

The Harper Kind

Good morning. Please be patient while your senses adjust. You've been asleep for a while.

The voice sounded relaxed, comforting. It wrapped around Toni like a hug. She slowly opened her eyes and saw lights flickering across the smooth glass window in front of her face. The tube she was lying in slowly tilted upwards until she was nearly standing. There was a hiss and a click and the door unlatched. Tentatively she stepped forward onto metal tiled floor. She was surrounded by a dozen other tubes with people asleep inside them.

Thank you for your patience. Please proceed to the information desk in the adjoining room. A staff member will be available to answer any of your questions.

Toni shook her head, and rubbed her eyes. A light had turned on above a door across the room, so she made her way towards it. The voice continued to speak as she walked.

You have just completed a sleep cycle of one thousand years, some side effects are to be expected. Temporary memory loss, dizziness, vomiting, and lower intestinal discomfort. If you experience any of these symptoms for more than forty-eight hours, please consult the onboard priest or physician.

The door was automatic, and slid open for her to pass through, closing softly behind her. She looked left, then right, an empty hallway stretched in both directions, but to the right was a sign labeled 'Quarters, Medical, Food Court'. Her stomach growled when she read the word food and the decision was made.

We would like to congratulate you for being one of the few selected for this journey, and we hope you enjoy your stay on the Harper Kind.

Toni passed by several locked doors before stepping out into a massive room, if room was even the right word. The ceiling was nearly a hundred feet above her. Small kiosks dotted the room. Tables and chairs, benches and even a few playgrounds were scattered in small groups. Small clusters of buildings (restaurants, clothing stores, exercise gyms, arcades) were placed in strategic locations making it difficult to see the room's walls at times. In the very center, a large tube stretched from floor to ceiling, holding what Toni assumed to be elevators. The ceiling was lit by a projection, at least Toni assumed it was a projection, of a blue sky filled with clouds and birds. The projection had the sun currently rising on her left, and lights scattered in the room adjusted the lighting so that shadows and colours bathed the interior as if it were outside.

There wasn't a single person anywhere.

Toni suddenly felt the emptiness like a heavy blanket over her.

"Hello?"

Her voice sounded incredibly small in here. She began walking through the empty paths. Past burbling fountains, and open doorways playing pleasant music. Empty. She passed an ice cream parlour with buckets full of dessert ready to scoop. Empty. She picked up her pace to a light jog. Jewelry store with diamond necklaces and rings on spinning turntables. Empty. Clothing stores with blank faced mannequins, posed for optimal viewing. Empty. She came to a stop at the far end of the room. There was a gap between the stores and the wall. The wall itself was made entirely of glass, but it was pitch black on the other side. Computer terminals were spread evenly by the glass wall and she approached the nearest one. It lit up as she did, displaying a picture of her face briefly before showing a variety of buttons.

Hey there Toni. Looks like you've found the forward viewing area. No one is currently accessing the exterior floodlights, would you like to turn them on?

One of the buttons on the screen flashed, and Toni pushed it. The other side of the glass nearest where she was standing was illuminated. She saw rock and sand about twenty feet below her, and bubbles floating upward. Then a school of fish swam by, attracted to the light. It flashed on their scales as they shifted and moved before swimming back into the darkness.

There is a variety of sea life, unaffected by the events above. If you would like, the Harper Kind has several methods of attracting many species. Simply select an option. Please be aware that separate instances of this option may be canceled or put on hold if too many people are using it.

Toni ignored the voice and tried to control her breathing. Her heart was racing and she was involuntarily breathing in quickly. She tried to think back before she woke up but her memories were flickering at best. She had flashes of interviews and stacks of papers to sign. She remembered boarding a little skiff on the water. She remembered a bright light in the distance.

"Where the hell is everyone?" she wondered out loud.

It looks like you're trying to make a query. If you were, please begin with 'Harper'.

Toni frowned and tried to shake some of the fog from her brain. It didn't work.

"Harper, where is everyone?"

Hey there Toni. Currently, all passengers and crew are safely within their designated sleep pods, awaiting the end of the cycle.

"Well that's not true."

If you have found a fault in given information, please log it and our technicians will attempt to solve the problem as soon as possible.

A window popped up on screen along with a keyboard. Toni ignored it and looked around. There had to be someone else around.

"Can you tell me where I can find someone in charge?"

Certainly. You are currently on the passenger level, facing the forward viewing area. Directly to your left, you will see an information desk where an employee will be more than happy to assist you.

Toni looked over at the empty desk and tried to keep taking deep, slow breaths. This wasn't working. She walked away from the terminal and scanned the room. She spotted the elevators in the center of the room again and nodded. She tried to walk, but anxiety got the better of her and she ended up jogging most of the way.

The column was, like the room it was in, massive. Sixteen elevators around the outside of it, each one probably able to hold twenty people comfortably. There were only two buttons inside: Atrium and Conservatory. Conservatory was above Atrium so she pressed that one. The elevator doors closed and the elevator smoothly rose upwards. The first half of the column was opaque but then it suddenly switched to glass about twenty feet before passing through the ceiling and she got a good view of the floor far below her. Then it was black again outside and she had a moment where all she could see was her reflection in the glass. She'd shaved her head preemptively for the journey. She didn't have to, but she'd been told that. For whatever reason, the sleep pods had a side effect of causing something they called 'hair rot'. So she either had to endure several hours of treatment to make sure she wouldn't be subjected to that, or she could shave. She chose the latter. She inspected her head now, it looked no longer than when she'd gotten in the pod, and the image of her face reflected in the glass of the pod flickered in her head. Whatever technology the pods used, it seemed to have worked as intended. She noticed a couple laugh lines she didn't remember, but she didn't even remember getting on board the Harper Kind.

Suddenly bright light flooded the elevator. Toni squinted against the change and then gasped. The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open. A gust of cool wind blew against her immediately. She stepped out onto a steel platform in front of the doors. Past the platform, the steel floor immediately gave way to grass and dirt. The room she was standing in was even larger than the Atrium. There were a few large buildings in the distance, decorated to look like the classic red and white barns you'd see in story books. The area around the elevators right out to the large barns was just fields of grass and trees. Cows, horses, goats, and sheep grazed in every direction. Hovering automatons floated quietly near each group. Some were in the process of herding groups of the animals. As she stated she heard the quiet humming of one of them approaching her.

It was surprisingly humanoid, though it lacked legs. A basic torso and round head, as well as a pair of arms with three fingers on each hand.

Hey there Toni. Welcome to the Conservatory! Please keep in mind that while the animals may look docile, they may have unpredictable behavior, so it is recommended to keep your distance.

Toni had grown up in one of the megacities and had only visited a farm once when she was very young. She carefully stepped off the platform and onto the grass. The grass was springy, and was a far cry from the steel and concrete she was used to.

If you have any questions, or if you would like a tour, please let me know.

"You do tours?"

Of course. Please follow me.

"Should I call you Harper too?"

Of course. We're all Harper.

The automaton began floating across the field. It began speaking about the size of the conservatory but Toni was only half listening. She watched a group of goats playing in and on a squat, sturdy looking tree as the automaton spoke about how all the animals were given as much freedom as they required (within the limits of the vessel of course). She saw a long line of sheep being herded through a gate and briefly dunked in a brown liquid while Harper explained the strict vaccinations and treatments the animals were given in order to ensure their health. Harper lead Toni through a door into another expansive room. Though not nearly as large as the previous ones, this one was filled with fruit trees of all kinds. Harper explained, as they walked through the rows, that there were two orchards; one for tropical and one for temperate.

Passengers are allotted a total of ten fruits from the orchard per week to make sure we maintain our supply.

Harper moved them into the final room which was labelled 'Grains and Tubers'. Toni hadn't seen any signs of anyone during the entire walk from the elevators. Harper started explaining the intricacies of planning for fertile soil over extended periods in a sealed environment and the importance of all three rooms working together as an ecosystem but Toni interrupted,

"Harper, I need to speak with a real person."

Of course Toni. If you would like, please make your way back to the atrium. There are several service desks where a staff member is waiting to-

"Harper there's no one there," she rubbed her temples, "If there's an emergency, how can I get in contact with a crew member?"

Staff members are available around the clock for passengers. If you need something, please approach a terminal or staff member and simply ask. All passengers aboard the Harper Kind have access to the best food, medical help and-

"Gods...what about a map? Do you have a map I can look at?"

Of course. A map of the ship, along with information of the vessel, can be located on the terminal in your quarters.

Toni was walking down a long hallway. It was nearly all the way back to where she woke up, and seemed to hug the sides of the Harper Kind. There were doors spaced every six meters or so along the walls. The floors were tile, but had an almost plastic feel to them, as opposed to the metal tile elsewhere. Each door had a small plaque next to it with the name of the room's occupant (last name, then first name). She stopped in front of her own name, and the door slid open with a quiet hiss.

A set of soft lights placed around the edges of the ceiling turned on as she entered. They slowly increased in brightness until everything in the room was lit well enough to make her way around. It wasn't a very large room. It was obvious by the design that the occupants weren't intended to use these for much more than sleeping. There was a bed at the far end, built into the wall like a bunk, A desk with a built in computer terminal, and a partition near where she stood in the doorway that

concealed a small washroom.

She sat down at the desk and the terminal turned on automatically. Nothing fancy. A black screen with green text:

Welcome to the Harper Kind Entertainment and Information System (H.K.E.I.S)

- Entertainment

- Information

A microphone icon blinked at the bottom left of the screen.

"Harper, I'd like to see a map of the Harper Kind."

The terminal flickered and the text vanished. A simple map appeared slowly on screen. It was little more than a series of green lines sketched out in front of her. They showed the Atrium, and the Forward Viewing Room. Then the Passenger Quarters where she was, and finally the Passenger Storage in the rear. Everything was labelled cleanly, but it lacked any detail whatsoever. For a moment nothing else happened, then the microphone icon began blinking again. She paused.

"Crew Quarters?"

The terminal flickered and then a box with text popped up over the map:

User access denied.

The box went away after a moment and showed the map again. Toni frowned and tried again,

"Crew...Lounge?"

User access denied.

"Mangers office?"

The terminal flickered and the screen went black, then a slightly more detailed map of the Atrium began to appear. It showed the stores, restaurants, clinics, and information desks. Then a portion of the screen flashed near a corner of the map, close to the Forward Viewing Room.

A few minutes later, Toni was standing in front of the door. There was a small metal sign, the kind that could be slid in and out of place if needed, on the door that said "Richard Common". She knocked, even though she wasn't expecting an answer. She pushed on the door and to her surprise, it opened. The room on the other side was small, but nicely decorated. Several self contained environments hung from the ceiling in spherical glass bottles. They held plants, water, even small fish.

In the middle of the room was a desk which took up a lot of the space. There was a chair on either side, and a bookshelf on the back wall stuffed with all sorts of physical copies and assorted nick-knacks.