

We're hunting for flowers, in the desert.

It sounds ridiculous.

It sounds fucking ridiculous, now that I line the phrase up in my mind, but here we are. In the desert, sweating, greasy, getting coated in sand and grit...God. When did deserts get so *dusty*?

'Come on, this way,' Iris says.

I follow, because what else am I going to do?

She cuts a track through the sand that's gone by the time I get there. We trudge for an hour. No breeze, just the sounds of shifting grains, our panting, me thinking and thinking and thinking. I'm sure Iris is thinking too, thinking shapely and poignant thoughts. Thoughts about Ellie.

I'm trying to focus on Ellie's flowers. They can be any kind, so long as they're real. But what a caveat! Who sees real flowers anymore? Discluding whatever goes on in the city's sheltered heart, where the inner courts are paved with polished marble. I've heard they have amphoras the height of your hip, full to the lip with fresh water and lurid lilies. Talk about overindulgence. No; I'm talking about here in the Outer Ring – in the dirt, amongst the metal and the heat. There's plenty of sunshine, and I've met a few good people like Iris... But I don't remember the last time I saw a real flower.

Iris shoots a hand in the air. We stop. She looks around, careful, as if we might scare the flowers away. *Hilarious!* I think, but say nothing. Too thirsty. No point spending words on this.

'Shaded spot 'there.'

I look to where she's indicating: yes, there is a dark smudge in the distance. No way I'd have found it by myself.

'Cool,' I say. She nods. We pursue the smudge.

The longer we walk, the heavier my legs get, slipping deeper into the sand with each step. I remind myself that this is for Ellie, but focussing on Ellie is like looking directly into the sun, and I have to make myself forget again before I feel worse. I end up circling the thoughts like a buzzard. By the time we reach the shade I'm dizzy and aching.

To be fair, even Iris, who has the stamina of a field mule, is slightly out of breath when we stop. She watches me thoughtfully whilst she reties her braid.

'You okay?' she asks. I take a breath, end up coughing. Stupid desert.

'Super. Working on my tan. Could do with a touch less sand.' I throw in a wink at the end to show her: *'the easy-going one is still going easy'*. Iris snorts, which means she accepts these sub-par jokes as a response, for now.

'Let's find some fucking flora!' I wheeze, pumping my fist. Iris breathes out the smallest of sighs, then leads us through the rocky arcs.

Because it turns out, the shade has been created by something pretty incredible. I've never seen anything like it before. But something, or someone, has created these curious rock structures in the middle of the desert.

There's a brutal but commanding aura to them. They're like shattered caves, scattered and looming in the sand. Bone-white arches and tall, jagged shards. Some are big enough to cast precious patches of shadow. Iris and I weave between them, looking to see if any plucky flowers have grown here. I know we're thinking the same thing: Ellie would have liked it here.

And then, eventually and all of a sudden, *they appear*. I say 'oh!' out loud like a pantomime character. But it's sincere. I've never been transfixed by something so small and delicate before.

I'm...not sure I've seen something so small and delicate before.

My chest seizes as if it's in a scrap compactor. Iris comes over.

Together, we look: three little flowers, growing in a crack between two rocks. They have the most deeply purple petals, and tapered leaves like shoals of green fish. The middles are flecked with gold. All the beauty in the world has been distilled, pulled up through the desert and into the roots of these three tiny flowers.

'Wow,' Iris breathes.

We watch a little longer. After a minute, Iris reaches out a hand. She wavers, moves back.

We wait again, then I reach out. The petals are so soft. If I pressed just a little stronger, they would bruise. I put two fingers around a stem. I can tell Iris is holding her breath.

I think of Ellie, and it's blinding. It's so blinding my eyes sting, but it's enough. I release the flower and stand up again.

'I think she'd appreciate them just as much here,' I say.

'Agreed,' Iris says. Her hand reaches out to take mine; I squeeze back. 'Let's just have it here'.

So we stand in front of the flowers and do our remembering. It isn't the Outer Ring Cemetery, but maybe that's for the better.

*'These flowers are for you,'* I say in my mind. *'We're leaving them alive, because I think that's what you'd have wanted.'* It's the first time in a while my thoughts have been so clear. And it's ridiculous, but I swear I feel her smiling in response.

I smile back.

Copyright Ana Dukakis