

In Space, No One Can Hear You Howl

I came to Casper to get away, but I still dreamed. I dreamed of the same thing every night. The forest. Running. The moon up above. Darkness. I don't remember if I did anything other than running in these dreams. They were just a reminder, a fading imprint. I was free now.

I inhaled sharply as my alarm woke me from my usual dream. I pulled the pillow over my head, attempting to hide from the morning. The harsh beeping still permeated the comfort of my pillow and thwarted my efforts for a few more minutes of sleep. Resigned, I climbed out of bed and shut off the alarm in my module's control panel. My fingers grazed a stray button and the glass of the window became transparent. Rays of Casper's sun beamed directly into my room, blinding me for a moment with orange light. Barely awake, I collected my bathrobe and toiletries.

Before leaving for the community showers, I looked at the paper calendar on the wall by my door. Grinning, I crossed off another date and counted the days blocked by red 'X's. One hundred days without incident. One hundred nights without unbearable pain. One hundred mornings that I had woken up in my bed. And one hundred days without worrying what I was going to do once I closed my eyes. On Earth, I had to schedule my life around it. Imagine my surprise when I'd gone over three months without an incident.

After a shower, I got dressed and rushed off to work. The sun was warm and there was a light breeze carrying a flowery perfume from Casper's forest. I was able to walk around comfortably in just my t-shirt and jeans. Above me, one of Casper's two moons was visible in this morning, a little over half full. The moons would appear in the sky at seemingly random times. When the moons passed each other, the gravity fields changed their orbit. As of yet, they hadn't been able to come up with a predictive model for the moons. At times, there were two, identical half-circles. Once we had a completely dark sky, except for the stars. Another night had given us a view of two opposing crescent moons. Still, in the last five years, neither moon had ever been totally full.

The river rushed under me as I crossed South Bridge, the water babbling under the aluminum walkway. The campus wasn't very large, but the research facility was on the opposite side of the colony. On Casper, there were seven colonies. Colony Four was one of the research outposts and where the biology unit was located. The biology unit had two main functions. The first was to identify and classify the local plants and animals. The second was to ensure the

health of the colonists. The third, often overlooked, section of the biology labs was where I worked.

Swiping my badge at the door, I walked through the hall to the Animal Husbandry lab. Willy was already at his console, his hair uncombed and his glasses pushed high up on his nose. "Sylvia!" Willy said, greeting me from his computer. "You're looking chipper this morning."

"It's my one hundred day anniversary on Casper." I grinned, pushing my arms through the lab coat sleeves. "I have every right to be happy."

"All that time spent in cryosleep, followed by two weeks of travel sickness and you're excited about one hundred days on Casper? Most people would be happy that they survived the trip here."

I gave a short laugh and picked up my tablet. Opening the door to the pens, I was met with the musty smell of animal and a chorus of mooing, bleating, and clucking. It was a stark contrast to the sterile halls of the biology unit, but I welcomed it. Starting my rounds, I checked in on each walled-off pen. Starting with the cows, I rubbed the snout of one of our young heifers and started collecting vitals.

When Casper was first colonized, our main priorities were to generate food and shelter. Now, most of that research was on sustainability. That's where Willy and I came in. Willy had proposed the project of growing the animals in artificial uteruses on the planet. He hoped that we could engineer some of the strongest cattle in history using samples provided by Earth until our own herd was diverse enough to take samples from them. It was less expensive than shipping a whole cow over and we expected to get more samples in the coming months as long as the current specimens were healthy. Not to mention, I think it was preferable for the cow.

We had successfully reared two cows, three sheep, and ten chickens. Our current assignment was to see how they matured on Casper. Casper Command urged our department to wait until we had a sizable herd before we started eating any animals we raised. After one hundred days of freeze-dried meats and a plant-based diet, the colonizers of Casper were prepared to do just about anything for meat. Official orders said these animals were for milk, eggs, and wool...for now.

I greeted each animal by name, made a record of their vitals, and took the samples I would need to run the daily tests. Afterward, I brushed down the cows and sheep, keeping a critical eye on their skin for any kind of rash or insects. I cared about these animals. Willy and I

had been raising them together since I arrived and they brought me a sense of peace. They were like my pets, my family on Casper. My rounds took me most of the morning, so I decided to prepare the samples for the lab before taking my lunch.

"So, riddle me this," Willy said, pointing at his computer screen as I walked back to my console. "Rumor from Colony Six is that they're going to be starting a cattle farm out there."

"Six has always been farming," I told him, labeling my samples. "Do you remember when they started passing out actual, *real* vegetables in the Commissaries? You'd swear they were giving away free credits with how many people were lining up for carrots the size of my little finger."

"Yeah, but this has been you and me from the get-go!" Willy boasted. "They should set up the farm here with you and me. They owe us that much."

"Who knows?" I grinned. "Maybe they'll send us to Colony Six and give us a big farmhouse to live in with our own—"

I cringed and tightened my grip on my pen. I exhaled slowly and blinked my eyes. There had been a sharp pain in my stomach. It felt like someone had grabbed my kidneys and tried to pull them out through my back.

"Sylvia? You OK?" Willy asked, furrowing his brow.

"Just a...weird cramp." I lied. That's not what it was. I knew this pain, but that was impossible. I swallowed. It was a spasm...a phantom pain. People would feel pain in their hands or legs even after an amputation. That's all this was. I looked up at Willy. "What do you care about where Casper sets up the farms?"

"Well, it's the principle of the thing!" Willy said. If there was one thing that could be said for Willy, it was that he knew when not to ask questions. "We started this, it should be our claim to fame. Colony Four Pride, ya know? The project was born here, it should stay here."

"Well, submit a query to Casper Command if you're really—"

The pain was worse this time, like a knife in my stomach. I cried sharply and gripped my stomach. I was wrong. This wasn't phantom pain.

"What's going on?" Willy jumped up from his desk.

"It's...I'm fine."

"Bullshit! We need to get you to Medical."

"No." I whimpered through the pain. "I think I need to go home."

"Are you sure?"

"Just my stomach. I just a day to—"

"Sure, sure," Willy nodded. "I can handle the lab tests today."

"Thanks, Willy," I told him, gritting my teeth. "I promise I'll stay late tomorrow."

If Willy said anything after that point, I didn't hear it. I tore my lab coat off and dropped it by the door. My mind was racing and I could feel my heart beating as I sprinted outside. Once I got outside of the building, Casper was unbearable. The sounds I had heard earlier today were overwhelming now. The river was deafening and the sunlight hurt my eyes. My breathing was heavy as another sharp pain cut through my stomach.

I had to get away. I rushed to the outer limits of the colony and into the forest. There were a number of rules about individuals leaving the Colony unsupervised, but it was more to keep people from wandering off and getting lost. I wanted to get lost. I wanted to get away from as many people as possible.

Staggering through the woods, I felt another sharp pain in my back. I dropped to my knees and felt my shoulders snap inwards. I grit my teeth and my jaw reshaped, jutting outward and filling the empty spaces with sharp teeth. My hands were on fire, the bones snapping and reshaping as dark claws grew from under my fingernails.

I looked up. Both of Casper's moons were in the sky. One of them was full and round. It wasn't as bright as the sun, but I could still make out the complete shape of it. *No*, I thought. *No, no, no...*

One hundred days without incident. I thought I had escaped it on Casper. I realized I was wrong as the world turned dark.