

The Unravelling of Forever - Natalia, Year 6, VIC

Forever is quite a trifling thing – if I can even call it a ‘thing.’ What is it? Where can I find it? How does it work?

Despite my confusion, my thoughts drift silently along the rivers of my mind. The villagers insist that “doing things as they have been done forever” is the solution. Endless cycles of days filled with incessant farming, work, rules – it’s how the world should work. The simplicity of... unchanging things. Yet as I close my eyes, there’s an itch burrowed deep in the depths of my head. Unreachable – but I know it’s there.

Change.

The word reverberates many times, bouncing off the walls of my consciousness, each time impacting harder than the last. Maybe changing things occasionally would be acceptable...? Maybe not.

The overflow of my thoughts comes to an abrupt stop. Dragging a hand through my raven black hair, I sigh, tired of being puzzled by everything. Perhaps answers would come much easier if your mother isn’t dead.

The sound of my door slamming open jolts me out of my daze.

“Bad news, the Annual Offering isn’t possible. No resources at all.” That’s Cerise, straight to the point. Her hazel brown eyes lock onto my own.

“But how...? We’ve been doing our practices forever. Harvest from the North, lock the village at ten pm, use one remedy for the sick. Everything’s been fine until now.” A tired sigh escapes through my mouth knowing that this will be my burden to carry. Fifteen-year-old Chief Nyssa – yay.

She runs a hand through her curly, snow flecked, blonde hair. “I don’t know, but yeah, I’ll try to help. It’ll be okay.”

The tone in her voice tells me it will be anything but.

The Annual Offering is a celebration of our ancestors who built our village and set the rules. We make special dishes, decorate immensely, and spend our time making new memories. However, it seems that this may be the first year we don’t. The herbs we harvest from the North have disappeared, and the Edelweiss used for decorations are missing. *Breaking tradition is a sin.* I can’t let my village down now, it’s my first year of being chief. I’ll be a bad omen; a curse.

Shivering underneath my fur coat, I clean up some snow that skirts the edges of the village. Hearing footsteps behind me, I swivel around to see Elio, a guy who's kinda like an older brother to me. Other than his grey eyes, his face is covered by a black scarf.

"Have you heard about the resource shortage?" I ask him.

"Yep. It's weird too, like why is everything going awry now? Haven't we been doing this stuff repeatedly?" He puts his hands deeper into his pockets to try and trap heat.

"Maybe that's the issue. Forever..." Trailing off, I'm not quite sure where I'm going with this. "Anyway, nobody's going to listen to my nonsense. Everything will be okay!" Channelling some positivity, I give Elio an awkward chuckle. His eyes glisten with something I can't really perceive. Admiration? Concern?

"Wrong, Nyssa, if the villagers are willing to listen to someone, that someone is you."

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I hear the first scream at six fifteen in the morning. The sun is only rising, but I can feel the anxious thud of footsteps against the snow-covered floor. Grabbing a coat, my arms shove open the door, the cold enveloping me. There's a commotion at the village gate, the frigid wind whipping my face as I rush towards it. A frail woman weeping on the ground, surrounded by people, caressing a familiar head with curly blonde hair.

Please, no. Without meaning to, I move my way through the crowd until I'm standing in front of Cerise laying on the ground. *Wailing.* Staggering back, my eyes lock onto her frosted, blue face. *Cold.*

"She's frozen to death." A voice cuts through the air; maybe mine, I don't know.

Motionless. Something bitter and cruel tugs at my heartstrings as Cerise's soulless eyes bore into my own. The only sound is Cerise's mother sobbing and my heavy breathing. *Dead.*

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A girl with black hair stands next to her mother on a bed.

"You're sick," the girl says, confused as to why they won't give her a different medicine.

Her mother smiles, "I know. The remedy isn't helping, sweetheart." She closes her eyes and lets out a ragged cough.

"Then try a new one-" The girl is cut off.

“Shh,” her mother urges, reaching out to hold her hand. “That’s against the rules. Remember, Nyssa, I’m always with you. Forever and ever.” Her hand begins to drop out of the girl’s grasp.

However, the girl cannot comprehend what is going on.

“Forever and ever mother. Forever and ever.”

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An archaic rule killed my mother. It did the same to Cerise.

My mother had a rare illness that could only be cured through another medicine. That has kept me up at night, tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Ever since Cerise’s unfortunate passing, the whole village has been restless and worried for the Annual Offering in the next week. Something needs to change.

Change. There’s that word again, this time more reachable and familiar. Staring at the ceiling with my back on my bed, I wonder about what Elio had said. *“Wrong, Nyssa, if the villagers are willing to listen to someone, that someone is you.”*

Fingers fiddling with the loose thread of my mother’s blanket, I remember something she had told me a few days before she passed.

“We’ve stretched this way of doing things for far too long. It’s time for something different.”

At this moment, something clicks in my head. The fog that traps my thoughts dissipates, and my goal isn’t like finding a needle in a haystack anymore. It’s just there, simple and clear.

Forever isn’t unbreakable – and I’m the only one who can initiate change to prevent more people from getting hurt.

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Murmurs rise among the villagers as I stand before them. The uncertainty is obvious – though I can’t blame them, as this is my first Chief meeting. Clearing my throat, I straighten my posture and begin.

“As you know, Cerise Marisol has unfortunately passed due to getting locked out of the village. Her intentions were not wrong, they were to search for herbs for Edelweiss we can use. She got lost, then found her way back – but it was too late. Cerise froze to death.”

My voice can’t help cracking at the end, and a blanket of misery covers the crowd. I talk about my mother, and how she died from an illness we couldn’t cure using our one medicine.

“It’s our second death. One is more than enough, but we have double that.” Looking up, my eyes identify that Cerise’s mother had said that. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her face is still etched with anguish.

“The rules our ancestors had locked forever is what caused these deaths. Why can we only use one remedy? Why lock the village at ten?” The villagers exchange nervous glances at each other. “Our concept of a perfect forever is broken. The Annual Offering is in a week, and we have no resources. Change is inevitable if we want to live on.”

Whispers erupt from the crowd, the skepticism present. Yet, no one seems to object.

A new voice speaks up. “If we harvest from another location, use a different medicine, or keep the village open, we have a greater chance of existing for longer.” Smiling at Elio, he mirrors my face – this guy always has my back.

“I know you’re scared, I am too,” I continue. “We don’t know what will happen for sure, but the best thing we can do is try. Just try. For my mother, Maira, and for Cerise. Times are changing, and we need to accept that.”

After a stretch of silence, the villagers begin to clap and cheer. *Well, that’s nice for a change.*

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In the best way possible, forever unravels. Everybody benefits. No more outdated rules. Countless new plants, food, and animals have been discovered from the East, West and South. With all these new findings, we manage to spice up our Annual Offering by adding more celebrations, while still respecting the original traditions. I even made some new friends with people I hadn’t really known!

Our 425th Annual Offering was filled with laughter, songs, dancing, friendship and delicious meals. It ended with us grinning and chuckling, our chatter slowly fading into the moonlit, starry sky. Our people, rules and methods are changing, and through that, our traditions, legacy and culture are staying.

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Years later, sitting on the grass, I gaze into the melted red and orange sunset.

Now, I understand ‘forever.’

It’s not an object you can lock in a box, nor is it something you can find in one.

It is a ceaseless, flowing river ... a river of constant change.