

BRIGHTLY

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She held the sun in her hand and it didn't burn.

Bridget gripped the pole as if letting go would destroy her. She knew that's what it would feel like. With her other hand, the one pinned behind her back, she squeezed. The circle of wood, perfectly the size of her palm, would leave a ring in her skin like it always did. Months before, its shine had been brighter, but enough squeezes from Bridget had smoothed the surface. Flecks of paint had gotten stuck in the wrinkles on her palm. She'd hated washing them off, feeling as if she washed her confidence away with the memory of the token's former glory: a sun, painted with spikes of gold and red, meant to bring warmth to whomever clutched it. Bridget had clutched it too much.

It's been ten seconds, she thought. Just another five... no. I need to move. With eyes tightly shut, she pulled herself one-handedly up the pole. Water trickled along her skin. She was drenched. Worse, a drop clung to the tip of her nose, goading a constant tickle she couldn't scratch. If Bridget released the pole, she failed level B for the fourth year in a row.

Twenty seconds remained, and just as many feet. Bridget had summoned her strength – now came using it. Up she crept, inching along the pole. Oh, how high she'd climbed!

High, high – don't think the word. Instead...

"Think how warm the sun is."

Bridget chewed her lip. The advice hurt to consider. It came from a ghost, one who had never been. Things had always come and gone; and Bridget, fourteen years old today, had grown used to clinging where she could. She'd clung then, and she clung now to the pole that had defined her happiness the past three years. No, this pole had not defined any happiness; it had *denied* it.

Cold metal bonked her nose, startling her eyes open. At least her nostrils no longer itched, though the relief was not enough to distract her from the vast space hanging below her feet. Bridget was high! More than distance, however, she saw her isolation. Only she and the pole occupied this damp room. Anxiety pinched her heart. Her grip faltered, and she slipped several feet. Her fingers flexed, her legs locked, and she hugged the pole forcefully enough to stop her fall.

"I won't let you fall."

In practice, Bridget had relied on someone to catch her. She was alone

now, lonelier than she'd ever been. For a short while, she'd had a friend. That warmth had vanished as quickly as the paint on her token.

Why must things go? she wondered. Go... I need to go!

With a boost of desperation, Bridget set her attention on the pole and shimmied upward. Every movement taunted her; it snarled threats of falling and failing. She pictured the sun and all its warmth, but her fingertips stayed numb and her heart frozen. Mere seconds remained, too little time unless she tripled her pace. The will to try refused to come. What did she climb towards? Level B, the achievement she'd yearned for the past three years? Level B would bring unknown territory, and Bridget would navigate it alone, as she always had. It would be easier to give up, let gravity carry her to the floor and back to level A, where she'd be ridiculed but at least comfortable. Instructor Sheedy was there. He'd be kind to her.

A face burst into her memories, one redder than the sun. She'd had a friend, even if only for eight months. The ice in her chest had melted then. Buds had even begun to flower. She pictured yellow and gold petals cocooning her in silky warmth – the heat of friendship, forged once in her past. Bridget had enough memory for the both of them; she'd cling to that and let the past carry her toward the future.

Her watched buzzed the final time just as she breached the top. Bridget tightened her hand around the head of the pole, where the nozzle sprayed between her fingers. Light peeped from over the wall that led into the next room. She'd never seen into level B.

Had she passed A? She hardly dared check her watch for verification.

"Oh, I can't fail. Please, let me have passed...." She murmured a few more seconds before tentatively dropping her gaze to her wrist.

Proceed, it read in bright blue letters.

Her chest expanded as if breaking through chains. Bridget Avary, the oldest A in all of MTA history, had just become a B!

Already the next time limit began, disrupting her raw joy before it could filter through her toes. She reached toward the wall beside her; it didn't touch the ceiling, which meant she had a ledge to hold. Two-handed now, she straddled the air for a moment before thumping against the wall. She certainly couldn't look down now – though, somehow, the thought of space didn't terrify her so much. That is, until she pulled herself over the wall and landed on a platform aglow in the otherwise dark room. She had her footing for one second before it escaped her. The ledge simply

collapsed, and Bridget found herself falling through dim air toward a floor dozens of feet away. As soon as she shrieked, her feet knocked the hard surface. She teetered but caught herself, a hand over her heart. Her knees were still bent. She stood in an awkward hunch and gazed around, wondering what to do next.

Light burst into existence; she flung her arm over her eyes, which quickly adjusted. She saw that the level B room consisted of a series of ledges that jutted from the walls. At the very top, one ledge had collapsed vertically so that it lay flat against the wall. Even as she watched, it lifted to horizontal position again. Evidently, the ledges dropped when touched.

A whirring began in the ceiling; a hole had opened, through which someone descended on a rope. Bridget knew why: she'd failed B, and her supervisor had come to relieve her. The recent joy of her success burned too tangibly to allow any sadness. Next year, she'd pass B. For now, she'd bask in her achievement.

Her supervisor touched down and released his harness. Instructor Sheedy wore a smile that mirrored hers. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

He stood much taller than her, but the height difference had never been the reason for her timidity around him. Instructor Sheedy, while not quite gruff, carried a stern air that locked Bridget in a cone – although, lately, he'd showed a softer side to his personality.

"You passed, Bridget," he said. "Well done."

"Thank you."

"After today –" He blanched, having noticed something on the floor behind her. His fingers twitched. A moment later, her sun token landed in his hand. She must've dropped it. Instructor Sheedy rotated the coin. It was barely an inch in diameter, yet he inspected it as if it were too big for his hand. "Where did you get this?" he said quietly.

"She gave it to me, sir. Last year." Bridget swallowed against the sudden balloon in her throat. Thinking of the ghost hurt again. As the sorrow folded over her, she noticed her instructor shared the emotion. She'd never seen him with an expression so... *fragile*. He was the commanding officer, well known as the best cadet in the academy, yet he looked as if he'd forgotten his young inferior witnessed the turmoil evident in his eyes. She didn't think he'd be inclined to return her sun token.

"Would you like to keep it?" she asked.

He flinched. He smoothed a thumb over the coin, then stiffly handed it to Bridget. "She gave it to you. Not me." Instructor Sheedy tugged on the harness that hung from the ceiling. "Let's head back."

She thought they'd share the rope, as they had in previous years. Instead, her instructor jumped straight toward the ceiling and vanished into the hole. She ascended alone.

On the roof of the stadium, Instructor Sheedy waited with his hands behind his back. He'd always been a cadet of few emotions, but those he did feel were etched plainly on his honest face. Bridget understood his struggle. She'd lost a roommate, and Instructor Sheedy had lost a partner. They'd rarely discussed their mutual friend; Bridget had feared sounding impertinent. He was, after all, her superior. However, on their silent walk toward the edge of the roof, the gap between instructor and student diminished. Bridget yearned to fill the role they'd both lost.

"She did care about you, sir."

"Not enough." He paused at the ledge of the roof. His blue eyes inspected something in the woods.

"I—I don't think that's true."

He suddenly faced her. "How do you know?" he asked, somehow on the same plane as Bridget, as if they'd both fallen off that platform and landed beside each other. He stared with his usual intensity, yet this did not intimidate her. Gone was her stern instructor. The boy before her had only earnest desire.

"Because I know her," she said softly. "And so do you."

Instructor Sheedy furrowed his brows. His head turned back toward the trees. A windy minute passed. Bridget shivered as winter snuck into her suit. The blaze of beating level A turned wispy. She tried to cling and found that her determination was shrinking again.

Finally, he spoke. Not to her, but to the broad forest around them. "As a B, you would go on missions. Do you believe you're prepared for that?"

"I think so, sir."

"I need better assurance than that. Cadets die every week, and I've promised to keep you alive." His fingers curled. Instructor Sheedy found Bridget's gaze. "She cared about you, too," he murmured.

"Really?"

"Yes."

A tingle began in her toes. *Paresthesia*, Dr. Garcia called it—a symptom

of her anxiety. This tingling felt right, however. It burned and didn't hurt.

"Don't lose that coin, Bridget," he said.

"I won't, sir."

"Good." He held out a hand and kept it extended. What did he wait for?

Bridget blinked. He waited for *her*. She reached, half expecting him to shrink away in regret. He didn't. A firm hand secured hers. *He's not letting go*, she thought. Together, they jumped.

And together, they landed.