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The Colony of Shadows

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Introduction

In the final years of Earth's battered glory, the world as it was known ended not with fire, but with water and the relentless erosion of hope. Ice caps bled into swelling seas, forests wilted into memories, and the heavy air tasted always of salt and loss. Survival became an act of rebellion, and trust an endangered currency. Humanity's remaining pockets clung to what land was left, islands and archipelagos spared by the tides—until even these threatened to surrender to the waves.

I am Mira, a daughter of the ruins, shaped by the storms that took my family and driven by a will to endure, no matter what the world took from me. I remember the journey here, to the archipelago whispered about in survivor tales—where it was said a final colony held ground, governed by order, safety, and the fragile promise of a future. Each face aboard our vessel, gray with exhaustion but lit with desperate hope, reflected the same question: What measure of humanity could we preserve, or must we sacrifice, to endure?

Our arrival was a waking from one nightmare into another. The colony sprawled against jagged cliffs, protected by seawalls and discipline, shrouded in a mantle of secrecy. The leaders were revered, yet never seen at ease; rules were many, kindness rationed. I soon felt the shadow of something deeper behind their practiced smiles, a memory of old guilt or an unspoken threat. Still, there was food, shelter, and electricity bought at the price of obedience—a bargain too valuable to refuse for those with little left to lose.

But peace in a dying world is built of illusions. Even as I tried to fit into the rhythm of work and survival, unanswered questions gnawed at me. Why did no one speak of what lay beyond the boundaries? What lay buried in the colony's past, hinted at by hurried conversations in dim-lit corridors? Shadows moved at the corners of night, and more than one set of eyes watched with interest as I tried to find my place.

Here, on these haunted shores, I was granted neither rest nor certainty. Every new day invited a fresh test of resolve and judgment—about who to trust, how much to risk, and what kind of future I might help shape. Yet in my heart flickered the same stubborn fire that had carried me through the storms: a refusal to accept silence where truth was needed, and to believe in the possibility of a better tomorrow, no matter how shrouded in darkness it might seem.

This is the story of what I found in the Colony of Shadows, and what I lost. It is a story of resistance, of secrets unearthed and allegiances forged, of the last colony on Earth and the truth that would either save it or doom us all.

CHAPTER ONE: Shores of Ash and Salt

The groan of the repurposed cargo freighter, the *Vagabond*, had been the soundtrack to my life for the better part of a year. Now, as the engines finally sputtered into a near-silent thrum, a new sound emerged: the rhythmic slap of water against a hull, a sign that our journey was finally, impossibly, over. Through the salt-stained viewport, a jagged silhouette rose from the perpetually churning grey ocean. It was an archipelago, not a verdant paradise, but a collection of dark, volcanic islands, their peaks often shrouded in a low, persistent mist. This was the promised land, or what was left of it.

The air, even through the thick metal and reinforced glass, felt different. Less acrid, less the taste of decay that had permeated the coastal ruins we'd left behind. Here, there was a faint, metallic tang, almost like ozone, mixed with the ever-present briny scent of the sea. Hope, a fragile and easily extinguished flame, flickered anew in the cramped holds of the *Vagabond*. Around me, the other passengers, a motley collection of weathered faces and guarded eyes, stirred. Each one carried their own story of loss and an equal measure of desperate resilience.

A low, guttural blast from the ship's horn pierced the silence, a signal to whatever lay beyond the fog. For a long moment, nothing happened. Only the constant sway of the ship, the gentle creak of stressed metal, and the anxious shifting of bodies. Then, a pinprick of light appeared in the distance, growing steadily larger, resolve in its beam. It was a patrol craft, sleek and fast, cutting through the swells with surprising ease. Its hull bore no distinguishing marks, only a dull, utilitarian grey.

As the patrol craft drew closer, its powerful searchlights swept across our deck, lingering on each face, assessing, judging. I instinctively pulled my worn canvas bag tighter against my chest, feeling the reassuring weight of the few possessions I had salvaged from my old life. A faded photograph of my family, a small, intricate carving my mother had made, and a multi-tool that had seen more use than most people had years. These were my anchors in a world that had tried its best to cut me loose.

A figure emerged from the patrol craft, a woman in a severe, dark uniform, her face etched with a kind of weary authority. Her voice, amplified by a crackling speaker, cut through the sea spray. "State your vessel and purpose."

Our captain, a grizzled old man named Silas who had navigated us through storms both literal and metaphorical, stepped forward. "The *Vagabond*, carrying refugees from the mainland. Requesting entry to the Colony of Shadows." His voice was hoarse, but steady, a testament to his own long-held hope.

The woman in uniform paused, her gaze sweeping over us again, unhurried and unwavering. "Entry is not guaranteed. Prepare for inspection. Any attempts to resist will be met with force." The words were delivered without emotion, a stark reminder that even here, at the supposed haven, a new set of rules applied. My flickering flame of hope trembled.

The inspection was thorough, bordering on intrusive. A team of similarly unsmiling individuals boarded the *Vagabond*, their movements precise and efficient. They moved through the ship like shadows themselves, examining every nook and cranny, cataloging our meager belongings, and questioning each of us with an unsettling detachment. They seemed less interested in *what* we carried and more in *who* we were, though they gave no indication of what criteria they used for judgment.

When they finally got to me, my heart thumped a nervous rhythm against my ribs. I met the inspector's gaze directly, trying to project a calm I didn't entirely feel. He was a man with a sharp nose and eyes that missed nothing, his uniform crisp and uncreased despite the journey. He rummaged through my bag, his movements surprisingly gentle for such a stern demeanor, until he found the photograph.

He held it up, his gaze lingering on the faded faces of my parents and younger sister. "Family?" he asked, his voice low, almost an afterthought.

"Yes," I replied, my throat tight. "Lost in the floods." The words, though years old, still carried the sting of fresh wounds.

He simply nodded, a flicker of something in his eyes, perhaps understanding, perhaps just a practiced response. He returned the photograph, then examined the carving, turning it over in his calloused fingers. "What is this?"

"My mother's," I explained. "She was a carver. Said it was a symbol of resilience, like a tree growing through stone." It sounded a little foolish now, a remnant of a more innocent time.

He handed it back, his expression unreadable. "Welcome to the Colony of Shadows," he finally said, his voice devoid of warmth or enthusiasm, but equally devoid of animosity. It was simply a statement of fact, a door opening slightly, offering no guarantees of what lay beyond.

The *Vagabond* was guided by the patrol craft towards a massive, fortified harbor. High walls of dark, polished rock rose from the turbulent sea, protecting a sprawling settlement built into the cliffs. It wasn't the sparkling beacon of civilization I might have dreamed of, but a utilitarian fortress, designed for survival, not comfort. Even from a distance, I could see the strict geometry of its structures, the careful placement

of its floodlights, and the almost sterile cleanliness of its visible areas.

As we neared the entrance, a colossal gate of reinforced metal slowly began to retract, groaning under its own immense weight. Beyond it, the harbor was a hive of activity, though eerily silent compared to the bustling ports of the old world. Small, sleek vessels moved with purpose, their engines barely audible. Figures in uniforms similar to the inspectors moved along the docks, their movements efficient and unhurried. No shouts, no laughter, no casual conversations. Just work.

The *Vagabond* eased into a designated docking bay, a vast cavern carved into the rock face. The air here was cooler, fresher, and carried the faint scent of something industrial, like freshly cut metal and ozone. Ramps lowered, and we were directed off the ship, herded into a large, brightly lit processing area.

Here, the atmosphere was even more regimented. We were lined up, given basic medical scans, and issued temporary identification bracelets. The instructions were concise, delivered by another uniformed individual with a voice that brooked no argument. "You will be assigned temporary quarters. Food will be provided. You are expected to follow all colony regulations. Further instructions will be given at the welcome ceremony tomorrow morning."

No welcoming smiles, no comforting words. Just rules and expectations. It was a stark contrast to the desperation and chaos we had left behind, but also a new kind of confinement. I looked around at the faces of my fellow travelers. Some looked relieved, the sheer safety of it a balm to their weary souls. Others, like me, had a subtle glint of apprehension in their eyes. We had found refuge, yes, but at what cost?

We were led through a series of antiseptic corridors, their walls smooth and unadorned. The lighting was even and pervasive, leaving no shadows. It was efficient, functional, but also strangely unnerving. The absence of personal touches, of the small imperfections that made a place feel lived-in, gave the colony a cold, almost impersonal air. It felt less like a home and more like a carefully maintained machine.

Our temporary quarters were small, spartan rooms with bunk beds and a single shared washroom. My assigned bunk was on the bottom, the thin mattress surprisingly comfortable after months of sleeping on hard decks. I set my bag down, carefully placing the photograph and carving on the small, built-in shelf beside the bunk. They felt like tiny beacons of defiance against the stark efficiency of my new surroundings.

The other occupants of the room, two women and a man, acknowledged me with brief, tired nods. No introductions, no small talk. The unspoken rule seemed to be: conserve energy, minimize interaction. We were all survivors, each carrying our own burdens, and perhaps the sheer weight of past trauma made casual conversation a luxury we couldn't yet afford.

Later, as a bland but nourishing meal was served in a communal dining hall, I observed the other colonists. They moved with a quiet efficiency, their expressions mostly neutral. There was a sense of order, a collective discipline that was both impressive and a little unsettling. No one raised their voice, no one hurried unnecessarily. It was as if they had all been perfectly integrated into the rhythm of the colony, their individual wills subsumed by the greater good of the settlement.

I tried to blend in, to mimic their measured movements, to keep my own expressions as neutral as possible. But beneath the surface, a restless curiosity stirred. This wasn't just a place of refuge; it was a mystery, a carefully constructed façade behind which something deeper, something less sterile, surely lay. The Colony of Shadows. The name itself was a paradox: a place of light and order, yet shrouded in an ominous descriptor. What shadows did it conceal? And what would it take to unearth them? The shore of ash and salt had brought me here, but the journey to truly understand this place had only just begun.

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