

Chapter 01 - Sunrise Purple

A twist of past brought back from recess in brutal clarity, the stain on a book's pages seeping through to the end. A gentle breeze brushed across Rayne's face. Light cracked her eyelids, peeling them away from the wide black of her pupils. The white ceiling above rippled, the smoke of dreams echoing like an incessant shade. It wasn't a concoction of fiction, but memory that returned of late, more vivid than she thought possible. Could such a recapitulation really just be an unconscious show put on by her mind, or was there something more? They were dead after all, both her mother and younger brother fifteen long cycles prior. Wack the Raptors and their firebombs. Rayne hoped it wouldn't happen a fourth time. Perhaps she'd go insane.

She blinked back the morning shine through dreary eyes, pushing herself up into a slump. Her head seemed to reverberate, as if there'd been a bolt of lightning bouncing around in her head. She shoved off her blankets, kicking the thick folds free of her body and legs. She yawned, so wide that the corners of her lips felt they were about to tear. A gummy taste held in her mouth. What a scum morning. Rayne needed to get out, go on a run or she'd lay back again till noon.

Rayne searched her room, hoping to find something which would invigorate her and bring her out of her passive daze. The morning filtered through the blinds in stripes over the yellow wash of her bedding. Nearly everything in the room was the same faded buttercup, a surplus set of furniture shipped from SuperTerra that Rayne hadn't bothered to update along with the paint that had come with it. Rayne didn't particularly like the color, it was just all that was available on arrival and everything else had a several short cycle wait. She could have changed it later, but to what? The circular turning of the ceiling fan caught Rayne's attention.

The blades whisked the air, seemingly in slow motion when you followed one on its incessant path. Rayne felt bored staring up at it, and thereby motivated to do something else.

Something irritated the corner of her eye, a slow flashing light. Rayne yawned a second time and reached to grab a hair band off the nightstand. After finding one and wrestling down her thick curls, she sighed and took a peek at what she knew lay nearby. Her transmitter blinked indicating a message. She reached for the small cylindrical device before pausing and withdrawing her hand. Whatever it was could wait.

The wood floor was cold on Rayne's feet. She pushed herself up, swaying between heel and toe before finally finding balance. A mirror leaned against the wall a few paces away. Rayne plodded in front, assessing herself as objectively as she could. If she was going on a run, her bra was too loose and she needed shorts at the least. A shirt? It's not like she'd be running in to too many people and the sun on her skin would be pleasant. Dark stains under her eyes pulled her closer to the mirror. They were deep pockets, purple, as if she'd hardly slept. A clump of hair had also escaped, drifting around over her right ear in a frazzle. Again, the hope was no one would see her.

Rayne turned to her dresser, unable to tell for a second which drawers contained the appropriate wear. She froze as she felt the two bead eyes watching her. Fluffy sat on top the furniture, his once soft white fur stained to the color of soot. Part of its smile had been undone and hung loose off of its rounded nose. Rayne picked up the cow, turning it over in her hands and brushing its fur lightly with a thumb. The color of smoke went to the root and couldn't be cleaned by any method they'd tried.

After a moment's thought, she strode to her closet and swung open the door. She bent over and stuffed Fluffy behind her shoes out of sight.

Rayne had decided to go without a shirt after all. The hot sun and steady breeze of ST-467 lost all sense of freedom under superfluous garments. Plus again, who would see her on a near empty planet like this one. At least no one till the grouping several kilometers off. Perhaps she'd turn before chancing the others to be late risers.

Rayne paused at the top of the steps, instinctively glancing down at the kitchen timeboard. Nine twenty two. Her father wasn't there when she crossed the downstairs. It was still before ten so it wasn't a surprise he wasn't yet awake. Rayne found the spiced squash bread on the counter she'd baked a few days prior and siphoned a piece. She took a bite and wrapped the rest of the slice in paper for later. She took a bottle off the back of the counter and drained half of it, breathing again only after. Blinking, she slipped the rest of the container into the cooler. At the front door, she paused for several moments, breathing lumps of water to the bottom of her throat. Finally, she braced herself for the heat and spun the knob, squinting as hot air washed across her body. The air crackled in the heat and Rayne's hair straightened and fried. A dirt path encrusted in clay led off the porch to the main road, the only road.

ST-467 was a SuperTerra product, a planet molded for crop proliferation and agricultural mass production. The sky was brisk and cloudless, a dome of unstained purple spread from the system's blazing red sun. Things were vivid, basked in a constant crimson glow that dissipated only at night. A tangle of dull yellow held the horizon, weed grass. The plant covered most the planet by this time: an oxygenator, dirt fertilizer, and a foreign ecosystem destroyer when the need arose. Right off the road were the crops, green and varied to an excess greater than Rayne knew. Cabbage, flax, strawberries, modified sugarcane from which certain organic materials were extracted. Small boxlike robots roamed the fields, their solar cell backs glimmering fiercely. Their work was incessant as the constant hum of their tracks grinding soft over the dirt, a chorus of bustle that grew easy to ignore.

cycles ago, but still they hadn't arrived. Still, she looked at the towering pole in the distance hoping one of the transport vessels might have touched down in the night. No such luck.

Most houses Rayne passed were barren, the inhabitants not yet awake or venturesome enough to brave the heat. Miss Suzy was out though, rocking on her wood porch under a wide brimmed straw hat. She lifted a few tentative fingers as Rayne passed. Rayne waved back before looking ahead. The journey so far hadn't been tough, but the sun rising higher every step spoke of difficulty later on. Thirst had just begun to ebb on her thoughts. She needed to think about turning around before the end of the grouping.

Rayne reached a familiar villa and slowed to a stop. Low hedges overflowing with flowers and tall green stalks lined an irregular stone patio in garden. It was the prettiest arrangement on ST-467 by long. She spotted two figures working among a tall patch of pink flowers, bent in labor. One stopped and stood up, stepping to the other to say a few words. They walked out on to the patio and jogged with sharp steps to meet her. Justin.

"Eya Rayne," said the man in his thick Tangenian southern drawl. He was covered in soot and dirt that caked especially thick on his knees and elbows. Sweat had cast an awkward slant to his hair and dripped down his bright red face in pools. Rayne felt she could smell his sourness even from a few meters away. Justin was her age within a few short cycles but nearly a third meter taller. He shot her a dumb grin that she couldn't help but return. "You run that length?"

"I did," said Rayne. "You helpin your mum with flowers?"

Justin nodded, gave her an odd look, and peered up into the sky. Rayne spied a patch of unshaven hair curling from his chin that she should have long told him to get rid of. A devious glint lit up his eye. She noticed his right hand was still concealed as he stepped close. He

produced a flower, a daffodil glistening with morning dew. It seemed to glow as he held it out to her. "For you."

Rayne blinked. Justin slipped it between her hanging fingers and she gripped it. She turned it over in her hand. "Um... thank you... I've never received a-

"Ma mum said we got too many and she went to snipping them all. Thought they'd smell better, but nah, not really."

Rayne stared at the boy, his lankiness locked in a casual half lean. "Well thanks anyway," she said, spinning the stem between two fingers. When she looked up again, it was just in time to catch Justin averting his gaze. His grin was impalpable. "Hey, what are..." Rayne remembered at that point she was only in her tight running bra, the top of her chest vastly exposed. 'Mutt,' she almost shouted at the giggling man. Instead she crossed her arms over herself and shot him a glare.

"You look good," he said. "But we don't got a pool-

Rayne stepped forward and socked him in the shoulder. He stumbled back, his face in full hilarity. "You," she said, turning before she betrayed a smile.

"Hey Rayne," he said. "Rayne... Ray. Ray-bay-bay" She stood turned away, barely able to contain the inflating bubble of laughter in her gut. "You get ma message?"

"I hadn't checked it yet," she said, stifling her voice.

"Biff's throwing a party down at the grouping over. You can come in that getup cuz he does got a pool and I imagine he'd like it. Pat as well." Rayne's expression did darken at that. A few weeks ago her and Pat had kissed under the setting sun, maybe more than once.

"I'll go," said Rayne. "But I don't want any of your shenanigans tryin ta set me up with Pat. There's a difference between liking someone with and without wine."

"There'll be wine."

“That’s besides it Justin. Can you just do what I say?” He looked at her curiously. When had she gotten so worked up? Rayne took a breath and gave a weak smile. “Well, I best be off. The sun’s only gettin higher.”

“Wanna come in for strawberry lemonade?” he asked, eyebrows furrowed a little. “Seems a tad hot and dehydratin.”

“I got studies,” said Rayne. “Maybe another time.” She stepped away, trotting into a run back towards her house.

“Actually come to the party,” Justin shouted after her. “Everyone wants you there.” Rayne looked back over her shoulder at him, but he’d turned up the patio path, a mischievous smile already etched on his distant face. That mutt.

When Rayne spotted her house in the distance, she slowed to a stop. The small building wasn’t alone in its field of short grass. Another shape poked up, nothing but a dark shadow at this distance. A ship? Even Rayne had to imagine she would have seen something coming down all the way from above. She jogged closer.

It turned out it was a space vessel, but not of a like Rayne had seen in her life. The surface was gray and unreflective like chalk, a differentiation from the usual metal. Smooth curves formed the contours making it seem more like an aeroplane than a spacecraft, but the wings and tail were far too stubby. A thin black window arced across its bulbous front composed of one way material preventing even a glimpse inside. The ship was only a tad larger than Rayne’s house, extremely small for anything more than a shuttle. The giant engine on the back was telling though, its size nearly a third of the total craft. Its construction ignored everything Rayne knew about spacecraft, yet she knew it was one.

Rayne approached her own house at a walk, a feeling of uneasiness pulling at her arms and weary legs. She stumbled once over the packed clay. In the time she'd lived on ST-467, her and her father had only had a few visitors from off planet. SuperTerra representatives, tired men making their rounds. They'd land near the grouping and hang around for a few days, house hopping and telling boring tales as if they were reading them off a list.

She crept up the stairs to the porch, stopping just short of the front door. Her hand froze before the turn knob. Her father was yelling on the other side. Never had Rayne heard so much anger from him. He'd been placid after the Raptor attack and every day since. She could tell when he was sad because he wouldn't talk, just drink a beer and stare into space. Never had he taken an affront to someone.

"No! It was you!" she heard her father shout through the door. Rayne planted her ear to listen better.

"Calm down," said another voice, familiar but unplaceable. "What I've done... it doesn't change the current situation. To be honest, I don't have a choice whether I'm here or not. They were priority orders." It wasn't someone from ST-467. Who was talking? It was beneath thin dust at the back of her mind.

"My wife... and one of my children! Do you really think that things wouldn't have been different if you never did what you did! And don't think I haven't heard about your little spree." There was a short pause before his words began again in a deeper voice. "Now you want to take her as well. It was you and that crystal that changed her, wasn't it." Was her dad talking about her? What crystal?

"Sam, these are orders that-

"Is the Navy done with simply obliterating things? It's worked in the past..." her father said, unloading cycles of pent up bitterness. It sent prickles down Rayne's spine. She'd never

heard him talk like this before, and to whom? Navy... Uncle Dan. The voice was her uncle's. Rayne couldn't stay out here any longer.

She turned the knob with her hand and pushed hard. It swung back against the inner wall with a shudder. "Stop," she cried. The words seemed to tumble out her mouth and fall flat on the living room floor. Her father snapped his head back towards her, his surprise only a small fraction of a much greater fury. He was seated on the couch, his back broad towards her, his beard a forest under two penetrating points. He blinked, and suddenly he was with her on evening walks, chatting about robots and his favorite books. A shiver ran down Rayne's back like a drop of ice water.

Her uncle shifted in his chair opposite in quick discomfort. Rayne looked to him for answers, but the man turned his gaze to the floor. He was recognizable only by a handful of poorly held features she used to know. Shaggy unkempt hair streaked with white drizzled off of his head. Pale and thin, marble eyes glistening in their sockets. Rayne had kept an image of him at the back of her mind, sealing him as a knight of gallantry and excitement. The man could have been anyone, but instead it was Uncle Dan.

Rayne didn't notice the third figure at first. It took a step forward in the silence, drawing Rayne's eyes and breath into its darkness. Whoever or whatever it was, they were massive and imposing, bending slightly to fit under the three meter high ceiling. A long brown cloak concealed the figure, revealing only a glint of metal and shadow between its folds. Its deep hood shifted. "It's arrived," it spoke, the voice unnaturally deep like sandpaper over rust. "We should..."

Rayne's father stood. He stepped between her and the cloaked figure effectively quelling its movement. He turned back to her. "Why don't you take a shower and get a change of clothes Ray. Me and your uncle will finish our discussion." The tall figure went motionless,

his robe swaying loose in memory of recent steps. Rayne stood in shock for a second, her back foot still only half through the front door. A sweat drop rolled off her nose and dripped onto the ground. She was panting still, the sound of her breath all that permeated the tense silent room.

Rayne tried to catch her uncle's gaze as she trekked through the silent room, but he maintained his showdown with the floor. Almost getting hit by the magnet train earlier seemed suddenly very small.