# White Sky

By Jasmine Ravel Schwam

Caroline's feet smushed against the soggy ground, coating her shoes with wet sand. Fifteen years ago, this land was a desert—cracked earth with dust storms rolling over the horizon like bruises. Now it breathed like a rainforest. The caked sand beneath the new soil was the only reminder of what had once been.

Tall, drooping trees arched over the trail, their leaves slick with condensation. Each branch caught stray aerosols drifting down from the stratosphere—Solar Radiation Modification, SRM, the project that changed everything. Scientists called it geoengineering. Locals called it the white sky.

Above them, sunlight diffused through the haze, turning the air into a soft, misty glow. The light hit the tips of Caroline and Cat's noses, highlighting freckles and sweat and the steel albedo panels rising from the forest floor. Whole regions were covered in them: polished, white, reflective. A planet-wide mirror. An emergency measure that became a lifeline.

Caroline shoved her hands into her pockets and tried to walk taller.

She was fifteen, but she refused to be treated like it. She hated it when adults spoke to her like she didn't understand SRM, climate modeling, or any of the real-world things. She read the white papers. She watched every albedo update. She could recite the aerosol-release schedules better than half the technicians.

Cat, her older cousin, twenty-seven, annoyingly calm, walked a few steps ahead.

"Slow down," Caroline snapped. "Your legs are longer."

Cat laughed. "Your attitude is longer."

Caroline kicked at a clump of moss. "I just want to see the panels up close. The actual maintenance zone. Not the kid-safe outer ring."

"You know it's restricted," Cat said.

Cat just graduated with her PhD in panel engineering and is continuing her summer internship at Pacific Albedo Authority.

They reached a clearing where a massive albedo panel towered above the canopy. Its surface shone like a frozen lake. A technician in a sunhat hovered at the base, checking gauges.

Caroline's breath caught.

"I can't believe you get to work here," she whispered.

Cat shrugged. "It's not as glamorous as it looks. Mostly cleaning dust, checking reflectors, making sure nothing grows too tall and casts shadows."

But Caroline wasn't listening. She stepped closer, eyes fixed on the shining panel.

Then, suddenly, the panel flickered.

Not visually. It was something she felt. A faint vibration under her feet. A shift in the air.

"Did you feel that?" she asked.

Cat frowned. "Feel what?"

The technician's radio crackled. He pressed it to his ear, nodded once, then jogged toward the forest, disappearing.

Caroline's heart thumped. "Something's wrong."

Cat exhaled. "Probably just a signal check."

But Caroline saw it in her eyes: uncertainty.

That night, she couldn't sleep.

The sky glowed faintly even at midnight, a soft white sheen instead of the old blackness. Caroline sat by the window, hugging her knees, watching the pale stars pulse behind the aerosol veil.

When a message flashed on the community channel: "Albedo Zone 3 temporarily offline for diagnostics," Caroline bolted upright.

Zone 3 was their zone.

She marched to Cat's room, shoved open the door. "What's going on? Why did a whole zone go offline?"

Cat blinked awake. "Caroline, it's fine. It's normal."

"No it's not," Caroline insisted. "Panels don't go offline for fun. If one drops below threshold—"

Cat sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Kid. Nothing is melting. Nothing is collapsing. It's maintenance."

Caroline crossed her arms. "Take me with you tomorrow."

Cat groaned. "You're relentless."

"I'm informed," Caroline corrected.

After a long moment, Cat sighed. "Fine. But you listen to every rule. One mistake, and we leave."

Caroline nodded, trying not to grin.

The next morning, mist rose off the canopy as they hiked to Zone 3. The forest felt different. Cooler. Quieter. Even the insects were hushed.

When they arrived, a cluster of technicians stood around the central panel. Screens floated in the air via holo-display, all tinted red.

Caroline froze. "That's not good."

A lead engineer looked up. "You must be Cat's cousin."

"Caroline," she said, stepping forward. "What happened?"

Cat gave her a warning glare, but the engineer didn't seem bothered.

"The panel pinged a high-reflectance anomaly," he said. "Probably just biofilm buildup or condensation. But if all the panels in a region brighten at once, it can overshoot the cooling curve."

Caroline swallowed. Overshooting meant too much cooling. Too much cooling meant rainfall shifts. Storm path disruptions. The world had stabilized, but stability was always delicate.

"Can I see?" she asked.

The engineer hesitated... then adjusted the display so she could.

The panel readings pulsed: reflectance 0.95... 0.97... 0.99...

Too high.

Caroline looked up at the panel surface. A breathing, thin film shimmered across.

"Moss?" she whispered.

Cat shook her head. "Wrong texture."

Caroline approached, kneeling. The shimmer moved.

She realized what it was:
Bioengineered algae —a species released two years ago upstream to restore river oxygen levels. It must have aerosolized, landed here, and colonized the panel's surface.

"It's helping," Caroline murmured. "It's increasing reflectance."

"But too much," Cat said. "It throws off the model."

"But you can regulate algae," Caroline said quickly. "UV pulses, targeted shading, even pheromone repellents—"

The engineer blinked at her. "You know your stuff."

Caroline stood taller. "I read everything."

The group exchanged looks. The problem wasn't catastrophic, but it was alarming. And it needed a solution before the next release cycle.

Caroline inhaled deeply. "Let me help."

Cat opened her mouth to protest, but the engineer beat her to it.

"Actually," he said, smiling, "we could use one more pair of hands."

For the next three hours, Caroline worked alongside the technicians, cleaning panels, scanning biofilm patches, and helping recalibrate the reflectance monitors. They listened when she spoke. They explained things without dumbing them down. They treated her like someone who belonged.

When the anomaly warning disappeared from the screens, the entire group exhaled together.

Cat bumped her shoulder. “Not bad, kid.”

Caroline pretended not to beam.

On the hike home, sunlight filtered through the white haze, soft and even. A damselfly landed on Caroline’s wrist, wings catching the gentle light.

“You were right,” Cat said.

Caroline raised an eyebrow. “About what?”

“You’re not a kid,” Cat admitted. “Not when it comes to this.”

Caroline looked at the sky. It’s subtle brightness, the engineered reflection layer holding back the heat just enough to let the world breathe. SRM wasn’t perfect, but it was working, for now. And people were tending it now the way they once tended gardens.

“Do you think,” she asked, “we’ll ever get a blue sky again?”

Cat thought for a long time. “Maybe. When the planet is strong enough. When we’re strong enough.”

Caroline nodded.

But for now, she didn’t mind the white sky.

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