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A Journey to the Edge of the World

It rained the evening before Shiro went to the edge of the world. It was a light rain, cool and soothing, glimmering with the swiftly fading light of day, and Shiro and his parents rushed to get the last of the harvest under cover: most went into the musty, creaky, but surprisingly still-solid storehouse, and the rest was assembled in wicker baskets on the porch, to be eased down rickety wooden steps, with the aid of a lamp, into the cellar afterwards. They had begun as soon as the first drops fell, but it was pitch black, lit only by the lantern dangling outside the front door, by the time that aching legs and arms and backs finally carried them onto the porch for the final time and into the house. Dinner was waiting there, hanging over the firepit in the cast iron pot that it had been simmering in all day, having been tended to diligently by Shiro's grandmother all evening. They all gathered around the low table in the common room, sat down on the cushions surrounding it, and fell upon the noodles, broth, and mixed vegetables in their bowls ravenously. None of them spoke, preoccupied as they were with filling empty stomachs and resting weary limbs. After eating his fill Shiro retreated down the only hallway to his bed, a simple padded mat, separated from the house, like the rest of the rooms, by slatted bamboo screens. He lay there, eyes closed, listening to the pitter-patter of the rain on the rooftop and waiting for sleep to take him.

“Hey sweet pea,” said a whisper as his door, another screen, slid open a crack. His mother was doing her nightly rounds before bed. “You still awake?”

Shiro rubbed his tired eyes and mumbled his assent, easing up to a sitting position.

“Yeah. I suppose.”

She eased the rest of the screen open and moved quietly into his room, her face dimly lit by the flickering lamp she held in one hand, and sat down at the foot of his mat.

“I just wanted to check in before tomorrow. You still planning on taking that trip in the morning?”

“Yeah, if that’s alright?” He hoped there hadn’t been a small disaster since he’d retired to bed. The storehouse could’ve sprung another leak, she might’ve found a den of mice in the cellar again, and he’d be stuck at home again at the end of harvest dealing with the latest in a never-ending cycle of domestic disasters.

“It should be. I imagine your father and I can still manage a day or two without you. These bones aren’t that old yet.”

“Really?” Shiro was genuinely surprised. It had been two years since he’d last been allowed a whole few days to himself and before that he had been too young to stay out overnight on his own. On a few occasions he’d managed to convince his father, and once even his mother, to take him out exploring the forested hills that surrounded their farm, but those excursions were rare as well.

“So long as you’ve finished up your work for school. It starts up again right after you’ll be getting back, remember, and I don’t want you wandering around for the rest of your break ignoring your schooling.”

Shiro groaned. “Why do I need so much of an education if I’m just gonna be a farmer like you and dad? Farming’s all there is here ...” he muttered quietly, half-hoping his mother wouldn’t hear. She did.

“We’ve been over this before, Shiro,” she said in the weary tones of someone tired of justifying something obvious.

“Yes mom.” He acquiesced more gracefully and quickly than he’d expected to. The news that he’d be allowed go out alone for a couple of days had definitely helped. “I’ve almost finished all of it. I’ll bring the last book with me and read it by the fire tomorrow night.”

She thought about it for a couple of seconds, and then nodded her assent. “All right. Be careful out there.”

A small smile crept onto Shiro’s face. “Will do. Love you mom.”

“Love you too.”

As she left, easing the bamboo screen closed behind her, Shiro lay back down and wrapped the single blanket around himself as cool air trickled through the slats in the screens into his room. The rain had ceased during his mother’s visit, and all he could hear was the crickets chirping softly as he drifted into sleep.

The next morning Shiro awoke slowly, savoring the knowledge that the day was his. After around half an hour of slipping in and out of pleasant dreams, he stirred, dressed himself in his outdoors clothes, still a little damp from the night before, and wandered toward the common room, where he found his grandmother grinding some of last year’s harvest into rice flour. His parents

were already awake and working, judging by the empty pegs near the door on which their hats normally hung.

“Good morning little one,” his grandmother ventured with a smile.

“I’ve been taller than you for a while now, Grandma,” he quipped.

“That doesn’t mean you’re not still little,” she said, pleased with herself. “Your breakfast’s gone cold dear; it’s over on the table”

Shiro shook his head with a wry grin. “Thanks Grandma.”

He ate quickly, placing his bowl and chopsticks gently in the bucket, half-full of water, in the corner where the day’s dirty dishes soaked, when he was through, and walked over to his own peg near the door, where he put on the hat and jacket that were hanging there.

“See you in a couple days Grandma,” he called from the doorway.

“Don’t get into too much trouble out there little one,” she called back.

“I’ll try not to.”

He chuckled a little to himself as he pulled on the rucksack that’d been lying optimistically near the door for the past week, ever since he’d packed it with a sleeping bag, heavy cloth sheet, flint and steel, enough food to last a week -- just in case, and a waterskin that he could refill in the stream along the way.

“Trouble? Me? Never ...” he whispered to himself and strode out the door, down the path to the stream that marked the end of the farm, and towards the edge of the world.

The air was crisp and cool, and all around Shiro autumn was in full bloom. The path was sprinkled with the first fallen leaves from the trees surrounding him. Their remaining foliage was a

riot of color: green brightening into yellow, then orange, and eventually joining a sea of red with pastels scattered rarely throughout. The walk down to the stream was quiet, save scattered moments of birdsong and the consistent crunch of leaves underfoot as he made his way past the terraced green slopes of his parents', and he supposed his, farm down towards the stream. He'd only been to the edge of the world, this edge of the world rather -- there were others, though this one was by far the closest, once before, when his father, after much beseeching, had finally agreed to take Shiro to see it. That was almost seven years ago now, but he still remembered the way.

“We'll follow the way the stream flows,” his father had said.

“And then?”

“That's all there is. Our little stream eventually becomes a river, and that river flows right off the edge of the world.”

And so it did. Shiro followed the path the stream took, hopping across stones from bank to bank if the path got rocky, smiling at the occasional fish he saw venturing out from still pools alongside the stream into the current, only to find it too much for their fins and retreat back to safety. Soon, the stream swelled into a river and the horizon began to grow before his eyes. It was midday now, and the sky was bigger than he'd ever seen it before, even wider than he'd remembered from last time. He was getting close.

He stopped briefly to refill his waterskin and to eat a couple of wild apples that he'd grabbed along the way, but otherwise made good time and by late afternoon Shiro exited the forest to find a small clearing next to the falls at the edge of the world. Here, the river rushed all the way off the edge, falling noiselessly into an unexplored darkness. Shiro supposed that the water must go somewhere, but he wasn't about to attempt to figure out where. He'd heard stories about people

who'd tried, who'd tied ropes to the rocky outcroppings near the edge and went down into the black
armed with lanterns, who'd come back disappointed and shivering with nothing to show for their
journey but tales of a cold, endless void studded with stars like the night sky. He simply put down
his pack and started assembling a rudimentary shelter: sturdy branches formed a frame, to which he
tied the thick cloth sheet he'd brought; dry twigs and flimsier tinder went into a pile that he'd set
alight after darkness fell completely. One cozy-looking tent later Shiro let out a satisfied sigh and
looked up at the sky, where stars were already beginning to wink into visibility in anticipation of the
night to come. Eventually he wandered towards the edge and sat on the most comfortable looking
outcropping he could find, and gazed happily out into the horizon.

“Beautiful, aren't they?”

Shiro scrambled up from the edge of the world at the unexpected greeting, and turned to see
an unfamiliar girl behind him. She looked his age, or perhaps a little younger, but that was where the
similarities ended. Her skin was impossibly pale, her hair, braided in an unfamiliar style around her
head, shone near golden in the dying sunlight, and her eyes were brighter than any he'd ever seen,
the color of cloudless sky. She was wearing what looked like a sheet draped somewhat awkwardly
over a tunic. The whole ensemble looked too clean to be real, a starker white than he'd thought
possible. Shiro realized that he was staring and attempted a response.

“What ... sorry, who are you?” he managed to stammer.

“I'm simply a fellow stargazer,” she said opaquely, and motioned toward the cluster of rocks
where, until just now, he'd been semi-comfortably sitting. “Do you mind if I join you for a little
while?”

Shiro couldn't think of any reason why not. "Sure."

They sat in silence there with their legs hanging off the edge of the world, as the sun retreated beyond the mountains to their backs, casting the landscape a tranquil purple-grey, and the air grew cold and still. It was night by the time Shiro spoke again.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

She smiled slightly at the corners of her mouth and eyes. "No, I'm not."

"Then where are you from? If you don't mind my asking."

He turned toward the strange girl, who met his gaze briefly before tilting her head back toward the sky, seeming lost in thought. Eventually, she looked back at him again.

"I was born on a world called Earth, a million stars and more besides from here. Look over there, to your left." She pointed toward what looked like a giant cloud of dust in the night sky, studded, especially in the middle, with stars. "Earth's star, Sol, still shines about right there, out on the edge of the Orion Arm."

"Earth's star still shines ... wait, what about Earth? Did something happen to it?"

Again the stranger paused, looking pensively off into the distance. Her silence lasted near a minute, long enough that Shiro was about to interject to tell her that if she didn't want to talk about it she didn't have to, but just as he was about to say something she nodded her head slightly, as if in agreement, and spoke.

"There was a war. There were many before it, but this was the last. By the end Earth's surface had been reduced to cinders, glass, and ash and then, during the final days of the conflict, it was broken. For good."

"Broken?"

“Yes.” She bit her lip and a shadow seemed to cross her face. “My home was sundered, shattered, smashed, if you like. It lives on only in human memory now.”

“Human memory? Are you saying that you’re human?” Shiro was incredulous and it showed. “You sound like you’ve seen more years than my grandma, but you don’t look any older than I do. You can’t be human! People get old. People die ...” he trailed off bitterly.

“They used to.” She pursed her lips a little and furrowed her brow. “Not anymore. Tell me Shiro; what do you know about the human condition? How do you know what war is if in the entire history of your world there’s never been one? Could there be more to being human out there, different ways to be human?”

He stopped short, anger and frustration collapsing into confusion. “I ... don’t know. So there are more out there then?”

“There are more humans, many more, in the world beyond than there are stars in the sky. Most of them would look even stranger to you than I do. There are even some people in the wider world,” She smiled conspiratorially at him, as though he’d been let in on a secret that he couldn’t quite comprehend yet, “who aren’t even human at all.”

“Why don’t I know about any of them, if they’ve existed all this time?” Shiro said, his confusion growing steadily. “Do my parents know? Why wouldn’t they tell me if they did? If they don’t, why wouldn’t people here know about the others?”

“Your parents do not know, Shiro, though they did once, long ago. The only people who know the truth, that there are many other worlds besides this little one, are sitting right here, legs dangling off the edge of it. War haunts its survivors, Shiro, and there have been so many wars. This world, your world is a place of healing, of tranquility and simplicity where people come to forget

their memories for a while and rebuild themselves. They live and die and are reborn until the shards of their personalities that they left behind determine that they're finally whole again, ready to go back into the world beyond. Sometimes, however, someone is ready to leave but there isn't anyone new to replace them and, on those rare occasions, someone completely new is born: someone like you. Everyone else chose to be here long ago, but this is your first world and you never got to make that choice. Now you do."

She finished speaking and sat very still, there on the edge, waiting patiently for him to make up his mind.

"What does choosing mean? Can I ever come back?" A little worry crept into Shiro's voice at the thought of leaving forever.

"No. If you leave you cannot come back as Shiro. Someone else perhaps. But not yourself. And you wouldn't be allowed to remember the world beyond." She frowned slightly, and then lay back onto the grass behind them, pushing herself up entirely onto solid ground. He joined her, wordlessly. They lay there gazing up into the star-studded darkness for a while before she broke the silence again.

"What are you so worried about?" she asked.

"My family," he said finally. "I don't want to leave them." He thought of his mother, and father, and grandmother, and of all of his memories of them from his short life and wept a little there, face pressed into the cold hard ground at the edge of the world.

She waited for him to finish, and when he was done wiping his eyes she helped him up and led him to the pile of long-ignored kindling.

"I'm getting a little cold," she said pointing at the fire-to-be. "Would you mind?"

“Of course.”

After the fire caught they sat next to each other for a while, once again without words as he turned the offer over and over in his head, as she stared into the heart of the fire. She must have been deep in thought as well, though about what he couldn't guess.

She took his hand then and whispered something, so softly that he almost couldn't hear. “I had to make this choice once too. Well, not this one exactly, but one very, very similar. I ... never saw them again.” A single tear ran down her face, followed slowly by another, and then, faster this time, yet another. Shiro supposed that he should hug her then, and he did and she didn't object.

After wiping her eyes a little later, she continued. “When I was very very young, younger even than you if you can believe it, people came to me at school and promised me the world if I went with them. And I got it, though that's a story for another time. But I still miss my mom and dad, even now, all these years later. I used to watch the stars like this with my dad when I was really little. He would point out Orion and his belt, Perseus and the Pegasus, which was his steed, the twins: Castor and Pollux ...” Her voice tailed off as she recognized the confusion on Shiro's face. “Sorry, wrong mythology and night sky and all that. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I understand.”

He nodded and then stared at the now dying embers of the fire and asked, “Was it worth it?”

“Yeah. It was. If it means anything.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

Shiro stacked a little more kindling onto the fire's corpse, stoked it up once more, and they watched together as the updraft from the flames tossed flecks of red-hot ash into the night sky until, once again, all that remained were embers.

Shiro came back from the edge of the world changed, though quite how his family could never put their finger on. They chalked it up to him getting a little older, and sure enough the slim boy of sixteen grew into a man before their very eyes. He ended up marrying a nice girl from the nearby village, and before even Shiro could quite catch up with what was happening he was middle-aged, the father of twins, a boy and a girl. His grandmother passed away soon after the twins' birth, happy to have held her great-grandchildren before she died. Shiro's parents followed not long after, and before he knew it he was holding grandchildren of his own. Finally, at the ripe old age of seventy-six, his wife passed away as well, and Shiro packed his bags and left the old farmhouse in the capable hands of his daughter and her husband. He told them, simply, that he was going on a journey.

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