

Where the Roots Run

By Amy Luo

CHARACTERS

ROSE - A young adult woman. Wears worn overalls and practical gardening gloves.

BEE - ROSE's younger sister, in middle-to-late adolescence. Wears a sleek headset and modern clothes.

CEDAR - A man in his sixties. Weather-beaten, with quiet authority. Wears practical work clothes.

AUTOMATED VOICE (offstage) - An omnipresent soundscape in the background.

SETTING

It is late afternoon fading into evening. The stage is dominated by a small, overgrown garden, enclosed by a rusted chain-link fence patched with scraps of metal and wood. A few raised beds hold struggling plants -- tomatoes, herbs, flowers -- while weeds creep in at the edges. A bucket of compost sits in the corner. A single, gnarled tree stands in the center, strung with handwritten notes. Beyond the fence, the surroundings are gray and lifeless. The sounds of automated announcements and the hum of machinery fill the air. A wooden bench sits to one side, its paint peeling. A wheelbarrow, gardening tools, and a pile of soil are scattered around. The garden is lit by a flickering overhead light.

ROSE kneels tending a patch of tomatoes, face smudged with dirt. She's working faster than necessary. A hose is tangled at her feet. BEE sits on the bench, slouched, wearing a sleek 'Escape Pod' headset. CEDAR stands near the gate, a folded paper in his coat pocket. He hasn't moved since he arrived. A distant automated voice drones on.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Block seven water ration: two gallons daily.

ROSE glances up at the sky reflexively, then back down. She yanks at the hose. It's tangled.

ROSE

(muttering)

Stupid--

She yanks harder. Nothing. She sits back on her heels.

ROSE

You know, if you put half as much energy into helping as you do into avoiding me, we might actually get something done.

BEE doesn't respond. She crunches a chip.

ROSE

(louder)

Bee. Headset.

BEE pulls one earpiece out dramatically.

BEE

What.

ROSE

The carrots need water.

BEE

(looks at the carrots, then looks at ROSE)

The carrots need a funeral.

BEE puts the earpiece back in. ROSE stares at her. Then she picks up a trowel and hurls it into the dirt near BEE's feet. BEE jumps, her headset off.

BEE

What the hell--

ROSE

You're here. Be here.

Beat. BEE looks at the trowel. She doesn't pick it up.

BEE

Why do you even bother? The city's gonna pave this place eventually.

CEDAR had started carrying the bucket of compost toward ROSE and BEE, and he now sets down the bucket. The thud makes them both look. ROSE glances at CEDAR, who stopped moving.

ROSE

Cedar? You okay?

Beat. CEDAR pulls out a folded paper and hands it to ROSE. She reads. Her hands go still.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Hydration pods now open. Residents are reminded that unauthorized gatherings are prohibited.

ROSE

(very quiet)

When?

CEDAR

End of the week. They're expanding the processing plant.

Long silence. BEE watches them but can't see the paper.

ROSE

We've fought these before--

CEDAR

It's a final order, Rose. Different from the last ones.

BEE moves closer.

BEE

What's happening?

ROSE holds up the notice. BEE reads it. Her face goes carefully blank.

BEE

Huh.

ROSE

That is not "huh."

BEE

What do you want me to say?

ROSE

I want you to be upset!

BEE

(flatly)

I am upset. I'm just not surprised.

BEE sits back down. ROSE looks at the garden then at the paper again. Then she folds it very neatly and hands it back to CEDAR. She picks up the tangled hose and starts working at the knot again, too fast.

BEE

Rose.

(ROSE ignores her.)

Rose. Stop a second.

ROSE

Can't. Carrots need water.

BEE

The carrots are fine.

ROSE

(yanking at the hose)

They're not fine. Nothing's fine. Carrots need water and the hose is a-- *(the knot tightens)*-- stupid, useless—

ROSE throws the hose down. CEDAR picks it up. He works the knot slowly, and ROSE watches him. After a moment, she kneels back down and starts pulling weeds, too fast.

BEE

Rose.

ROSE

I'm working.

BEE:

You're ripping things out.

ROSE stops and looks at her hands. She's holding a fistful of something -- she drops it.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Attention, residents. Third-to-last warning before curfew. All citizens must return to their designated housing units.

ROSE looks at the sky again. BEE notices this time.

BEE

Third-to-last warning.

ROSE

I know what it said.

BEE

You kept looking up.

ROSE

It's just a habit.

BEE

... You never used to care about curfew.

ROSE doesn't answer, but she goes back to weeding at a slower pace. CEDAR has the hose untangled and hands it to her. BEE watches.

ROSE

Thanks.

BEE

(quiet, almost to herself)

I had a friend. In the Pods.

ROSE looks up. CEDAR keeps working, but slower.

BEE

(stands, pacing)

Did I ever tell you that? Her name was Jessa. We'd meet in the community square, virtual, and she'd show me her garden. Perfect strawberries. Perfect soil. And then one day she just--stopped logging on. I checked her profile. It said "User Deactivated." That's all. Not "she moved" or "she died" or "she got bored." Deactivated. Like she was an app.

BEE watches CEDAR work the compost.

BEE

So don't tell me about real. Real means people disappear and you never know why. Real means you wake up one day and the only thing left of someone -- *(gestures at the garden and the tree)* --is a note on a tree that'll be bulldozed next week.

BEE sits down hard on the bench. ROSE stares at her. Even CEDAR looks up.

ROSE:

I didn't know about Jessa.

BEE:

Yeah. Well. *(shrugs, but it's not convincing)* You were busy with your dirt.

Silence. Then CEDAR stands up and grabs the bucket of compost.

CEDAR

Compost's been ready. Smells a bit funky, but it'll help the squash.

BEE

(wrinkling nose)

Woah, how about you keep that bucket over there. Smells like death. Or our neighbor's fish stew.

ROSE

(trying to laugh)

They'd call that a compliment.

CEDAR

Death's part of it. *(smiles)* We'd have a hard time growing anything new without it.

They work. After a moment, BEE picks up a trowel. She doesn't do much with it -- just turns it over in her hands, then jabs it once into the soil. CEDAR notices. He doesn't say anything.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Attention, residents. Second-to-last warning before curfew. All citizens must return to their designated housing units. Failure to comply will result in penalties.

The announcement repeats, fading into the background. CEDAR sets down the bucket. He subconsciously looks at Bee, who's still jabbing at the dirt.

CEDAR

I stood at my door this morning for a long while. After I read it.

They look at him.

CEDAR

Almost didn't come.

ROSE

Cedar--

CEDAR

I'm not saying I shouldn't have. I'm saying I stood there. Forty years I've been putting things in this ground, and I stood at that door and I thought -- maybe that's enough. Maybe I've done my part.

(pause)

Took me a long time to put my boots on.

BEE

(carefully)

What made you?

CEDAR

Your nan. *(pause)* Not a thought of her. Just...the habit of her. The way she never waited to see if someone else was going to start. Mae just started. She handed me a trowel. Right where you're sitting, actually.

(pause)

So I put my boots on.

ROSE

(quietly)

Mae.

BEE

(after a beat)

He never calls her that.

A beat. CEDAR doesn't look at either of them. When he speaks, his voice is the same, but something in his posture has shifted.

CEDAR

Come here, both of you. There's something I've been meaning to show you.

(He reaches into the tree and pulls down a folded note, then hands it to BEE.)

From Miss Elena. Last year.

BEE

(reads)

"Thank you for the pears. They made my day. --E. from 4B."

A pause. BEE stares at the note. ROSE watches her. CEDAR is quiet.

BEE

4B's empty now.

Beat. BEE folds the note very carefully and sets it back where Cedar found it. CEDAR reaches deeper into the tree.

CEDAR

There's more in here, if you want.

He pulls out a rusted box and hands it to BEE.

BEE

(taking off the lid)

I...used to leave notes in here. To tell Rose to stop stealing my strawberries.

ROSE

Steal? I traded my drawings for those.

BEE

(snorts)

Those doodles were not worth half my strawberries.

BEE takes off the lid. Faded polaroids spill out. ROSE kneels beside her, brushing dirt off a photo.

BEE

(holding one up)

Who's that?

CEDAR

(peering over her shoulder)

Miss Elena's mother. Braiding garlic strings, must be thirty years ago. Taught half the block how to preserve.

ROSE

(pointing to another)

Look! That's Mrs. Margot. We're holding sunflowers.

CEDAR holds up a faded photo. BEE squints at it. ROSE leans in, grinning.

CEDAR

Here's one I don't think you'll remember.

(shakes the photo)

Recognize anyone?

BEE

(squints)

Where is this? That corner looks...different.

ROSE

(snatching the photo)

Cedar, no way that's you!

BEE

(leans in, bursts out laughing)

Never thought I'd live to see the day. Cedar with cheeks!

CEDAR

They called me Chipmunk for five years. Thanks for the reminder.

ROSE

Is that...the sapling?

CEDAR

(nods)

Day we planted this old one.

(gestures at the tree)

Your nan dug the hole. Old Man Thompson brought the soil -- he'd stolen it from a construction site.

BEE

Classic Mr. Thompson! He was the one with a long beard, I'm pretty sure.

CEDAR

And here...Mrs. Patel kept yelling that we were defacing public property. Then she brought lemonade.

ROSE

(laughs)

Sounds about right.

They're closer now, heads together and passing photos.

BEE

Why's the sapling wrapped in...socks?

CEDAR

Why...the frost had hit early. Your -- *(tiny pause)* --nan panicked and raided everyone's laundry lines.
Said wool holds heat.

ROSE

Well. It worked.

BEE

How'd you even get it to grow?

CEDAR

(smiles)

Stubbornness. And a lot of arguing. Mrs. Margot wanted it closer to the fence. Thompson swore it'd block the sun. But of course, Mae just started digging.

BEE

(softly)

Of course she did. Nana Mae.

BEE is now holding a photo of her and ROSE as children with sunflowers. ROSE looks over her shoulder.

ROSE

Look at us! And those sunflowers, we used to call those--

BEE

Sky giants. *(laughs, but it's wet)*

...I'd forgotten how old this darn tree is. I'd forgotten all of it.

She sits with the photo. ROSE sits next to her in the dirt. CEDAR watches them.

CEDAR

Memory's like soil. Gotta turn it over now and then.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Attention, residents. Last warning before curfew. All citizens must return to their designated housing units.

ROSE

Last warning.

BEE

Yeah.

Neither of them moves.

ROSE

Bee. If we fight this -- try to stop them -- will you help?

Long silence. BEE looks at the photo, then at the tree, then at her sister. CEDAR steps aside and slowly puts away scattered notes and photos.

BEE

(slowly)

I don't know if it'll work.

ROSE

I don't either.

BEE

I don't know if anything matters.

ROSE

Neither do I.

BEE

(almost angry)

Then why--

ROSE

(cutting her off)

Because -- I don't know. Because I can't not. Even if it's pointless, I just-- *(stops, laughs slightly at herself)* That's the thing. I just do.

BEE stares at her. Something changes in her face.

BEE

That's exhausting.

ROSE

I know.

BEE

(pause)

And stupid.

ROSE

I know.

BEE

(longer pause)

...Okay.

BEE kneels back down next to the carrots. She picks up the trowel and starts digging, wrong and too deep. ROSE watches, then kneels next to her and gently adjusts her hand and helps.

CEDAR

(pulling a seed packet from his pocket, tossing it to BEE)

Plant these. For luck.

BEE

(opens it -- pauses)

Um. You just carry sunflower seeds around?

CEDAR

(sits on the bench slowly, like he's tired)

Always. *(beat)* Knees aren't what they were, though. You're closer to the ground than I am.

BEE looks at the seeds for a moment, then presses a seed into the soil. ROSE reaches into her pocket and pulls out a sock.

BEE

Is that--

ROSE

Nan's. I keep it. *(shrugs)* I don't know why. I just do.

She covers the seed with the sock. CEDAR nods. Then BEE starts to laugh.

BEE

This is so stupid. This is so--
(laughing and crying at once)

we're planting a sunflower in a garden that's going to be demolished, using a sock, and I'm--

She stops. Wipes her face. Looks at the covered seed, then at her hands. A long beat. Then she gets up, picks up the hose, and starts watering the carrots. ROSE watches her, then picks up her trowel to join her. CEDAR sits on the bench, watching the garden.

AUTOMATED VOICE:

Curfew now in effect. All citizens must return to their designated housing units. Failure to comply will result in penalties.

None of them react but continue working in the late light. The voice repeats, fades, and becomes part of the background hum.

END OF PLAY