

A Clover in the Storm

She hadn't seen another living person in five years.

Hannah had to admit she was getting lonely. An entire planet and she was the only one inhabiting its dry, freezing, barren landscape. She wondered if she was even human anymore. Wasn't it humans who desired love? The presence of other people? A home? She found she often didn't have time for desires anymore. Each day she survived was an accomplishment on a planet too far from the sun.

Something always proved her wrong, though. During those moments in the darkest of night, as she lay in her thermal sleeping bag inside her living pod, she would close her eyes and embrace that pinprick of hope that warmed her heart like a candle flame. She hoped that someday, she wouldn't have to wonder if she would survive another day. She hoped she'd be able to see a glowing blue sky again, to feel lush tufts of grass between her toes.

Above all, Hannah hoped they would come back for her. She stared up at the stars, hazy through the dust in Mars' atmosphere, and she'd find the brightest one and pretend it was her mothership *Astrophel* coming to take her home. Yet, every morning, she would wake up, and the stars would be gone, and she'd begin the task of surviving another day.

That morning, just like any other, she woke to the stark Martian dawn streaming through the single window at the top of her pod. She ate breakfast first—rehydrated eggs and watery black coffee from her dwindling food supply. Her worn gray uniform came second, and then her SpaceX-issued spacesuit. Like always, she tightened her oxygen tube with white knuckles.

The automatic door to her pod slid open, and Hannah held her breath in case her breathing tube had malfunctioned or she hadn't sealed her suit correctly. She exhaled when her skin didn't blister from frostbite and her lungs didn't rupture from lack of oxygen. Her relief was

cut short, however, when a gust of wind flung her sideways. She stumbled, collapsing onto one knee as bits of stone pinged against her helmet. Then, as soon as the gust was there, it was gone.

Hannah wiped away the thin layer of grime from the front of her helmet. She peered over at the hills that scraped against the dusky atmosphere. The wind blew against their tops, sending great billows of dust rolling into the air. Beyond the hills, a mass of brown clouds lurked. A windstorm loomed on the horizon, along with the promise of powerful winds and clouds of dry debris that blinded anyone in its path and turned them round and round until they couldn't tell north from south anymore. With Mars' unchanging terrain, getting lost was a death sentence.

She swallowed. Her parents had perished in a windstorm, while searching for any sign of organic, living matter on Mars' desolate surface. They refused to believe that Mars was uninhabitable. Evidence showed that water had existed there once. That meant hope. Except their hope turned desperate, and their desperation pushed them too far—made them disregard the incoming clouds, the winds that grew stronger every minute, until they never found their way back to safety—back to her. She'd been fifteen at the time—old enough to understand why they didn't come back, and why they never would. She vowed to never make the same mistake.

But she stared out past the range of stubby hills that separated her pod from the rest of the Martian terrain, and she refused to turn back. What if there was something out there? The windstorm would destroy it, and then she would still be alone. The girl eyed the darkening clouds. Judging from their position in the sky, the storm was still about five miles away, she predicted, and the wind wasn't strong enough to blow her over like it had at first. She could travel a few miles—just to make sure.

So Hannah walked, away from the sleek, red-tinted dome she called home, away from the looming danger that seldom visited but always promised destruction, toward that single flicker of hope that never left her vision.

The terrain stood monotonous before her. The burnt-colored sky was merely a lighter shade of the crimson ground. There was nothing to break up the unchanging Martian landscape. She thought it made finding any signs of life easier, just like how her father and mother had spotted that single speckle of green from nearly two miles away all those years ago.

They had all been so excited. They'd been sent to Mars to study its ability to sustain life, and that single green shoot, sticking up from a crack in the ground, reminded them that even millions of miles away from Earth, life still had the chance to thrive.

Her parents had uprooted the tender plant with all the care of two skilled surgeons, and they'd brought it back to their pod. Bent over their microscopes, they'd studied the foreign plant for hours, attempting to determine how the plant had grown, where its source of nutrition had come from, and why it was the only one for miles.

Determined for more information, Hannah's parents had ventured out to search for more of the little hope-colored plants. She had seen the optimism decorated in the sparkle of their eyes as they'd departed, in the bounce of their steps as they'd disappeared over the hills. So hopeful, so happy—those moments were the last she had ever spent with her parents.

As Hannah came to the other side of the valley between the clump of hills, she smiled as she remembered the joy that drove them both to continue in the face of desolation.

That joy was brief, though. The wind began to pick up, and it pushed her around like she was a stringless puppet. She didn't want to turn back yet, but her fears of getting stranded grew with every step. Just as the wind threatened to topple her, she spotted it.

It was a speck of green on a red canvas, as if someone had accidentally dipped their brush into the wrong paint color and had only noticed when they touched it to the paper. For her, it stoked that single flame of hope in her heart into a bushfire.

She raced toward it, stumbling over her feet. She stopped right before she stepped on the little green plant. The wind had died down enough so that she could bend down and observe the tiny organism. She stared at what she thought was a clover, billowing in the wind, and she imagined millions of them in a field, glowing under the light of the sun.

She blinked, and slowly, with a bulky, gloved hand, reached out to touch the little plant.

“Hello! Is anybody out there?”

Hannah choked on a gasp. Stumbling to her feet, her eyes darted around. She hadn’t heard another human voice in five years. Was she dreaming?

She swallowed, turning on her suit’s audio transmitter with shaking fingers. She opened her mouth, speaking her first words since saying goodbye to her parents all those years ago.

“I’m here!”

Hope colored the words until she imagined them the same hue of her little clover. She stood still, listening carefully for footsteps over the roar of the wind. Finally, crunching pebbles sang like a melody in her ears, the wind died down a bit, and a human figure—no, *two* human figures—materialized from the hazy wind.

Her throat went dry. They wore spacesuits like her. A foreign emblem, shaped like a rounded arrow, embellished each of their left sleeves. She saw the faces of a man and a woman through their helmets. Hannah’s mind whirled.

The man spoke first. “There are survivors. I can’t believe it. What’s your name?”

She averted her eyes. Could she still remember her name? “Hannah, I think.”

The woman pulled out a glowing tablet. “Are there any other survivors?”

Hannah’s mouth went dry. “My parents were here. They’re gone now. Deceased.”

The man and the woman stared at the tablet. Her eyes darted between them.

“It can’t be,” the man muttered. “After all these years...”

Hannah swallowed. “What’s happening? Who are you?”

Both figures blinked up at her. The woman stepped forward. “My apologies. We’re from the Second Established Martian Colony. We’ve come to examine Terran conditions for re-habitation. You must be very confused—”

“Wait,” Hannah interrupted. “You live here too? I never knew there were other people...”

The man and woman glanced at each other. “We don’t live here,” the man replied.

Hannah’s brow furrowed. “This is Mars, though.”

The woman stepped closer, and Hannah could see that her eyes glowed blue through the dusty haze around them. “You and your family were on the mothership *Astrophel*, right?”

Hannah merely nodded, pressing her lips together.

The woman continued. “Right after you lifted off for Mars, nuclear war broke out on earth. It led to an extinction-level event—”

She choked over the words, so the man continued. “Your ship received orders to turn around. Your mission had changed,” he said, and Hannah felt her stomach drop into her feet. “Your ship was redirected to the ruins, to jumpstart the effort for re-habitation.”

A tear dropped onto Hannah’s cheek. Her breathing shallowed.

“Hannah, you’re not on Mars,” the man said.

She looked back at her plant, her source of hope, but the wind had blown it away.

“You’re on Earth.”