

## Healing Flower

They called it The Blackout. One by one it wiped out almost the entirety of what was once the greatest city in America until only a hundred people remained and New York City was a shadow of what it had once been. At the rise of the disease, I witnessed people from all over the city dropping like flies. At first, it caused the victims to become paralyzed from the neck down, causing immense pain, and death would come swiftly if it was kind. However, for most it lasted days, even weeks for the young ones.

"EEEEEEEEEEEE!" I heard a shrill whistle coming from beside me, bringing me back to reality.

"Shhhh!" I whispered to my companion, Oliver. We had been best friends since birth, but sometimes he drove me nuts. I knew that I couldn't allow myself to keep thinking about that morning, so I was almost glad for his cheerful distraction. However, it isn't very helpful when you are trying to escape a quarantined city, guarded by fearsome cyborgs. They had the strength and obedient mind of a robot, but the willpower of a stubborn human. They were our biggest threat. We turned the corner of the street, and then we suddenly drew back holding our breath. I had just narrowly missed being spotted by the blinding search light, and silently willed Oliver to shut up, just for a minute. As we moved along, I thought again to this morning, of something that made my entire world crumble beneath me, and I knew that Oliver felt the same way. Our families had contracted the sickness. I remember my mother's raspy breaths as she told me how to escape, to get to the doctor's office a few miles outside of our town: Kroywen. I didn't know what to say to her in reply, but I let my body guide me when I solemnly covered her body in a piece of burlap after she passed, and ran away with Oliver before my mind had a chance to make me cry about it. I let my thoughts drift back to the important thing, getting out, and saving the last of our kind.

As we carefully picked our way through the rubble and decaying fever victims, we came upon the edge of the city. And there we saw the cyborgs, seemingly human as Oliver and myself, but three times as dangerous. They patrolled our only way out, and our hopes of escape began to diminish.

"Hera, I found something," Oliver whispered, as he moved to the side of the building we were hiding behind. As his fingers explored the edge of the mortar in between the bricks, they came upon the remnants of a long piece of wood.

"Here, help me take these bricks off," Oliver said as he struggled to pull them away from the rotting wall. As we worked, I saw something strange. A doorway was beginning to take shape out of the lone piece of wood. When the last brick fell to the ground, we were hit with a blast of cool air. It was a long, dark passageway, full of cobwebs and damp dirt.

"This must be how food was smuggled into the city during the Starvation Era," I explained breathlessly to Oliver, who was examining it as well.

"We may as well get on our way, then," he said, heaving his pack of supplies onto his back. Just then, we heard a terrifying sound. The joints of a cyborg make a whirring noise when they walk, and judging by the closeness of the sound, they weren't far behind us.

"Come on!" I said as I grabbed Oliver's hand and dragged him down the stairs and into the passageway. The cyborgs were trying hard to keep up with us, as they could only ever manage a sort of a limping speed walk, shooting their acid lasers in our direction. I cried out as a

dirt clod hit me in the back of the head, and I fell. Oliver frantically tried to get me to get back up again.

“Come on, Hera!!!! The roof is going to collapse on us! The stupid robots shot the support system!”

I quickly snapped out of my daze long enough to realize what was happening. I scrambled up to my feet in time to jump out of the way of a particularly large piece of debris. As I glanced behind myself, I could see the cyborgs being easily crushed by the collapsing passage. “Ha! Take that, technology,” I thought to myself as I silently chalked one up for the humans in my mind. Oliver and I reached the end of the passage in enough time to see the rest of it finally give way behind us. We attempted to catch our breath as we grinned idiotically at each other, amazed that we were still alive.

“Wow,” Oliver managed between our ragged breaths, and I nodded in reply. “Wow” was right, having just survived a cyborg attack.

“Come on,” I said, hoisting my bag over my shoulder, “We’ve got a lot of walking to do.” Oliver reluctantly joined me, and we began walking towards the woods. I had to think back to this morning, what my mom had said about getting to the doctors. The Gate was the first thing on the list, but she had also said something about a river. What river? I didn’t know those were even still here. The government had dried them all up, in an attempt to protect themselves from the sickness because the disease can travel through water. So what was my mom talking about? Then, it came to me. She didn’t mean a river literally, but she used it as a code to symbolize something. Water created life, and what was a better example of life than a plant?

When I was little, she used to take me to this amazing weeping willow tree during our camping trips. They eventually cut it down for some elderly couple’s summer cottage, but the memory was still there, fresh as summer rain. I looked over at Oliver, who was struggling to open an energy bar package. Boy, we had a lot of work to do if he was going to help me save the human race. I looked up ahead at a clearing in the trees and there it stood, in all of its splendor. The weeping willow tree was the best thing I had seen in the past hour and a half of walking.

Oliver and I ran up to it and hugged the tree, and its long tendrils enveloped us as we made our way to its majestic trunk. Suddenly, the spot I had been hugging caved in, revealing a dark chamber. A podium rose out of the center, and a worn map on parchment paper emerged out of the darkness. All I could do was stare stupidly at it, but Oliver had gotten over that and lumbered over to the podium. He quickly made a show of grabbing the map, and bowed to me as he handed it over.

“For you, mademoiselle,” Oliver said with a grin. I snatched it out of his hands, annoyed at his demeanor.

“Let’s go, Oliver,” I said, once again swinging my bag over my shoulder. I glanced at the map, hoping the big red X in the middle was the doctor’s office, and that it was not from some kid’s leftover treasure hunt. The next six hours of my life consisted of me walking while I half carried Oliver, who was complaining the whole way about his fragile muscle condition. We walked all day, and part of the night as well, until we were within half a mile of the doctor and decided to get some rest, camping out in the forest. As the sun rose in the east, I woke up and shook Oliver until he mumbled, rolled over, and stared daggers at me. He slowly rose to his feet, looking like some sort of wild animal disturbed from hibernation. I would’ve laughed at his appearance, were it not for his mood.

“Good morning, sunshine. Ready to go?” I asked cheerfully. He managed some sort of an agreement, and we were off again.

As we came out of the forest, I saw the city. Wow. They had electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing. I hadn't seen those things since the beginning of the Blackout. Shading my eyes from the sun, I began walking next to Oliver as we made our way to the doctor's office. We must have looked out of place there, because the people walking in the street stared at us as though we were from another planet. We casually strolled into the building and went up to the front desk.

"Yes?" a lady in a clean white dress inquired, leaning away from our ragged appearance.

"We need to see the doctor," I said in a matter of fact voice.

"Well, why else would you be here? Going to a party?" the lady inquired as she buzzed us in, gesturing towards the door. As we walked down the long, white hallway, a man dressed in a flowery shirt and big spectacles that covered half of his face welcomed us.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Leon, and I'll be taking care of you today," the man said, grinning crazily. I was a bit taken aback by his absurd appearance, but I hesitantly told all that had happened to us.

"Ahhhh....so that is what became of the majestic city of New York, now, is it?" he scratched his chin, "Well, I will see what I can do to help you."

Motioning to a small room to his left, he held his finger to his lips and tiptoed into it. We followed, glancing at each other nervously, wondering what was to become of us. The man took a very large, dusty medical book off the shelf in the middle of the room, and plopped down on the floor to inspect its contents. As he thumbed through the book, Oliver and I watched as the small man handled the giant book with ease.

"Here it is!" he shouted with enthusiasm as he violently ripped a page out of the book. He pointed to a picture on the page, tapping his index finger so fervently that I had no idea what he was talking about, because the page was flapping wildly back and forth. He finally shoved the paper into my hand, and closed my fingers around it.

"You best be on your way, now," he said, pushing us out of the door, "There's trouble brewing."

He continued to push out of the hallway and through the lobby, and we looked back, seeing him and the nurse waving sadly at us. We got out the door, and glanced back just in time to see the building explode. We had to shield our eyes from the light, and I felt tears stinging my eyes. These people had just saved lives, but it came at a price. Revealing the secret of the cure caused the government to take action against them. They knew that they would die. I understood now. The government wanted the disease to cut down on the population numbers in certain cities, so that the people would be easier to control. I looked away from the destruction, and Oliver took my hand. I took the page with the cure on it out of my pocket, my other hand still trembling slightly.

The dust in the air settled, and I finally looked down and saw what was on the page. A strange flower labeled *Rhiconia* was printed on it, in wild colors like violet and bright green. I couldn't believe my eyes. This was the answer to all our prayers. According to the paper, all that the fever victims had to do was breathe in the flower's aroma in order to heal. But where could it be found? We searched among the rubble and carnage for clues that might lead us to our success. But there was nothing. Or, so it seemed. Oliver began to dig in the debris, and he seemed very excited about something. I observed from behind, trying to figure it out. Finally, Oliver came up and almost plowed me over. In his hands was the cure, the only thing that could save the rest of humanity from The Blackout. I could have kissed him right there, on the mouth, if I hadn't been already hugging him. Maybe there was still time to save them.

I grabbed the flower from Oliver, and breathed in its delicious scent. This was going to spare people's lives. I raced away, indicating for Oliver to follow me. We had to get back to New York, and fast.

We started back, and Oliver walked for himself, restored by his new found "confidence". I nearly ran to New York, almost giddy with excitement. And when I saw the ruined skeletons of buildings peeking up over the horizon, I let out a cry of elation. Home. We had to be careful, of course, just in case there was a new stock of cyborgs guarding the city, but to our advantage, we had taken out the last ones in our desperate escape. As we passed through the gates, the few sickly people that were left saw us, and cried out for help. And I knew right then, that everything was going to be all right.