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Mrs. Mansapit/ Mrs. Kolo

December 2, 2021

The Land of Water

 “All systems,” I heard in my mic. The excessive air in my spacesuit made me feel loose and almost uncomfortable. To think I was going to space was a crazy idea in itself, although it was happening. In this year and age, it’s impossible to believe that they’re letting a child, barely over eleven, go to who knows what, and my parents said yes. I’m not complaining. I wanted to go but now that I’m in the space shuttle, all I want to do is go home. My seat was stiff and gray. The buttons didn’t feel so friendly at all.

 I remember sitting on my couch, watching a NASA rocket shoot into the air. I wouldn’t mind much, I wouldn’t think about all the dangers, that it was a big deal. But now that *I’m* in the same position, I wished I would’ve thought more.

 “Go,” I answered. I remember many of the crew wishing me good luck. It was quite different from being congratulated year after year by my teachers from 1st through 5th grade. A hint of their voice always sounded like they were almost nervous about whether I would make it back alive or not.

 I heard the rumbling of the rocket engine starting. This was it.

 Suddenly, I felt hot and my seatbelt felt tighter. It wasn’t the suit. I was shooting 62 miles up into space, and then going 231 million miles from home. I was starting to panic. It felt like I was stuck on a roller coaster and at the last second, you want to get off. But then I recalled that even after the scary start, I never regretted going on the ride.

 My dad always says something in Hindi, which translates to something like, ‘There is always victory after fear.’ The proverb reminded me of how my family is always thinking about me. Just remembering home made me calm down. It made me feel like I was whole.

 “Countdown initiating. Ten, nine, eight. . .” an automated voice blared in my headset. I couldn’t hear anything. I felt my adrenaline rushing back. “Five, four, three, two, one, blastoff initiating.”

 The rumbling sound was louder, obscuring my thoughts. I started pressing random buttons, as if they were going to solve the problem.

 “Hello?!” I heard in my mic. “Sharanya?!!!” It was different. It wasn’t the automated voice that was counting down. “What are you doing?!!” it screeched at me. “You’ve redirected where the spaceship is going!!!! Do you know how dangerous that is?!!! We don’t know where this planet is!! You moron!!!”

 I couldn’t speak. I didn’t know what I did wrong. “I, uh. . .” I felt hot tears stinging my eyes. “Um,” my voice trembled. I wasn’t going to Mars anymore. I was cursing myself as the rumbling got worse. Tears were now streaming down my face. *Why are you so stupid?* I screamed at myself.

I stopped crying for a second. Why cry? Crying is not going to help me get me out.

 I felt my face relax. My thoughts weren’t so jumbled anymore. My tears started drying. I couldn’t do anything now.

 I started zooming toward the atmosphere at 25, 200 miles per hour, about 7 miles per second. Math numbers floated in my head.

 All at once, there was light. I looked up.

 I couldn’t describe what I saw in words.

 The stars gleamed in clusters. They looked like little dots in a northern lights show.

 “Hudson? Come in?” I spoke into my mic.

 “Hello? Sharanya?” I heard sighs of relief from the other side. “We’re aborting the mission. We’re going to activate the ‘return to station’ command early. Do you copy?”

 “Hold on!” I exclaimed. “Don’t abort the mission! I don’t have enough time or fuel. If you do, the spaceship’s gonna self-destruct! Let the mission continue.” I knew the risk. But the risk of dying was way higher if we aborted.

 “Are you crazy?” The response sounded pleading. “You can’t take this route!”

 “But I will,” I stayed stubborn on my decision.

 Two hours passed. Nothing happened. A sudden, rumbling started again. I heard an alarm blaring.

 “Systems crashing. System crashing,” it spoke. I tried to steer it but it wouldn’t move. Was this the end? Was the moon the last thing I’d ever see? Suddenly, I felt I was going down. I screamed in horror as I ran to the back of the rocket, trying to get as far as possible to the possibly impacted place.

 *BOOM.*

 I woke up. I think I hit the ground hard because I had a sprained ankle and a massive headache. I stood up, rubbing my head. I looked out the small, broken window.

 I didn’t hit ground at all. It seemed like I landed in. . . water? I took a deep breath. Wait, I was breathing? My headpiece had broken in the crash so I had no commute back home. I tried to put an extra space helmet on but it didn’t work. What baffled me, even more, was how I was breathing here. I took my suit off. My skin did not react to it.

 I waded into the water. It was quite thick, not like normal water at all. The ‘water’ was clear, though. Much clearer than the water we have on Earth. I could pick it up and it wouldn’t slip through my fingers. Fascinating, really. I pondered on what elements it might hold. The structure looked and felt completely different than the normal ‘one hydrogen molecule and two oxygen atoms’ formula.

 I went back to why I was going to Mars: Earth isn’t safe anymore. It might redline. That’s why this whole mission exists in the first place. I don’t have time for some stupid exploration.

 I started to wade back to my ship, but I couldn’t move. The water had turned frozen. I felt a chill in my bones. My legs started to tense and numb. What should I do? I started feeling discouraged when it happened. I could move again. It seemed as if someone had released the strings pulling me back. I fell face-first into the water.

 “Ow,” I muttered. I got out completely dry, but I was too busy with my bleeding nose to notice. I started coughing badly. “Curse you. . . allergies,” I wheezed. I was always like this when the weather changed. I used to have asthma but it’s fine now. But then again, why was it acting up now? I heard a voice.

 “Im-oster!” it said. I whipped around. I couldn’t see anything but I knew there was something there. I looked down. A short half-dwarf half-elf thing glared back up at me. “Im-oster!” it said again.

 I screamed. “What are you?!!!!” He didn’t pay any attention to what I had said. He grabbed my hand and started dragging me. For a dwarf-elf, he was strong and fast. He started yelling, “Im-oster! Im-oster!” right until the edge of a broken bridge. My eyes were out of focus and everything went by in such a blur, I didn’t know what was happening. My hair flew into my face. The dwarf I looked around.

 The bridge finally became more steady. I saw different plants all around what seemed to be a fort. No, a palace. The sky was a vague light blue. The shadows were underwater-ish. The trees were like seaweed. Suddenly, I saw fish— just swimming in the air. I'm not gonna lie, it looked kinda peaceful, in its own sort of way. It was unique. Something broke my trance. “Im-oster! Im-oster!” the Thing kept shouting. The bridge repaired itself and let us through. Was it. . . magic? *Nah, that’s crazy!* I reasoned with myself. But then again, how did the bridge repair itself?

 I was pushed onto the other side. The Thing kept shouting the same thing until I was in the throne room.

 “Im-oster! Y-ur Masty,” it bowed, taking me with it. While bowing, it backed away out the door leaving me in front of the ruler. I looked up. She was wearing a white and blue greek goddess attire, with a golden crest in the middle. She didn’t look like she was older than sixteen. Her majesty’s hair flowed like water over rocks. Wait, it was water! Fascinating!

 “*Aroi*,” she said. When I didn’t respond, she looked annoyed. “How many of you do I have to encounter?” She exclaimed, exasperated. I honestly felt offended, but what confused me was how she knew English.

 “You know how to speak English?” I asked, hoarse. I felt like I was gonna die if I didn’t get water.

 “Did you swallow the water from the river?” Her majesty leaned in her chair with a softer look in her eyes. She suddenly said, “*Hacriri ella. Croy le nase*,” she pointed at me. The guards next to her started walking toward me.

 All of a sudden, I felt a sharp pain in my right arm. My eyes felt droopy. I couldn’t see straight. Was I dying? I felt peaceful. It didn’t feel like death at all. I couldn’t open my eyes. I fell asleep.

 I woke up abruptly, as if someone had shaken me awake. Though the room was empty, I felt someone watching me. I tried to sit up but I felt a searing pain in my right arm. I noticed something green on my arm. *Herbs?* I thought to myself.

 Ignoring the pain, I got up. I opened the curtains and windows, while my head throbbed with the aching. Dim light flooded into the room, drenching everything in rose gold light. *Golden hour,* I thought smiling to myself. The earthly glow reminded me of home and the training quarters. It reminded me of my family.

 Even though I was smiling, I had blurry vision. My tears clouded up my eyesight. I just wanted to go home. The feeling of being alone with nobody made me cry.

 “Good morning,” Someone came in. I blinked away my tears. I saw Her Majesty coming in. “Hope you’re doing better today,” she came over and sat on the chair next to me.

 “G-Good morning,” I stammered. “I-I’m kind of feeling better,”

 “Well, I’m glad to hear that. Look, I have a proposal,”

 “What?” I asked. What kind of proposal would the Queen have?

 “If you will help me defeat Morona, I will help you win back your. . .vehicle.” She didn’t seem to know what my spaceship was.

 “Who’s Morona?” I asked, clearly confused.

 “Well, you see, Morana is my sister, but instead of keeping our land pure, she wants to destroy Aqualiria.” The Queen had a look of hatred in her eyes. She saw me staring and returned to professionalism. “Myself is Mira Arilli. And you are. . . ?”

 “Sharanya,” I said hastily. “Sharanya Sinha.” Mira struggled to pronounce my name, just like most people.

 “Sharanya, would you like to accompany me on my quest?” I looked at her like she was making a joke. But she wasn’t.

 “I, uh,” I didn’t know what to say. It could be dangerous. But I thought about what she said. *Win back my spaceship?* “Wait, what do you mean ‘win back’?”

 “Well, uh, Morona’s drows took over the thing you are talking about,” Mira stammered as if it was her fault.

 “It’s really fine,” I said as Mira looked relieved. “But I will help.” Mira looked grateful. I got up. I winced and sat back down. Mira rushed to help me.

 “Are you okay? I guess I made the paste too strong. . .” Her face showed the disappointment she had in herself.

 She started unraveling the leaf wrap that was on my arm. It looked like different chunks of bark and leaves, but it seemed like she put sharp pic white willow bark which had caused a cut and had worsened because of the other leaves that didn’t mix well with it.

 “Sorry,” Mira said. “It must sting,” The Queen looked genuinely sympathetic.

 “It’s alright,” I said, trying to scrape up a smile. “I know, weird question, but: would you by any chance have clove oil, turmeric, neem leaves, marigold flowers, and a mortar and pestle?”

 A few moments later, Mira returned with all of the things I asked for, including some clean water. I mashed the neem leaves, marigold flowers, and turmeric powder into one along with some clove oil and water. I applied the paste on my cut and wrapped the cloth over my arm again. While I was doing all this, Mira was watching me intently, following my every move. When I was done I asked her, “Why did you wrap anything around my hand anyway?” That seemed to snap her out of her trance. She looked startled at my voice.

 “Well,” Mira started. “You landed on the southern side of the land and us nymphs never go on that side and, well, your right hand was affected.” She gestured to my arm. “That side is poisoned, you see, so it somehow seeped into your skin and made a deep rash. It was good fortune that our elves were patrolling on the border and saw you.”

 I understand now. Some things grew here like Earth but in much stronger quantities. Mira had added the amount a person here would need. Not an outsider. I felt bad just crashing into this beautiful planet, the least I could do was help Mira in return.

 “I will help no matter what happens. It’s the least I can do after I crash-landed and probably ruined some of Aqualiria.” I heard Mira mention Aqualiria and assumed that it was the name of the planet.

 Mira was speechless. “Well, I, uh, I,” she struggled and finally sighed. “My apologies. It’s just that I’ve never gotten help this easily,”

 This time, I was speechless. “How?!” I blurted out. “Sorry,” I sheepishly replied to my horrid return.

 “It’s fine. Well,” the Queen smoothed her dress, “we shall leave at dawn tomorrow. I don’t suppose you have any luggage?”

 “No, and the timing is perfect,” I responded. “See you.”

 “*Au revoir.*” She exited, leaving me alone in the morning sunshine.

 “All ready?” The next morning I was up as early as ever, packing. I took all the medical things and Mira took all the food items.

 “Ready,” she replied. I noticed she wasn’t holding the bag. It was floating in a. . .bubble?

 “Whoa, how are you doing that?” I exclaimed. It was like low gravity!

 “Us elves have. . .powers,” Mira seemed hesitant. I wonder why.

 “It might be useful?” I shrugged. I was awestruck on the inside. How does that work? There was just no possible way for powers to exist. I awkwardly asked, “Can- can I touch your hair?” I felt embarrassed even asking.

 “Sure,” Mira turned around to exhibit her long hair. Half of it had turned black and the other half was still ocean-like. I touched it. It flowed over my hands like a snake. When I tried to touch the dark side, it gave me a burn. The hard rock didn’t move. It was barely hair.

 “What happened?” I whispered.

 “Morona,” Mira sighed. “She polluted some of the land and it shows on my hair. It used to be all blue. But now. . .” I felt bad for her. It’s hard enough running a kingdom, not to add your sister trying to ruin it!

 “We should probably go,” I said, trying to change the subject.

 “We may.”

 Mira and I crossed the place grounds and out the front gate. We kept walking without a word, but I couldn’t help wondering where we were going.

 “Mira,” I started, “where exactly are we going?” She looked up.

 “We’re going to the Cove of Bones,” she replied like that didn’t send shivers down my spine.

 “WHAT?!!” I shouted at her. We kept on walking. “WHY ARE WE GOING TO A COVE OF BONES?!!!!” I was worried. Why would we go to a place where we might end up dead?!

 “LISTEN,” Mira finally burst, “THERE IS NO WAY WE CAN TAKE THE SAFE ROUTE EVERYWHERE!!!!” I had never seen anyone this mad. Then it hit me.

 She was right.

 We can’t just take the easy way out. We never can. That was just the solid truth. There was silence. I heard chirping. We were in a pathway with trees on each side. They looked like ever-greens, trees that stay lush year-round. Funny how these trees hadn’t been cut down. On Earth, they would’ve cut them down in two to six years.

 Suddenly, I heard wind whipping. Sand flying into my face. Wet sand. Mira was running now. She grabbed my hand and leaped to the side.

 “*Hoki lea*,” she breathed out in her foreign language.

 “What was that?” I was drawing breath heavily.

 “It was the Dune of Death,” she explained, “you didn’t see it, did you?”

 “No, bu—” I was cut off.

 “So we must continue,” she dusted herself again and walked again to the path like nothing had happened.

 We walked for a bit longer. I saw a big opening, it’s inside like a stary night. It looked beautiful. I left Mira’s hand and started toward it when Mira pulled me away. “Snap out of it!” she told me. She explained that those “stars” were bones of people who have entered but never made it out. She believed they had been lured into the cove. “So please proceed with caution,” she finished. The alarm showing in her face looked genuine, though I didn’t know if it was.

 Mira did something with her hands and swished them around. She chanted something unintelligible. Suddenly she had a small gem in her hand. It looked like it had water inside of it, like little droplets.

 “I couldn’t perfect it,” she mumbled, disappointed. She threw the gem on the ground, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

 “Why would you do that?” I asked.

 “Well, there was no use for it. It doesn’t work,” she shrugged. Mira started again, conjuring another one of the gems. This time, she seemed satisfied with it and started flipping it around in mid-air, creating a water tornado. She raised it over her head and smashed it down anyway.

 “What’d you do that for?!” I exclaimed, brushing water off of me.

 “Don’t brush it off! It’s going to help you!” she shouted.

 “Okay, okay,” I apologized. Something flittered onto my ring finger. I tried to shake it off, but it wouldn’t budge. I looked at my finger and saw a ring.

 “You can use it as a communication device. Just tap it twice if you need to find me, or you can just follow it.” When she said ‘it’, that made me look closer. A little gem was sitting on top of a flower. I taped it twice and the gem grew wings and took off towards Mira. When I reached for the gem, it perched back in its place. Mira seemed amused by all this. “Just don’t lose it,” she warned. “Now, I’m going to do a spell that will get us to the other side of this cove, but I need some help. We both need to go inside and grab a touch of tuchandra root. It will enhance our safety and help us get over. . .in one piece.” Mira winced as she said those last words. It showed me she did not have a good experience with the spell.

 We slowly entered the cave, cautious of our surroundings. Something clicked. We both whipped around.

 “Sorry, I dropped the flashgem,” Mira said.

 “The flashgem?”

 “A flashlight but in ring form. Anyways, we are going to go straight and then there is a fork. We will go on separate sides. If you need my help, tap the ring three times, okay?” She looked at me expectantly.

 “Alright,” I replied. We walked ahead without a word. I knew this was only for business, but I wonder if Mira and I could actually become friends. *That’s crazy,* I told myself, *It’s only a deal and then you go back home and you can forget about everything else.* But I couldn’t stop thinking about it. *What if* questions kept popping up in my head.

 Before I knew it, we were at the fork. We went our separate ways, still without saying a word to each other. Of course, it was only a deal, but maybe we could at least talk without the awkward gaps? Maybe I should start the conversation. But what if I make bigger problems communicating with Mira? Right now it was the least of my problems.

 A huge beast advanced on me, growling. I backed away, screaming for Mira. I forgot I had the ring. I was defenseless. The three-headed creature kept walking closer, slowly. Drool fell from its mouth, the dog sniffing the air.

A woman walked beside it.

“Celebrus, you naughty dog,” her villainous voice cooed, “why have you brought in today?”

Her attention focused on me.

“Oh,” she looked at me in disgust, “Mira’s sent. She must not be far from here then. Sent a peasant this way? How careless.” She cackled wickedly. “Drows, tie her and take her to my lair. No one should see you,” she ordered, vanishing into the darkness. It’s over. Everything was over. Our plan, probably my life, and my chance of going back home.

Tears against my eyes, I got up. I wiped my tears and felt my ring brush against my cheek. My ring! I tapped my ring twice and quite surly, the little gem-bird appeared again! The evil elves started chasing it, which gave me enough time to sprint out. I started toward the opening when a hand grabbed my shoulder. I kicked back and heard a shriek.

“Why would you do that?!” I heard Mira’s voice.

“I’m so sorry! I thought you were one of the drows because they were chasing me and— I’m sorry.” I felt really bad. “Where did you get hurt?” I asked hurriedly.

“On my leg,” Mira scrunched her pant leg up to reveal a bruise the size of a boulder.

“Do you think you can walk?” I asked.

“Maybe,”

“Well, try to walk to that rock. I’ll help you,” I reached toward her, but she held her hand up.

“I think you’ve helped enough,” Mira got up, and slowly hopped toward a huge rock and hid behind it.

I felt rasque. I cursed myself over and over again and sat on the other side of the rock.

“Hey, Mira. I just want to say sorry for everything.”

“I’m fine now,” she said. I noticed she was right above me. “Let’s go,” she gestured, impatiently.

“I’m so sorry Mira. I—”

“We just need to go,” she angrily wretched out of her mouth. We started walking back into the cave, but at the fork, Mira pulled me over onto one way. We kept walking in silence, but I couldn’t help smiling.

We walked a bit longer when we heard muffled voices coming from the other side. I wanted to tell Mira but a hand clasped over my mouth before I could do anything. The muffled voices were Morona! She came over with. . .a dragon? *A dragon!* I thought, astonished.

“Who’s a good boy? Yes you are!!” she cooed. She saw us. “Mira,” she prowled, “what are you doing here?”

“I’m trying to make things right,” she replied in a pleading voice.

“After what you did to me?” she cackled again. “Forget about it. Forget about me. If you ever cared we wouldn’t be here.” I guess Morona was hurt. But the real question: what did Mira do?

“What happened?” I turned Mira toward me. “What did you do?”

“I, um, I might have, um, taken Morona’s, um, rightful space to the throne? I knew it was wrong but I—”

“But I what!” Morona shot back. “But I am older! I was the one to the throne and you tell fake stories? You are so very low!” I could feel the ground shaking with Morona’s anger.

“STOP!” I yelled out. “Fighting is going to help no one. Why can't you guys settle it in peace?”

“Because we just can’t!” Mira and Morona yelled in unison.

“You can take your things and don’t mingle with our lives!” Morona, again, melted into the darkness.

“I’m so sorry, Mira,” I apoligized outside the cave while she was sobbing.

“We came all this way just to, just to fail,” she sniffled. “I’m sorry for putting you in danger,” she hugged me. “You’re a really good friend.”

I felt. . .apriciated. I hugged her back. I started to get up when I sat back down. My spaceship. . .it was mended. I got up and touched the cool metal.

“I guess this is goodbye then?”

“Yes, well, will you promise me you won’t tell anyone about Aqualiria? We want to stay underground,”

“I promise.” I hopped in and started the engine. I waved as the voice counted down.

“Three, two, one, blast off initiating.” The rumbling started again and I shooted off into space.

“Landing initiated. Welcome back,” the AI said once I had landed. Her voice was getting annoying. I opened the chute to find everyone gathering around me, congratulating me. I didn’t dare mention the scientific discoveries I had made or Mira, and I knew I had done the right thing.