

**Solace Plant** - Emily Biggs  
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Grades 9-10

The boy had been running for almost an hour through the dense forest. His heart was racing, and he feared that it might beat out of his chest. He came to a halt when he met a small mountain stream trickling delicately through the woods. He squatted down by the creek for a much needed rest. Gathering water into his cupped hands, he quenched his thirst and washed his dirty, sweaty face.

Although he was exhausted, he continued his trek through the lonely forest. His body begged him to rest, but he knew time was of the essence. If he lingered by the stream much longer, his mother would surely die. She and the rest of his tribe were counting on him to retrieve the Solace Plant that would save her from the clutches of death.

He was quick and nimble and knew the forest well. He jumped like the deer and ran like the wolf. Over the logs he leapt and darted through the thin gaps between the colossal oak trees. He ran in this manner for many miles, resisting the urge to rest, until suddenly, he stopped. Looking straight ahead, he realized he had never seen this part of the forest before. The chief had warned him of this and had told him of a path that had once led to the patch of the reviving Solace Plant. He also told the boy to be cautious for the forest on each side of it was filled with terrifying beasts that patiently waited for someone to drift from the path.

The boy looked around him and at first could find nothing that even slightly resembled a path. Finally he discovered the trail that led silently through the dense, dark forest. He inhaled a deep, long breath and proceeded on the desolate path. He no longer ran but walked at a fast pace. The trail was overgrown by brambles and was invaded by immense tree roots that projected up from the ground, forcing the boy to watch his every step. The forest canopy trapped

the hot humidity and cast a faint green light upon everything below it. Tiny creatures that remained invisible to the boy scuttled near the path, but did not dare let themselves be seen. The boy grew tense when he heard the skulking little feet on the edges of the woods but soon grew accustomed to them.

His skin was hot and sticky, and his entire body ached. He pushed through the pain and continued down the solitary path. Finally the trail opened into a semicircle and in its middle grew a massive tree towering above him. Long vines clung to the tree and on the tips of these vines blossomed flowers that his chief had described as the Solace Plant. The boy carefully reached out and plucked a flower. He felt a sharp pain on the tip of his finger as a thorn attempted to protect the vital blossom. A bead of blood slowly trickled from the wound and sparkled in the green forest light.

With flower in hand, he turned back to the path that led to his mother. He walked the trail silently; hoping no beast within the forest would be stirred by his presence. As he proceeded, he had a strange feeling that something was watching him closely. He heard a slight rustle of leaves and a sharp snap of a twig to his left. He clutched his hands into tight fists and hesitantly cast his eyes in the direction of the noise. For an instant he saw bright yellow eyes staring at him but suddenly disappeared as the beast retreated into the dark forest. He gulped and quickened his step, praying that the creature was not a threat.

He still sensed those piercing yellow eyes observing his every move. Knowing that the beast would not leave the hallow confines of the forest lining the path; he set his pace to almost a jog. This sudden change in speed was a horrible mistake. The creature sensed the fear and vulnerability of the boy and seized the opportunity to pounce.

The boy's instincts were excellent as he spun around, reaching for his bow. Stringing an arrow onto the bow, the boy shakily lined his eye with the arrow and took aim at the beast

rapidly emerging from the forest. The boy identified the charging creature as a panther, larger than any he had ever seen. The massive cat stormed at the boy with his mouth open, revealing razor-sharp teeth ready to devour its prey. The boy released the bow string, sending the arrow flying rapidly through the air, hitting the panther directly in its jugular. The beast ran a few more strides and collapsed onto the forest floor. The immense cat let out a low, helpless moan; then its head hit the ground never to be lifted again.

The boy's head grew light, and he could hardly comprehend what had happened. He suddenly remembered the flower and the urgency to get back to his mother. He seemed to fly through the forest, but he felt cold and empty. Time did not seem to exist during his journey back to his tribe. Finally he caught a glimpse of his village through the thick forest. His legs began to tremble, and his vision became blurred. His head was cloudy, yet he pushed onward. His long journey and the energy he exerted had finally taken its toll over the boy's body.

He awoke to find himself in his own hut in his own cot with his mother sitting beside him. She was pale, but the boy knew the plant had defeated her illness. He attempted to sit up but an acute pain pulsed throughout his body.

"You must rest, Son," his mother ordered with a weak smile. The boy laid his head back onto his cot, knowing his mother was now safe and thus began his road to recovery.

