm. “For you, it will only feel like a couple hours.” He brought a needle feeding into a tubed IV line to her hand and pushed it into the skin between her second and third knuckle.

Rose felt her chill return as the latex strip was removed and the contents of the IV line moved its way through her veins. With each heartbeat her arm felt heavier, like her own blood had congealed and thickened to the same spongy gel she laid on. She had pictured herself flying to her new life awake and alert. She wanted to feel the new sun’s warmth through the shuttle windows and see the panoramic of Halcyon unfold around her on approach, not lie in a pod like a coma patient.

“Why do we have to be asleep?”

“It’s cost effective, as impersonal as it sounds,” replied the attendant as he arranged the feed line. “More people can fit on one shuttle if none of them are moving around.”

Rose’s stomach heaved as the congealing sensation reached its cold tendrils into her torso.

“It takes ninety seconds to reach your brain,” the attendant said. “Start counting and you’ll be dreaming before you know it.”

The lid slid shut and Rose was alone in the diffused light of her capsule. Outside, she heard the muffled voices of other people, passengers and attendants, moving through the stacks of capsules.

“One, two, three,” she counted quietly to herself.

There was a hiss of air as the capsule directly to her left was opened. Turning her head, she could make out the vague shape of someone climbing into it, the soft curves of a woman showing under her own paper gown. The blocky shape of a lab coat moved between the two capsules as they prepared the new passenger for departure.

“Fifty-six. Fifty-seven.”

When the attendant moved aside, Rose saw a shock of electric red at the head of the capsule. In a moment of panic, Rose tried to lift a leaden hand to her IV and rip the needle from her flesh. The woman was hurt, something had gone wrong and she was bleeding. Rose’s body was no longer taking commands from her mind and her hand lay uselessly at her side.

“It’s her hair,” Rose said to herself, realizing her mistake. “It’s just her hair.”

She struggled to find the number she had left off counting as the spreading sensation of the IV drip reached her throat. Rose was within a dream before she realized it. She saw herself in the dense forests and standing on the rocky crags of her own new world, just like the ones in the recruitment ads. The moons shone on her skin, turning the blemishes of her life on Earth into a patchwork of constellations. Air that had never filtered through a duct or been spat out of an exhaust pipe filled her lungs and made her head feel light, until she rose into the sky. Inside her mind, a planet turned beneath her fingers. The glittering lights of cities that formed her life winked out as the disappeared behind the horizon and a new landscape formed as the planet revolved.

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There were no rolling fields dotted with homesteads on Halcyon, as the ticket kiosk and informational pamphlets promised there would be. Instead settlers were roused from their long sleep to find gray soil that turned to dust underfoot and a scorched sky split by a rainless storm.

The clouds came from the horizon, the result of the terraforming engines and the chemicals they spewed to acclimatize the planet to the closest approximation to Earth possible.

Once she was lifted from her pod, jolted awake, and given a pair of corporate fatigues Rose was passed from one shuttle to another, decreasing in size and in miles traveled until she was deposited at Outpost NQ1S48. It was little more than a semi-trailer with a generator and water distillery. Northern hemisphere, quadrant one, section forty-eight and its care and development depended on Rose and the woman with the electric hair.

Her name was Caroline. Outside of the yellow light of the capsules, her hair was not red, but a sunny purple that radiated against the stark sky. In the rolling shadows of the terraforming engines, they counted their inventories of seed species, plants that were hardy enough to survive the crumbling soil of early cultivation. They decorated the corrugated metal walls with what little they were able to bring from Earth. After two months of lying beside one another in silence as they traveled away from their old lives, they said out loud the reasons why they left.

“My family used to have a farm,” she told Rose. “I didn’t want to sell to the developers and the rest of my family did. I tried starting over. There was no way I could afford that much land on Earth, but out here they’ll pay me for it.”

Rose had never been on a farm, or seen an animal much bigger than a pigeon.

“I just couldn’t stand it in the city,” Rose said. “I spent my whole life crunched up between those ugly walls.”

They flipped through binders of instructional diagrams, explaining the steps of forming an entire forest from a handful of genetically modified seeds.

“I made other people look how they saw themselves in their head.” Rose looked at a crinkled tri-fold colonization advertisement. “Or at least as close as I could get. Nothing ever turned out how I wanted.

Caroline looked up from a flow chart detailing mass cross pollination methods without the aid of insects.

“If came here for a pretty sunset, you might have got on board a bit too early.” She set the binder aside. “Did you ever tattoo something other than eyeliner?”

Rose smiled. “I gave my cousin four hearts down her arm in freshman biology,” she said, jabbing the air with an imaginary needle. “We used the dye they used for slides. It passed the time.”

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Rose could never tell when it was day. The only indicator for time they possessed was a wall mounted digital clock tied to an identical one at the main base and the crackling voice of a radio, calling to check in once every twenty-four hours. She woke when it told her, ate when it told her, worked when it told her.

The sky gave no indication of day or night. The slender smoke stacks of the terraforming engines stood like gapped teeth on the horizon, the bellowing clouds it produced containing all the chemicals for a sustainable planet. Every day the clouds grew larger, joining with those from other engines until they darkened the sky and the molecules reacted in the atmosphere. Rose hated the way the compounds bounced off one another, releasing electrical energy in cracks of lightning.

As she walked between rows of struggling plants, Rose looked up and waited for rain. Rain meant success. Rain meant real farming, the introduction of wildlife, and real settlement.

Rain meant the clouds would clear and the moons she had dreamed of would finally hang in the sky in front of her.

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Caroline sat on the floor between their two narrow cots, flipping through a paperback novel she manages to bring with her. It was the only thing in the outpost that was not filled with figures and charts. Her hair had faded since they'd arrived, showing a dull blonde at the roots and where the color had been stripped away.

Thunder shook their small trailer and Caroline set her book down to move to the window. Her hair had faded since they'd arrived, showing a dull blonde at the roots and where the color had been stripped away. While Rose could not stand the view, Caroline relished in it. She said it reminded her of home, where the flat expanses of land gave her view of gathering storms. She said she always like watching the storms roll in.

Rose walked in from the field and collapsed onto her bed. When she was not working, she spent her time dozing in and out of sleeping, never looking out the window but at the advertisement taped to the wall. Caroline had asked her why. Rose said she would save her waking hours for days worth seeing, not the endless rolling gray that passed for daylight now.

Caroline sat down beside her, ignoring the protests when she pinned Rose's hand between her knee and the mattress.

Caroline pulled out three sticks of what looked like charcoal.

"I found this in one of the draws today. It's India ink," she explained, wetting it in a bowl and turning it to liquid. She said they used it often in the agricultural labs, where she had been assigned temporary duty, to prepare slides. "It's really just regular pigment. The same kind they use to prepare slides in freshman biology."

“You want me to tattoo you?” Rose looked up from her pillow, a crease already imprinted in her cheek from the fabric.

“I’ve always wanted one, but I was too scared. And like you said,” Caroline replied, pulling out assorted needles and thread from the medical kit, “it might help the time pass.”

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Given free range of subject, Rose spent the first days drawing lines across Caroline’s back and shoulders with a grease pen. Caroline would feel the cold press of the nib against her skin and look out at the rolling clouds, sparking and churning but never opening to the down pour they all awaited.

Instead of the broken sky of Halcyon or the murky horizon of Earth, Rose drew the landscape she dreamed of in the capsule. The twin moons she had never seen in person rose to their apex between Caroline’s shoulder blades. Down her spine, she designed constellations and sprinkled in shooting stars. She filled the horizon with plants that had never been cultivated and mountains that broke the sky into jagged pieces. Nestled into the branches of trees were birds she had never seen in person and animals from story book illustrations moved in the space between their trunks.

When Rose finished she showed Caroline, holding one mirror in front of her and one behind her shoulder. The only request Caroline made was that Rose fill the clouds with lightning. Rose said she would, but she dipped the needles into the ink and began her work, leaving the clouds whole and unbroken. They did not fit in the perfection she created.

Caroline knew, but did not reprimand. Rose was out of bed, her mind moved quickly and with determination. The fact she looked towards a sky at all, even if it was one that was imagined, meant Caroline had accomplished something.

Progress was made slowly, work counted in minutes they were able to spare during the day. Rose worked calmly, her steady fingers stretching the skin while her other hand jabbed pigment under the surface. They improvised when they had to, creating needle heads out of hypodermics and tool handles out of pens and pencils. The needles did not hold ink well, and Rose wrapped them tightly with thread that absorbed the pigment and kept the needles saturated. If the pain of it ever bothered Caroline she did not mention it.

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It rained on the one-hundred-forty-eighth day at the outpost. No tattooing had been done that day. Instead they spent it outside, sewing seeds and scooping tiny amounts of dirt into beakers the size of Rose's pinky. As she patted down the warm soil with her own warm hands, Rose looked up and saw the constant lightning stop and, as if it split along an invisible seam, the sky rip open in a torrent of water. She ran, mud flying into the station. The roof echoed with the leaden *ping* of rain. Through a round window punched out of the wall near the beds, she could see Caroline kneeling in the mud, her tools and beakers in organized piles around her. She made no move to pack up and come inside, instead tipping her head back and letting the rain water fill her open mouth.

It was a few days later when they found out about the water. Two of the other stations had reported problems with the rain and ground water, a possible unforeseen result of the molecules used to facilitate terraforming. Tests were inconclusive as of yet, but they were all cautioned against using anything other than what came from the station's filtration system.

Caroline did not see the harm in the rain. When they watered crops with rainwater, they grew. All around them sprouts of grass pushed their way through the damp soil. She assured

Rose the results were an anomaly. The water was fine. The down pours continued nightly, starting at almost the same time to the hour as the previous.

Sitting for the tattoo became difficult. Every time Rose picked up a needle she would find Caroline, bent double and complaining of stomach cramps. She refused any food and her cheeks became hollow.

“We should use the radio,” Rose said. “We should tell them to come get you.”

Caroline insisted she was fine. She said she had never handled colds well, that this was all it was. A cold that would take care of itself.

The morning she vomited blood, there was no more reasonable objection.

“Fuck, you’re a ways out there,” a voice crackled through the receiver. “Keep her stable, we’re sending out a supply ship that can bring her back, but it won’t be there until nightfall.”

She was dead before noon. Rose found her when she came in from the gardens. Rose sat on the bed beside her and placed her palm against her back. There was no rise and fall of breath, no steady beat under her ribs. When her fingers brushed over the lines of her work, there was only stillness.

Rose wanted be ill. Every feeling and organ seemed to swell at once to her throat and her vision tilted with nausea. A clamping pressure on her chest kept her vitals inside her, but it also constricted her lungs so much she thought she might never take in air again.

She fumbled for the radio but realized she had nothing to say to the crackling static. They were already coming. Getting here sooner wouldn’t help anything.

Rose stood over Caroline, over her body. Her purple hair had faded away completely, leaving behind only slight tints picked up by the dim lights. Her entire complexion had been leeches of its color and reverted back to the bleak grays and tans of the camp. Against her

whitening skin, the browns and blacks of the India ink looked like they had been painted on a canvas. Rose moved her hands over her designs, tracing the lines she never inked and the shadows she never cast. If she had ever been proud of anything, it was this. She would not let it go uncompleted.

Working quickly, she grabbed the needle and wrapped the thread. She broke apart the remaining sticks of pigment and drowned them in water from the rain collection. With frantic jabs, she filled in her horizon, determined to see what she wanted when she looked at the sky. Her hand cramped and ink stained her fingers to the knuckle. The bile stayed perched at the back of her throat, waiting for her to realize what she was doing and lurch forward.

She finished before sunset. Her sunrise shone, breaking through the foliage of monochromatic leaves. Birds frozen in time spread their wings, eternally seconds away from taking flight, and creatures that would never know the thrill of the hunt prowled in the forest. The twin moons still climbed in the sky despite the coming dawn, and in the clouds lightning danced.