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Sizzle

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This is New Earth. Our new home, we had landed here going on four years now. After setting up our colony and living accommodations. There were a couple of teams that ventured out beyond our base camp. They found an ocean just south of our colony, about an hour's walk away, which we knew already existed, but it was good for them to check it out before they allowed the rest of us to go there. The water was a light purple colour and tasted funny but was all non-toxic and human friendly. Which is always a plus.

In the same direction of the ocean, we took over the fields in between. There is a mixture of our crops and the crops that are indigenous to this planet which are human friendly. In retrospect this planet is perfect for second Earth. The surrounding area, East, West and North of our colony have been mapped out. Drones have been sent to check on native life, it seems we have this planet all to ourselves. There is no humanoid or animal life in the surrounding area. No alien life forms that are surprised by unwanted guests. For us, no one is complaining about that. In all honesty we are really looking to make friends, and we are grateful that we have this place to ourselves. This planet had three massive oceans, mountains, and forest area. As well as two suns and a large moon.

The mission is to terraform this planet and make it habitable for human life. When we got here it was already a welcoming place for humans. No terraforming is needed aside from setting up housing and some farming for us. Our crops have taken to the soil here. In fact, we are yielding better crops here than we did back on Earth. Our crops are 50% bigger, they grow faster,

and they have more vitamins packed in every bite. They look and taste better. It was a welcome surprise. We came with 600 people of those, there were only 20 couples, no children, no pets. Since we have landed, we have 150 couples and 30 babies and toddlers. These children are never going to set foot on Earth. This is the only life they are going to know, how odd is that?

Today there is a small group of us who are defying the higher ups and have decided to check out the fields north of us. We left the safety of our compound, walked around the outside walls to the north side. Before us is a small, short field of twenty feet of high grass and beyond that our jaws drop. We could see the forest from inside our walls but standing in front of the north forest is daunting. We are like insects! The trees reach up into the sky beyond the clouds. The tree trunks are massive. They remind me of how long a city block is back home. The smaller ones are like one city block length the others, are similar to five city blocks tucked together. These are just trees; I must remind myself. They are so massive! Swallowing hard, I am reminded that this is a foreign planet. This planet doesn't belong to us. We still don't know enough about this place. Yet here we call this place home. It feels like giants should be living here. Maybe giants did live here. If giants had lived here at one time, where did they go? Did they all just die of natural causes? Or did someone or something kill them? What could kill a giant?

I feel so humble. Maybe this isn't a good idea. Venturing out without approval.

"Oh my god! Look at this place!" John shouted. "Come on guys we have to check this forest out!" John is the one who started this quest of ours. Wanting to see what was beyond the walls of our home.

"Do you think this is a good idea?" Mel, our biochemist paused with her head tilted back looking up at the trees and the sky.

“I thought this was a mountain out here,” Julia laughed. “How are these trees so big?”

John is a member of our security team; Mel is a chef and John’s partner. John grabbed Mel’s hand and tugged her along with him as he headed through the tall grass.

“Come on this is our adventure. What could possibly go wrong?” John was excited. “We are like explorers!”

“Well maybe,” Chris hesitated. “I don’t know. Maybe Mel is right. We should go back and go through the proper channels before doing this.”

“Come on guys we are already out here. If we go back now, they are going to find out that we came this far. Let’s face it, we are already in trouble. Why not go back and face the music but have some knowledge and trinkets from our find? We will be heroes!”

“Well, I don’t know about being heroes, but you might have a point. They might go a little easier on us if we have something tangible to show them.” Chris frowned.

“Okay let’s quit debating it and move our asses. We only have a few hours.” Julia reminded us.

The reminder got us moving forward. We crossed through the tall grass; it looked much like the other field that we had already harvested and took over. We began walking in single file. John, Mel, Julia, myself and Chris bringing up the rear. We reached the forest and found a path. It looked like a path, but it probably wasn’t really a path. It was a clearing wide enough for us to walk on without any issues. We walked for an hour and half and were surrounded by these massive trees. The suns were shining through the trees but there was definitely not as much light as I would have liked. Shadows were everywhere. It felt unnatural and alien, reminding me very much I was not on Earth. I would never set foot back on Earth, that was part of the initiation fee for this mission. It was a one-way trip.

Mel slows down and announces that she's taking a break. We all stop with her and take the opportunity to take a closer look at the place. Chris and Julia are taking samples of soil and tree bark.

There is this uneasy silence. It's not like Earth with bugs, birds and the wind making noise in the woods. Here it's an uncomfortable silence. I can hear my friends breathing. They don't even have to be standing next to me, and I can still hear them breathing.

"Hey guys! Come look at this!" John is calling us over to him.

"What is it?" Mel was the first one to get a closer look at it.

"I don't know. Looks kind of like a flower of some sort." Julia was standing next to them.

Chris and I came up behind them and peered at it, over their shoulders.

It looked like a massive sunflower. The petals were bright green and the middle of it looked shining like liquid silver.

"We should probably head back," Chris interrupted everyone's thoughts. "Just leave it don't touch it."

Julia bent over and pulled it out of the ground. "Don't be silly this is beautiful. We need to show the others!"

Mel nodded, "Hey look there's more!"

"Maybe we should just leave them." Chris suggested as he started backing away. "Come on let's head back before it gets dark. I think we can all agree we don't want to be out here after the suns go down."

"Yeah, Chris is right." John agreed.

Mel grabbed three of those flowers and the two girls followed John as he led the way back.

We had been walking and following the path for two hours but didn't look like we had gotten anywhere. We should have cleared the trees by now. I was beginning to feel a little apprehensive.

John stopped and was checking his watch. "This doesn't make any sense."

"What is it?" Mel asked.

Chris went over and checked his watch. "What?" Chris looked up at the trees and turned around 360 looking at the place. "Is there something wrong with your watch?"

"No." John tapped a finger on it.

"Are you sure those readings are right?"

"That's what it says."

"What is it?" Julia asked.

"Well according to John's watch we've been walking for two hours north. So, we are not 90 minutes into this forest, but we are actually three and a half hours north of our compound."

"What? That can't be right!" Mel looked at the watch then at them. "We turned and headed back the same way we came."

"Didn't we?" Julia asked. "Well now I'm confused."

"Me too," I was sure we had turned and walked back the same way we came through.

"Not according to the map." John frowned.

"Okay so according to the map we need to go this way?" Chris pointed in the direction we had just come from.

John looked at his map and then looked at Chris. "Yes."

"Let's move it people. We are going to be walking in the dark pretty soon."

My stomach turned at the thought of it. We started walking in the direction that the map said. After twenty minutes we checked it again. We seemed to be heading in the right direction now. It was hard to believe that we had gotten turned around like that. Then again maybe not, these trees were so big, and everything looked the same.

The first sun started setting. The forest was getting a bit darker. The shadows were getting bigger, and they were feeling weird. Like they were alive. I didn't like it.

"My flower is starting to sizzle," Mel announced.

John turned and looked at it. Knocking it out of her hands, it dropped to the ground. "Just leave it." He pulled her away from the flower.

"Sizzle, sizzle. Let it fizzle, drizzle, let's hope it's not a missile." Julie whispered.

Julia tossed her down beside Mel's. We walked around them.

"It's sizzling," Mel had stopped and was staring at the flowers on the ground.

The silver liquid in the middle of the flowers was bubbling and one popped. A large red jelly bubble expelled from it and laid next to the flower. The red jelly bubble rolled a little to the left of it and was growing. It went from the size of quarter to the size of a milk crate in a matter of seconds. It grew to the size of a small freezer and stopped.

"There's something inside it," Mel gasped.

"I think we better get the hell out of here," Chris began pushing us towards the path.

"Come on move it."

"It's me," Mel gasped.

"What?" I turned back to look. I saw an impression of Mel's face pressed up against the surface of the red jelly pod. That was enough for me. I turned and was hot on Chris' heels as we

were not walking but running away from it. Whatever it was, we knew we didn't want to be a part of that.

"Wait for us!" Julia wasn't far behind us, and Mel and John were pulling up the tail end.

We kept moving, the second sun set, and it was just the moon that lit the path very dimly. It was a while before we slowed down, my lungs were burning. My legs felt like they were on fire. Chris and I were alone. We had left the other three behind. They couldn't keep up. Or they got lost. When we came out to the tall grass and our compound wall sitting there in the clearing, I felt relief. I was never so happy to see something in my life.

"Are you ok?" Chris asked.

I nodded. Looking back and thinking the same thing. I felt bad, we ran and left them behind, but I was also very happy to see home.

"Let's get back and report this. Then they can organize a search party to go find them." Chris reached for my hand and tugged me along.

We went inside and two hours later, after we explained what we had done. Sitting in the hallway next to Chris. He looked defeated. I had heard he got demoted and was now assigned to maintenance. I got yelled at and was told if they could send me back to Earth, they would but since that wasn't an option I would be sitting in the filing clerk's office until my last dying breath. If I ever thought I would be leaving the compound again, I could just let that thought go.

While sitting there, Mel, Julia and John came in. Walking past us, "Thanks for waiting," John glared in our direction.

I felt like an ass. We could have waited. Mel said nothing as all three sat across from us.

"Glad to see you three back," Chris gave a half-hearted smile.

"Go to hell," Julia growled.

Watching them, I noticed that there was something off. Couldn't place my finger on it, but there was something wrong with this.

"What happened to the flowers?" I had asked.

"Nothing." Julia snipped.

"I don't know," John frowned. "We just booked it out of there. You two just happened to be a little faster than us."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be." John frowned, staring at his hands.

"Mel are you okay?" Chris asked.

Mel looked up at us, her clear blue eyes turned a pinkish colour as she smiled and nodded slowly.

"Your eyes, what's wrong with them?" Chris asked.

Julia and John turned and looked at Mel.

"Mel?" John called her name.

"I'm fine," Mel smiled.

That wasn't Mel's smile! I knew right then and there that wasn't Mel. Wasn't sure if John and Julia were themselves but that definitely wasn't Mel.