

## Hope For Tomorrow - Kinga, Year 11, NSW

The wind forms waves in the field of dry grass. I stare down at a faux ocean, reminiscing of days spent by the water. The tides I had grown so familiar with had risen long ago, devouring the coastline and taking the city with it. Mother nature was a cruel shepherd, releasing violent storms which chased people inland like monstrous herding dogs. There was no land left that could sustain the life we once knew, but we had to make do.

We aren't lucky enough to feed on grass like true sheep used to.

I flinch as the crackle of fire breaks my train of thought, the tension only leaves my shoulders once my partner appears next to me on the balcony.

"Finally got it started, the matches were being stubborn," Aurora says, sitting down.

I can only nod in response, far too distracted by my own thoughts to speak.

I focus on the irony of how easy it is for us to wield the very thing that wreaked havoc upon the life that had thrived here. Despite our efforts to fight it, it only took a few years for the whole landscape to go up in flames. Now we sit atop a fire tower, guarding the passion in our hearts instead of watching for the smoke of bushfire.

The scalding sun sets over the horizon, the evening wind providing relief during a seemingly unending heatwave. I recall getting sleepy when I watched the sunset in the old world, now it marks the start of my work. It's far too dangerous to work by day. The sun usually hangs in the sky as a burning reminder of humanity's failures, proving they can't return to the old world no matter how much they want to pretend. They're lost birds hoping to find their nest again, in denial of their tree having long fallen.

Maybe it's time we stop looking for a place of constant comfort.

I feel the weight of a hand on my back; it makes me finally notice the heat radiating from the makeshift fire pit.

"C'mon, we need to eat," Aurie beckons with a smile.

The weight filling the pit of my stomach shifts uncomfortably; I stand despite it.

It's only once I'm watching the warm light dance across Aurie's freckled face again that calm finally washes over me. She's been my anchor through this hellish sea of emotions, keeping me in place as the waves threaten to sweep me away.

Mother nature isn't gracious, loving, nor kind. In reality she simply is just another force to be reckoned with.

Most methods we used ended in tragedy. She may continue trying to retaliate but I know we will always adapt faster. We resist, we will always refuse to drown.

Disapproval, the only word that echoes in my mind as I desperately try to get my head above water.

I gasp, taking in precious air with no regard for the smell. I clamber onto the boat with Aurora's help, dragging my bag full of seaweed, glass, and plastic with me. Scavenging was a messy task but it has become even more important now that we've brought a baby bird under our wing.

I grin at the aforementioned birdie as he plays with the rubber duck we found for him earlier. His name's Tom.

My hope never manages to fully waste away because I know Aurie will be there to tug me out. It's my responsibility to make sure eight-year-old Thomas doesn't have to lose his hope either. I've lost so much. I've gained so much. My fear of change fades day by day while my thirst for survival grows tenfold. We've only been getting better and I want it to stay that way.

I shrug my bag off my shoulders. It's functional even if it's made of torn up fishing nets. There's barely any fish that we could catch anyway since most of them turned belly up. I rummage through the haul, chucking a couple bottles Aurie's way once I start unpacking my finds. Aurora is rowing already, gradually moving our boat closer to shore, so the glass lands near her feet.

"Jessica?" I hear my name and promptly look up to meet Tom's blue eyes. "Are we going home soon?" he asks.

"Sure thing, we need to get back before sunrise," I answer, smiling and offering him a bottle cap. He goes quiet and begins examining it as soon as it lands in his hands.

I adjust our oil lamp, ensuring it doesn't go out. The light seems to dance across Aurie's face again. I've realised she's no longer an anchor; she's my lighthouse. She steadily navigates us through life regardless of how scared either of us are. In the darkest of nights and stormiest of seas, she has always been a guiding light. Even now, during an objective apocalypse, my partner's eyes sparkle in a way that makes me stare.

The night is quiet, with no one in sight other than us and our recently adopted son. It's serene. As I get to listen to the splash of calm waves again I consider that maybe it was a gift. A mercy to deconstruct society, to recycle all we knew instead of disposing of it entirely. I appreciate the lack of judgement, the lack of eyes following my every move, while I still can.

I still wish we had realised earlier how alike we're to leeches, draining the host of its blood till we're gorged. I wish we weren't shocked when the celestial body wilted beneath us.

The stars no longer need to hear my pleading. I'm thankful for what we still have. Humanity will embody the phoenix. Each day we'll stitch up our wounds and build a new nest upon the ruins of yesterday. I know we will. I have hope for tomorrow.

I tuck into my girlfriend's side, kissing her on the cheek. I look up at the night sky, devoid of light pollution, and admire the colourful stretch of galaxy. At that moment I silently thanked mother nature for her mercy.

For even though she took almost everything I knew, she at least let me keep my love.