



Not So Much a Season

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Not So Much a Season

She dreamed of winter, a cold chill on her face, snow as high as her knees. Then she dreamed of summer and spring, finally autumn.

The dreams were as useless as any fantasy on waking.

A mimicry of pine scent touched Charlotte Mark's nostrils. She sniffed, then rubbed the dream from her eyes and brought reality into focus.

Through the portal window the unchanged surface of the colony was a picture-postcard. The lawns always one inch high and no more. The artificial sun rising, as ever, above a false horizon.

Sadness, like a new gravity, pushed her down even as she pulled herself from the bed and slouched over to the couch.

How long have I been here now, she wondered? The calendar says twelve years, but how can I be certain when every day is the same

as the rest? Without a summer, spring, autumn and winter, what is a year anyway?

She knew exactly what a year meant in terms of the colony. Familiarity, duplication. Every day she took the tubes to the Weather and Atmosphere station to ensure the machines created all those familiar and duplicated days. Set a dial here and the temperature would rise, another dial and there would be rain localised to any spot she chose on the base. If she desired a mere gesture would bring winter one hour and summer the next.

And the decision was always the same.

Keep the constant, provide the optimum environment for all, no surprises.

No surprise, that wasn't life, that was nothing at all. The children here knew no season, no holiday. They would never build a snowman or feel a cold wind pinch their cheek. There were no fallen leaves for them to run through, twigs to snap beneath their feet.

Charlotte's gaze once again caught the postcard world they'd built away from the devastation of Earth.

Nothing had changed. The same from waking to sleep and back to waking again. The constant.

A heavier sadness put weight on her shoulders. What were they doing here, creating a new hope for the human race, or breeding a race that was nowhere near human anymore?

The thought, unlike any of the weather, sent a chill up her arms.

I can't live another day in this sameness knowing I'll never see another winter, never smell burning leaves again. And I won't be living if I don't do something.

But what?

The answer was in her hands and fifteen minutes away by the tubes.

Dressed, she rode those tubes to the outskirts of the grand bubble that housed the breathing lungs of the colony. There she flashed the

guards a familiar smile and they flashed their own in reply. Just like the weather it was all so predictable, unsurprising. No surprise either as she swiped her way into the control room and took her seat.

The machine blinked happily, said her name in a friendly mimic of humanity, just as it did every time she came into the room.

All so simple, the flick of a switch, a few delicate fingers crossing the screen and a season would be born. No, not so much a single season, but many, as many as she desired.

Her finger hovered over the execute button.

Am I really going to do this, she wondered?

“Take your hand away from the console, Charlotte.”

Donnie was dressed in his uniform, pale grey from head to foot, his eyes red from interrupted sleep.

“It’s three in the morning, technician, and here I am wondering who’s tampering with my

machines. Thought it was a glitch, but here you are, not a glitch at all but...what exactly do you think you're doing?"

Charlotte's kept her hand over the button. It would be so easy, just one simple motion and there, the seasons would arrive just as she'd programmed.

Just one simple motion.

Donnie had his own. He pressed his palm into the reader beside the machine and gave the override command.

"Now, explanations, technician? What is it you think you are doing here?"

Would any explanation suffice? Any reason be good enough. Maybe the truth?

"Do you remember earth?" she said.

"What? I asked for explanations, not questions."

"Earth, do you remember? How long have you been here at the colony, Donnie?"

Donnie's tired face showed confusion.

“You have gone mad, we shipped out the same time, twelve years ago.”

“And Earth?” she said.

Donnie laid a hand on her shoulder. “Are you in need of some help, Charlotte? The psych’s have some marvellous drugs that can lift any kind of—”

She brushed the hand away.

“I”m fine, better than ever,” she said. “I just realised something is all.”

“Something that brings you out to the control room in the middle of the night? Something that makes you tamper with all this expensive gear?”

A faraway look came to her eyes.

“I remember wrapping myself two layers deep, zipping up my boots and tramping through the snow. I remember my nose red from the wind.” She looked Donnie in the eyes. “Remember Earth, remember the seasons, Donnie, how it used to be?”

"I remember the pollution, being hungry and not knowing if we were going to blow each other up one day from the next. What are you driving at here, Charlotte?"

"We don't have that anymore. Sure we don't go hungry, there's no fighting, but look what we gave up to come here. We're not living, Donnie, not really."

He shook his head in annoyance. "We're alive, future generations will live because of what we do here. I don't know what it is you're suggesting, but we can't go back to how it used to be."

She stood up, charged by thoughts and possibilities.

"We can. Summer, spring, autumn, winter, we can do it just like that!"

"You are crazy. Do you know what would happen to the crops if we had even one week of cold? This machines aren't toys to be used for fun. The delicate balance must be kept if we're all to survive."

“Survive? Is that all we have to look forward to, just surviving? That’s not enough.”

“It will have to do. Step away from the console. I’m going to recommend you take some medical leave once this is done with.”

“No,” she said.

“You don’t have a choice, Technician.”

“I thought that way once, but we do, Donnie, we really do,” she said.

Donnie shook his head.

“Your delusional, Technician. I’ve already signalled for security. They’ll be here within the minute. Stand up.”

Was it over just like that? Just another dream of the seasons cut short? Another fantasy destroyed by reality?

That terrible gravity she’d felt upon waking returned. She carried disappointment and Donnie’s words upon shoulders that weren’t capable of holding such a weight.

What if he was right? What if she destroyed everything they had worked for? Could she really trade a brief season for the destruction of the colony? A moment of unknown weather for the seasonless seasons to come?

A moment.

That's all she wanted for herself, for those out there on the unchanged surface of the colony. Not a week, or a month, but one morning or evening to feel again the surprise of the weather. The joy of cold or heat and not knowing which might come.

A moment.

One morning or evening when the world they had built was not the same. Not enough to destroy the crops and everything they had built, but enough to feel human again.

Charlotte glanced toward the door.

The lights above the control panel were soft amber in colour. Door closed, but not the fierce red of locked.

Charlotte felt gravity lighten, her lips pulled into a smile. She bolted toward the door.

"Now what in hell do you think you're doing?" Donnie said.

Charlotte pulled the panel at the side of the door and reached inside. A quick yank and the door controls came out in her hand. There was a small beep and the door locked with a loud thunk.

"Time," she said. "I'm giving us the time we need.'

Donnie sighed.

"You know you'll be fired for this, don't you? Not just fired, they'll hold you indefinitely under evaluation. Do you want that?"

Charlotte took her seat again.

"If it means we get the weather back, then yes."

"Do you really think that's going to happen, huh? You just push a few buttons and it'll be just like earth again?"

“Nothing is like earth,” Charlotte said as her hands flew across the console. “But it’ll be something, just enough of a taste for everyone to know what they’re missing.”

“What they’re missing?” Donnie said, leaning over the console. “Disease, death, starvation? Don’t you realize what we’re doing here is saving people. It’s not a prison, it’s a sanctuary. The sooner you get that through your head, the sooner you—”

“Done,” Charlotte said, leaning back in her seat, hands behind her head.

Donnie’s fingers scrambled across the console.

“What is it you’ve done, tell me, technician?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” she said.

Donnie shook his head. “There’s no way you could have bypassed all the security, no way. It’s too strong.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

“All you’re going to see is the inside of the evaluation centre once security arrives.”

Charlotte smiled, and it was the first good smile in a long while. Donnie was so easy to read. She'd known him since they'd arrived at Liberty. He was like the weather here, and that's what she'd counted on.

"Tell me what you've done?" he said, his hand on the security access panel.

"You can't turn it around now," she said. "It's too late, it's going to happen."

"What is?" he said, then swiped his hand over the ID panel. The console acknowledge his presence and unlocked.

"The seasons, everyone will experience them. Every kid out there, they're going to wake up to spring, by afternoon it'll be summer, evening the autumn leaves will fall, by the time they fall into bed it'll be winter."

Donnie reached for his lapel and pressed.

"Security, this is Administrator Cole, could you please hurry it up with that detail to the operations room?"

There was a crackle, a voice filled the air around them.

"We're outside the door now sir. Having a little trouble, it seems to be—"

"The door has been disabled this side," Donnie said, glaring at Charlotte. "You have the grips with you, use them."

The door squealed as the grips were applied. Slowly a small crack appeared. The helmeted guards showed on the opposite side.

"And that, technician, is the sound of your dismissal," Donnie said, turning as the door cracked wide.

Charlotte saw her chance.

As she stood, she reached for the execute button and brushed it lightly as though it were a gesture of farewell.

The lights fizzed out and she knew the day had begun.

In the evaluation cell there were no windows, only pale green walls and a solid grey door.

Had it worked, Charlotte wondered? Out there on the surface of Liberty were the children waking to a spring morning, or had Donnie seen through her ploy and deactivated it all. Had her trick worked, or did Donnie notice she'd used his override to usher in the seasons?

The hours passed, at least if felt that way. Nobody had come to instruct her of her fate, no guards, no victorious Donnie.

What did that mean? Had her prank, her desire gone horribly wrong? Donnie had warned of ruined crops, starvation, disease. But one day, one wonderful day of seasons all crammed together couldn't do that much damage, could it?

When the lights fizzed back to life, she knew the day had passed and night had arrived.

With the night her worry grew.

Maybe, just maybe they were all gone. The weather worse than she could have imagined or programmed? And her selfish desire had done

the opposite of everything she had meant to do. Would she die here, alone in the unchanging cell, on a planet devoid of life?

The door to the cell opened whispered open.

The man on the other side was far removed from the man she had seen only hours before.

The grey suit was gone, replaced by a thick coat, a scarf and insulated boots. His face was pinched red, his smile bright. In his hand he carried a bundle of similar clothes.

"What's going on?" Charlotte said.

Donnie stepped inside and dropped the clothes onto the bench next to her.

"Put them on," he said.

"Why?"

"Because," Donnie said, "it's cold out, and we think it might snow soon. Hurry, or you'll miss the rest of the day."

"You're serious?" Charlotte said.

"The leaves are piled high, all the kids, the adults are out. It's like a holiday. You were right, but I never said that if anyone asks."

She dressed quickly, her heart hammering in her chest.

Spring and summer were gone, but there was still winter to come.

Not so much a season, but it was better than nothing at all.

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