Alienated

Alone — but not lonely.

Three days, we've been on this planet. Over a year, Earth-time. But we don't talk about Earth-time anymore. *It weakens morale*, says Sir Overgeneral Halfish.

My morale went out the window when I found out that I was sentenced to be transported off planet.

I was never one of those little girls with rocket ships and toy telescopes. I had a hermit Barbie with a pink plastic cave in which she kept her 14 pairs of shoes and 13 ball gowns. I was never an explorer. I just wanted a quiet life with pretty things. A pink plastic cave would suit me just fine.

I killed my husband. I got off light: 5 months' transport and 20 years on the colony. More than twice as long as my marriage lasted. For eight years, I wore thousand-dollar designer dresses and three-inch heels — and silk scarves to hide the bruises on my arms.

Now look at me. Wearing a grey jumpsuit with neon-orange reflectors, digging up stunted purple fingerlings as a part of some insane terraforming project in the middle of system 5088b.

At least we're not locked up; there's no chance of escape. We have caches of dried goods and imported water tanks. We also have Sir Overgeneral Halfish, who doesn't want anyone forgetting that this is punishment.

Orbital solar mirrors were the miracle solution to the Goldilocks problem. They say this place was uninhabitable, no native plants, just desert wasteland and solar winds. Sounds like Albuquerque to me. No one cares what might have come before.

No one but me. I see them. Bright green swirls in the darkness, hovering over the orange-brown dunes. Sir Overgeneral tells me not to worry my pretty little head, it's just swamp gas. He doesn't believe anything's out there because he's never seen anything. They don't show up until late-shift, when we're meant to be indoors with blinds down. They gather on the outskirts of our hovel and they *watch*.

So I watch back.

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My married life taught me to avoid attracting attention. So I sit perfectly still, just the quiet sound

of home-made purple fingerling schnapps splashing into my plastic cup. My secret still is why I've been out during late-shift in the first place. There's yeast here too, not that I've told anyone. That's not the point.

The point is, reconnaissance looks the same all over the Universe. They formed an acid-green perimeter around our settlement and shimmered along the vegetable gardens and inched right up to the security blinds. Then they pulled back and melted into the wind-blasted dunes where the Overgeneral keeps telling me no life could survive.

I never saw any need to follow them. I figured I've done my bit, telling Overgeneral, *Sir, I think you'll find there was something here first*. And now they come up most every 'night'.

I didn't know they even knew I was there until Warden Lecter caught me.

I was creeping back into the compound after checking my still when she sprang out from the water tanks. She's the worst of the wardens; there's something not quite right about her. I mean, something weird beyond voluntarily relocating to a poisonous planet to bully three dozen women.

I stood tall, hoping she couldn't hear my heart thudding.

"You should be in your hut," she growled.

"Yes, ma'am," I said and turned to go. She put a heavy hand on my shoulder to stop me.

I flinched and held my hands up. When she laughed, I knew I was in trouble. Just then, the green mist shimmered around the edges of the compound.

"Shoulda thought about that before you went sneaking." She grinned.

The green mist swirled up behind her. I twisted and bolted straight to my hut, slamming the door behind me. The only sound was my pounding heart.

Once I caught my breath, I cracked the door open. There was no sign of Lecter.

The green mist flared and then faded into the hills. I went to bed and stared at the ceiling until first bell.

The compound was in an uproar. Warden Lecter disappeared without a trace, they said. I didn't say a word. A week later, they found her bones behind the water tanks. Not an ounce of flesh to be found, just her bones, clean as a school experiment.

I stayed inside during late-shift after that. Forget the still, my tastes of freedom. I buckled down to do my time. But the next time Sir Overgeneral Halfish sneered at me as worthless, I started thinking about that night again.

I mean, Lecter must have run when I started running, right? Even if just to catch me. So how come I got away and she didn't? Other than they were already used to me, sitting outside, sharing the stars.

Or maybe they just don't like the smell of my schnapps, hell if I know. But it seems like they would be good friends to keep. Shimmery scary friends that eat people, sure. But then, I'm not exactly spoilt for choice.

So now I set my lawn chair out each late-shift, when I know everyone else is safely asleep, and I watch. The mists know I'm here. They whirlpool around my lawn chair. I figure we have a truce, of sorts. And if that truce doesn't extend to the others, well, that's not my problem.

The purple fingerlings are growing fine and the water tanks are hooked up with enough water to keep 50 of us going for a decade. There's no one else due here for a while, just us and the mists. I'm happy to lure the Overgeneral out of his hut if that'll keep them happy, maybe the rest, too.

Maybe this could be paradise after all. □

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