

That night, the sky was alive with colour.

The sun was just beginning to dip below the skyline. Its halo of warm, orange light bled out into the sky. A million different shades painted the horizon; violent crimsons, soft shades of purple, and luminous yellows which cut through the sky like a knife. Each colour blended effortlessly into the next; a natural masterpiece. It reminds me of a Monet painting that I've never really seen. The darkness of the night sky lingers above me – ominous, looming – but for now, the sun is still out and I feel alive. I can almost feel the chill of the night air around me, raising goose bumps on my bare arms. I stretch them out in front of me, reaching toward the horizon. With slow, deliberate movements, I trace the outline of the sun with my fingertips, wishing for its warmth to kiss my pallid skin. Suddenly, the scene before me becomes distorted; the landscape begins to blur and ripple into a series of ever-increasing circles, radiating out from my finger. I panic, pulling my arms back to my chest, but the damage is already done. The colours become muted, fading and fading until I'm sat alone in the dark. My chest heaves as I sob silently into the darkness.

"Oh honey, what's the matter? Which simulation were you in?" A voice breaks my reverie. I look up and notice my Guardian looking at me from the doorway.

"The sunset," I murmur. "I didn't know you were watching." I don't look at her when I speak. She laughs in the way you would laugh at a joke – not cruelly, but it feels patronising.

"You know we're always watching," She begins fussing with my IV line. "We don't mind you using the simulations, but you need to learn how to stop fidgeting." I remain silent as she pushes me back down on the bed. "Here, put this on for now," She presses a button on the panel beside my bed. "Maybe it will help you sleep."

"Hello, and welcome to the London branch of HiveTek!" The woman beams at me from each wall of my room. She leads the camera down a maze of clinical looking hallways, cooing at babies trapped behind glass walls. One of those could be mine. The tour ends in a room with a podium, which the woman hops up onto to continue her speech. "In the past, people were faced with a terrifying decision: all by themselves, they had to select the best candidate to give them healthy children." She pouted. "The fact is that most people simply were not capable of making a positive contribution to the gene pool of the next generation," Her tone was laced with faux regret. "Because of this, babies would be born with horrible diseases, and grow up to be unsuccessful." I don't know a lot about what it means to be successful out there, but I can't help feeling jarred by the sentiment.

"Thanks to HiveTek, genetic diseases have almost been eradicated, and sterilization has set them free!" The film cuts to footage of people outside, laughing in the streets or hard at work behind a desk. The similarities in their faces unsettle me; it's like they're all different versions of the same person.

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They call me a "Queen". If I didn't know any better, I would be flattered. As it stands, my purpose in life is to reproduce over and over again until I am no longer able. I don't know what happens after that.

My understanding of the world is based upon this room; I have never seen a real sunset, an ocean or a mountain. The only person I have real contact with is my Guardian. She is nurturing and compassionate, but reluctant to share anything with me. As for entertainment, we have access to a set of different 'simulations' – immersive scenes which appear on all four walls of the room. The sunset had always been my favourite. Once I retire, I'd very much like to see one out there.

We aren't kept completely in the dark; it's very important that Queens understand the way the outside world works. During the pre-producing stage of our lives, each Queen undergoes intellectual assessment; I think of it as a form of quality control. In order to keep our brains stimulated, HiveTek provides a database of select information, available for use to peruse at our leisure; that's how I know about Monet. Other than art, the database has information about different countries, animals, jobs, and – most importantly – history.

In times gone by, anyone could produce a baby. There was no selection process, no screenings –you could just pick out a partner of your choosing and make a baby together. It seems absurd now.

As a result of this free-for-all, disease was rampant. Eventually, technology progressed to the point where scientists began to talk about getting rid of these diseases – about ‘fixing’ babies before they were even born. As we now know, however, people cannot be trusted to make these sorts of decisions for themselves. People rejected these treatments, preferring to leave it up to fate, and as a consequence, children would be born with entirely avoidable, debilitating disorders.

Soon after this, the first Queens were chosen; selected for their superior genetic makeup. It was only meant to be a trial, but within ten years, a HiveTek centre was founded in every major city. New babies take one of two paths; they are either sterilised and sent out to a hopeful family, or they are chosen as reproductive stock: the girls will go on to become Queens, and the boys become Drones. I have never met a Drone – they are all kept in a separate facility, and all impregnation is artificial –but from what I’ve heard, us Queens have it lucky.

The most successful Queens can produce as many as twenty harvestable children over their reproductive careers. I’m hopeful that I will be considered one of the “most successful Queens” one day. I’m close to producing my next baby; there’s only a week or two left now. Usually, the harvest doesn’t bother me; it’s uncomfortable, but I’m used to it by now. This time, though, I’m apprehensive. Something went horribly wrong during my last production cycle. I produced an abomination. I vividly remember the terror of that day; I remember recoiling in horror when I heard their assessment: “Left limb, 6 digits”. I don’t like to think about it.

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That night, I wake in a cold sweat. My abdomen throbs with pain and I know that the time has come. I hit the button on my bedside table, and within 30 seconds a team of midwives enter the room and sweep me away to the production ward. My Guardian catches up with us just as they’re about to begin extraction. She smiles down at me. “Everything’s gonna be fine, honey.” I smile back as I drift into sleep.

Floating in and out of consciousness, I hear my Guardian’s voice in the background. She seems angry, which unsettles me; it’s not an emotion I’ve heard her express before. I fight against the fading sedative and heave myself into a sitting position, trying to assess the situation. Through the fog of anaesthetic, I see the baby in a cot at the end of my bed, ready to be shipped. I smile with relief, happy in the knowledge that the abomination I produced during my last cycle was just a fluke. Usually, Queens are only woken once the baby has been shipped, and being awake at this point in the procedure is a rarity. The midwives are busy talking to my Guardian in hushed voices, and I take the opportunity to sate my curiosity.

Gingerly, I prop myself up and peer into the crib. The baby is much smaller than I had imagined; a delicate, fragile creature. I reach into the cot, and warily brush my fingers across its skin. The baby smiles, and I feel a pang of emotion that I don’t understand. My heart thuds against my chest, and tears begin to fill my eyes as I watch it – *him* – open his tiny mouth and cry. A primal force ignites inside me, and I instinctively try to take the baby into my arms. *My baby.*

“She’s awake!” One of the midwives exclaims. I flinch, but can’t take my eyes off of him. “Ma’am, you need to lay back down. This one’s no good.” The midwife gestures toward my little boy as she speaks. “No good? He’s perfect.” I spit back with animalistic ferocity. The assistant rolls her eyes and walks over to me. She grabs his arm and holds it up to me.

“6 digits, see? Just like last time.”

I look at his little hand and notice that he has six fingers.

“That’s what six digits means?” It suddenly clicks in my head. “There’s nothing wrong with him! He’s fine!” I shout. The assistant doesn’t say anything and scoops my baby up from the cot. She walks toward the door and turns to the midwife.

“She’s not producing properly anymore. I think it’s time.”

“Where are you taking him?” I begin to panic, scrabbling to stand up. “What are you going to do to him?” I sob, fighting against the team of assistants trying to push me back down onto the bed.

“THAT’S MY BABY!” I scream, watching helplessly as the female assistant carries him out of the room. I turn to my Guardian now. “Where is she taking him? What’s going to happen to him?” I plead. Her eyes are glassy with tears.

“I’m sorry sweetheart,” She murmurs. “It’s going to be okay. You’re both going to be okay.”

Methodically, she fluffs up my pillows and lays me down, then changes the bag connected to my IV. A strange, cloudy fluid starts rushing into my veins.

“What’s... happening? Where... where is he?” My eyelids grow heavy.

“I’m sorry.” She repeats, stroking my forehead. I sink into the bed, unable to support my own weight. A wave of darkness rolls over me. Somewhere in the distance, my baby screams.