

Year 7 & 8 Category: Winner

Hope

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I look up to see the sky filled with a smoky red haze, coating the landscape in an orangey light, with visible dust particles dancing in the thick air. Hot gravel crunches under my feet as I slowly emerge from the tent, and I feel my throat grow dry as it interacts with the hazy air around me.

I scan my surroundings, and in shock I stare at the usually barren garden bed.

Today, there is a plant sprouting out of my small, weakly built garden bed.

It is a miracle that a plant could survive – not just survive, flourish – in this eternal day. I've been keeping this garden bed tidy with my mother's old shovel, and for the past five years I've been waiting in hope for a plant to grow, but I've never had any progress until today. I sneak over to the garden bed, trying to contain my excitement at the new friend. I crouch down, coming eye-level to the plant, marvelling at the shiny green leaves, tiny spikes, and small pink flower buds. Friend. That's a good word to describe this miracle plant. "My friend," I whisper to the plant, smiling for the first time in what seems like decades. My lips crack painfully, and blood flows steadily from them. A reminder that happiness comes with unavoidable pain. I touch my fingers to my lips and examine the blood that comes back hot-red on my fingers. With one more look at my new friend, I trudge back into my tent and zip the door shut.

As I apply a small drop of healing ointment onto my lips, my eyes wander around the tent and I think about the plant. For years, we've been stuck in this tent, not able to move any further due to the severe heat. The sky never changes: the sun shines down on us every hour, with no break in the intense heat.

I don't remember the last night on this planet; I was only 4 years old when it happened. My older sister tells stories of the darkness, the cool evening winds, and the warmly painted sunrises... but then the world stopped spinning. No one anticipated it, for the world to come to a drastic stop, and for years, there were barely any signs of life on either side of the planet. One side stuck in an icy prison, the other trapped in the relentless heat. Only a small number of humans and animals survived, my family, being one of them. But there isn't a point in surviving is there? We can't escape this fever dream. All means of communication were cut years ago, and it takes so much determination and so many resources to survive. But I mustn't let this deter me.

I start to unzip the door of my tent to go and admire the plant when I hear my sister step behind me. I whirl around and come face-to-face with her, staring into her tired brown eyes. I raise an eyebrow at her and step back.

“What do you need, Veronica?” I ask, enunciating the V at the start of her name.

“Well, Vel,” she says, using my nickname, “I was just wondering what you were doing. I haven’t seen you this happy in years.”

I roll my eyes in her direction as I edge closer to the door. “Is there something wrong with me enjoying myself? Plus, it hasn’t been years!” I say with mock offence.

“Of course not,” she snorts, “I was just wondering what you were doing that got you like this.”

My breathing catches in my throat. Should I show her? I’m not sure how she’ll react to the plant as we haven’t seen any other life in ten years.

“Fine,” I say. “Follow me, I’ll show you.”

I hear her laugh and clap behind me. “Let’s go!”

I unzip the door and the heat hits me like a brick wall, the thick dust dancing around my face.

“God, I forgot how hot it was out here,” Veronica says, wiping the sweat already collecting on her forehead.

“Yep, so I’m not quite sure how this survived,” I say, leading her around the side of the tent to where the garden bed is.

“What do you mean by this ...?” Her sentence is cut off when her eyes lock onto the plant.

“What! H-how? When? Huh?” I can see her mouth fall open in shock.

I laugh softly. “It is pretty amazing. I call it my miracle plant since, y’know, it’s a uh- a miracle.” I turned around to where she stood in the gravel, expecting to see her standing there, but to my surprise, she wasn’t.

“Uhm, Veronica? What the...” confused, I turn back to the plant, and see her crouched next to the garden bed, head resting on her arms with eyes full of wonder.

“It’s so, so...” she trails off, still intently staring at the plant.

“So?” I question while raising my eyebrow, amused at her reaction.

“Lively. Yeah, lively. And gorgeous. And the cutest thing ever!” She smiles. Smiles! My sister smiled! She never smiles.

"It isn't just beautiful? Do you know what this means, Velvette?" Veronica asks me, turning her head in my direction.

"What does it mean?" I reply, wondering what she'll say.

"This, my dear sister, this is hope. Hope that the planet can return to its former glory. Hope to return peace to the world."

"*Hope,*" I repeat. *Hope.* A beautiful word.