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MY FIRST LIFE

SHALL NEVER forget the day my first life ended.

Not that my next life began right away after that. For a fuzzy while, I hovered between them, not certain where to land.

But for now, let me tell you about that first last day.

#

JERIAH AND I were about eleven, best as we can figure. Gran didn't remember when we were born, and Pa never talked about it. But we were about the same age as our friend Mayne, and he was almost twelve.

He and Jeriah found me near the cave that morning. You see, my grown brother Ibro was at the house. He didn't live there, but he hung around sometimes, like he was hiding from something. And when he was there, it wasn't wise for a girl to be anywhere nearby. That's why I'd spent the night in the cave.

When Riah and Mayne canoed around the bend, I was high up a tallpole tree picking papes for breakfast.

Riah and I had found the cave one time when Pa sent him out with two baskets to fill with papefruits. Pa didn't send *me*, of course. As far as he was concerned, *I* didn't exist. But he didn't care if I helped.

Everybody knows papevines climb the trees that grow along the lower part of the sharpfall. Sometimes you'll find them elsewhere, but they like the water best. So we'd canoed along the water's edge, searching out the rounded, green-and-white foliage that wrapped around the tree trunks, looking for pods of pink fruit high in the branches. We only found a few here and there, and it took all day to fill those two baskets. But we also found the cave hidden behind a place where water cascaded down from above.

On the morning in question, Riah couldn't see me up in the tree's umbrella, but he always called whenever he approached, so I'd know who was coming. "Jem!"

I'd seen them a mile off. "What ya want?"

Riah didn't answer. Just steered the canoe toward my voice. When they reached the bank, Mayne grabbed a rope and stepped off the bow seat onto a rock. While he tied the canoe to a scrawny tree, Riah climbed out and shaded his eyes with his hand, scanning the slope. "Pa's off dragoning."

I didn't move. "So?"

"So we have to get the skinning shed cleared out and the soaking pots ready before he gets home."

The pain in my gut, always there those days, twisted and tightened till I thought I'd fall out of the tree. "I ain't goin' home." I'd stay up there for a week if it kept me from Ibro.

Riah's gaze had been searching all that time, but it zeroed in on me now. "Ibro ain't there. Gran had him go with her to get a load of salt."

I relaxed a little, though my gut still cramped. "What do you need me for?" I knew the answer, but had to ask.

"Takes two." His tone implied I was stupid for asking.

"Only 'cause you're a gel eel."

Mayne climbed the steep slope. "I'd help, but Ma likes me to be there when she gets home from work."

Holding a pod of papas in my teeth, I shinned down the tree, trying not to wonder what it would be like to have a ma. Especially one who wanted you around. "Riah don't need your help anyway. Or he wouldn't, if he weren't such a sliming gel eel."

Riah snorted. "If I am, so are you, 'cause we're twins, y'know."

"Wish I could forget."

I handed Riah the papas. He and Mayne plucked them from the stems and ate them as we picked our way along the steep slope through brush and over rocks. After pulling off the last pink fruit, Mayne tossed the pod's gnarled skeleton into the water below, where it floated on its back like a big dead spider.

I DON'T FIGURE you've ever been to Freemansland, and probably most of what you've heard about it is wrong. So let me tell you what it's really like.

It's true that it's an island, and not a natural one. In the distant past, some unknown people built it for a purpose long since forgotten. The land itself was long forgotten after the last great war centuries ago that just about wiped out everyone. It took the rest of the world a long time to find us again—and we wished they never had.

Freemansland is an uneven oval shape, built in six levels. At the base, it's about 400 kilometers across and 350 wide. The highest level, the smallest, is flat on top like a table, with sheer rocky sides all around. This steep, almost-vertical wall, called a sharpfall, plunges about 1700 meters and ends at a moat of sorts. The stillwater, so called because there's no current and it's not much affected by tides, wraps around the whole tabletop in a watery band about a kilometer and a half wide and up to fifteen meters deep.

A high rock rim around the outside edge holds in the stillwater, except for overflow areas where it pours down to the next level. Each level is the same—a sharpfall going up to the level above, with a wide stillwater at the foot. Except that the lowest sharpfall ends at the ocean.

On the day I'm telling you about, Freemansland was all I knew, and all I wanted to know. As far as I was concerned, Freemansland was all there was.

Though most of the things you hear about the place aren't true, it does live up to its nickname, The Land of Many Mysteries. But I was learning its secrets. If I wished for anything back then, it was to learn more of them.

Well, okay, there were other things I'd have liked. To not be scared anymore, for instance, or in pain. I didn't know why I hurt all the time, but it seemed to be getting worse. Sometimes I'd be too sick to eat. Sometimes my vision blurred. And a couple of times—I never told Riah, but I'm telling you now—sometimes everything would go dark, and silent, and I wouldn't know a thing until it all came back a while later, with me wondering what had happened.

If I knew more of Freemansland's secrets, then I'd know what was wrong with me and how to fix it. Just like I'd learned what I could eat and what was poisonous. How to smear my body with a mixture of mud, rufflemint, and burrowrat dung so the dragons couldn't smell me. How to make a paste of barbweed and charcoal to soothe the yellow rash. How to move so I wouldn't be seen or heard by predator or prey, and how to enter and leave a place without leaving a sign I'd been there. Those were the secrets I knew.

I hoped if I learned more of Freemansland's secrets, maybe I'd know how to kill whatever was inside me, killing me, before there was nothing left to save.

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THE BOYS AND I didn't speak as we scrambled across the rocks, because the water made so much noise rushing from above and pouring into the stillwater below. With that constant roar and the smoky mist swirling, it was like having a dragon that never slept guarding my cave. If I wanted a fire, though, I had to provide it, because the water dragon couldn't produce a flame.

Bare toes clinging to the stony sharpfall, we edged along until we came to an opening in the rock, kind of like a doorway. We passed through, down a short, dark passage, and into the indentation in the wall that was my cave. There was a big opening where you could see the water falling from above, but a tumble of rocks made a sort of barricade where you weren't likely to roll off the ledge in your sleep. I had space to lie down, and a little niche where I could keep a few things. Not that I owned much.

In the center, a fire still smoldered. I didn't need it for heat, because it never gets cold on that level. In fact, people in other parts of the world think it unbearably hot.

I didn't need it for cooking, because when I was hungry, I simply ate whatever I found, however I found it.

No, sometimes I just wanted a fire for company. It wasn't much, but it was better than nobody.

Mayne spied the whisky bottle against the wall. "Whatcha got there?"

"Just something Riah got for me." I was glad he didn't pick it up, or I'd have had to punch him. I didn't want him to think I was a drunk like Pa, or worse yet, like Ibro. But I needed the whisky now and then when the pain got real bad. That "now and then" had gotten pretty often lately, and there wasn't much left in the bottle. I'd have to steal another one soon, if I couldn't get Riah to do it for me.

To distract Mayne from the whisky, I turned to my brother. "You wouldn't'a found me if I'd kept quiet. You'd never'a' seen me in that tree."

Riah snorted. "I can always find you."

"When I let you. If I wanted to hide from you, I could."

"You smell like a rotting fish. I could find you by scent."

That might have been close to the truth, and my blood boiled. "Oh, yeah? Well, when you go through the woods, you leave a trail like a herd of rock sheep. A blind man could track you."

Mayne stood by chuckling as we argued. But when we were about to come to blows, he raised his hand. "Let's prove it."

We turned on him as one. "Prove what?"

"How good we all are at Stealth."

I could see Riah liked the idea as much as I did. The fact was, we'd played the game before, just the two of us, but it would be fun to pit our skills against Mayne's. We knew we were better than him in both hiding and seeking.

So we worked out the rules: first Riah and Mayne would take off in different directions. They couldn't use the canoe, and they couldn't stay in the water the whole time—at one point, they had to walk on dry ground. I'd give them about a quarter-hour head start, and then I'd track them. If I hadn't found them both by the time the sun was directly over the water, we'd meet back at the canoe. Then I'd take off, and they'd try to find me.

As I said, Jeriah and I had played this before, and I pretty much knew where he'd go. So when it was time for me to track them, I went looking for Mayne first.

Funny thing, though, I didn't find him until I decided I was running out of time and had better look for Jeriah instead. That's when I spied Mayne wedged between two boulders and behind a tall stand of hammergrass. Something about the shape of that clump didn't seem right. I stared more intently and could just make out the outline of his head and left shoulder as he crouched with his back toward me. I'd been moving quietly and didn't think he'd heard me.

I crept around one of the boulders and came at him from the front. I couldn't see through the grass, but I knew he was there, so I reached in and grabbed whatever I could. Which turned out to be his ear. And at the same time I whispered, "Shh!"

He didn't say anything. Just reached up and took my hand off his ear—and held my hand.

Hmm. That was weird. For some reason I liked it. Instead of pulling away, I leaned a little closer and whispered, "Let's find Riah together."

He gave my hand a squeeze then let go. I stepped back so he could crawl out of the grass. Then he stood beside me and lifted his eyebrows as if asking a question.

I pointed up the sharpfall, and he nodded, letting me lead the way in tracking Jeriah. Or, I guess that's what you call it. It wasn't so much tracking him as it was knowing him. Knowing how he thought, how he'd swerve to avoid the soft ground here where it would leave footprints, and climb the steeper way there, because a pursuer would expect him to choose the easier path. By anticipating his movements, I followed him, until after a few minutes I spotted him on a rock at the water's edge, just ready to jump in.

"Gotcha!" I yelled, with Mayne echoing the call behind me.

Riah paused and turned toward our voices. He was far enough away that I couldn't hear his expletive, but his body language was clear. He was not happy to have been caught.

He waited on the rock while we clambered down toward him, not speaking until we were in hearing range. "You Cityslime, Mayne. Slotting, slimy, sotter. Why'd you turn against me?"

“Didn’t.” Mayne chuckled. “She found me first. I just followed for somethin’ to do.” Squinting, he shaded his eyes and glanced at the sun. “But we’ll get her back. It’s highsun, so it’s her turn to hide now.”

Without answering, Riah watched something in a tree as we neared it. “Grab that lizard, Jem.”

I glanced left, and the corner of my eye caught a varana, barely visible against the rough tree bark. Quick as lightning, I spun and pinned the lizard’s head to the tree with one hand, then grabbed its body with the other and tossed it down to Riah. “Catch!”

It flew spread-eagle, not even wriggling. I wanted him to miss it so I could laugh at him, but he snatched it out of the air and smashed its head on a rock before it knew what was happening.

He held it up by the tail in triumph. “Who wants lunch?”

Mayne laughed as he skidded the down the slope to Riah’s rock. “Slithering City, that was a good catch! There’s some doglettuce over here. I’ll get some.”

While Mayne picked the doglettuce and Jeriah skinned and cut up the varana, I clambered up and down the sharpfall picking pebbleberries. The plants rooted to the muddy undersides of rocks, and the little fruits were plentiful, if you knew where to look. I picked as many as I could carry and brought them back to the boys.

Before eating, Mayne knelt at the edge of the water and rinsed his hands and head. Then, still on his knees, he spread his arms wide, bowed his head, and quietly muttered, “Thanks be to thee, O Good Giver, for thy generous provision.”

After feasting on lizard, lettuce and berries, my stomach cramped so violently I couldn’t sit upright. To disguise my pain, I leaned forward, scowling at Mayne. “Y’know you’ve got blickweed on your head?”

He combed his fingers through his short brown hair. “Where?”

“Everywhere.” Another cramp made me catch my breath, and the light seemed to fade. I took a deep breath and blinked, then scowled deeper. “Why do you always do that, anyway?”

His fingers found a bit of blickweed and pulled it out of the hair at his temple. "Do what?"

"Wash your head and pray before you eat." I wanted to say more, but the pain stole my voice.

Mayne shrugged. "Ma always does it. She says something bad'll happen to us if we don't."

Jeriah tossed a lizard bone into the water. "Gran does it too. But Pa don't, and she don't make me do it."

"I don't do it either," I said. "And nothin' bad happens to us." The pain in my gut and the cloud across my vision called me a liar.

But the cloud wasn't only across my vision. Oncoming rain roared through the trees on the sharpfall, then reached us where we sat. We squinted against it, but rain was such a common occurrence, that was our only response.

Except I had to raise my voice to speak above the torrent as I stood. "So I'm gonna go now. Gimme a quarter hour, then try to find me."

Mayne picked his teeth with a lizard rib. "Oh, I will. I'll find you."

"Not likely," my brother and I said together. Then Riah added, "You won't, but I will."

I snorted. "Ha. So where you gonna be so you don't see what direction I go in?"

Riah pointed up the sharpfall. "There behind that yellow boulder with the tremy tree beside it. We won't see if you go left, right, or into the water."

"We won't peek, we promise." Mayne wiped the rain from his eyes with his hand. "Cityslime, we couldn't see you if we wanted to." He turned and scrambled up the sharpfall, Riah following. "But if we hain't found you by the time the sun's at three-quarter-point, meet us at the canoe. I have to head for home then."

As much as possible with my blurring vision, I watched them climb until the driving rain swallowed them. Then I slipped into the stillwater.

I SWAM NORTH awhile, not so they couldn't track me, but because it was easier than trying to scale the sharpfall in the rain. About the time the downpour eased to a steady shower, I found a little inlet and climbed out onto a rock. The pain in my stomach had spread to my chest. I gasped for breath, and my arms and legs felt like weights. The rain gave me an advantage, but I couldn't rejoice in it. I just wanted the misery of this illness to end.

I rolled off the rock onto the ground where I'd be less visible and lay there a few minutes. The rain continued to taper off, and my weakness lifted a bit. I rose to a crouch, watched and listened for signs of pursuit, then began my climb.

I'd rather go up the sharpfall than down, and the knowledge that sooner or later I'd have to come down to meet the boys at the canoe compelled me to move in an ascending angle rather than straight up. I made pretty good time at first, but then I slowed and moved more carefully. With the rain stopping, I couldn't rely on it to cover my tracks.

At one point I heard something and crouched low. It was a herd of sheep bounding past, not the boys. But after a rock they'd dislodged bounced down the sharpfall, a thin human voice came from far below. That convinced me to stay high awhile longer and not head down quite yet.

I longed for the water. Its warm embrace soothed my pain. It was easier to stay concealed there than on the land, and easier to navigate. Panting, and with my bare skin wet from sweat as well as rain, I paused again to rest. What was wrong with me?

I pushed on, angling downward now, making sure not to break a twig, loosen a stone, or leave a trace to mark my passing.

Eventually I could see the water below, and through a break in the trees, I discerned the sun's position. Still about an hour to go.

I had to travel the edge of the water before I found a place where I could slide in, barely disturbing the skim coat of blickweed, rather than jumping in and making a splash. Once I eased into the welcoming waters, some of my tension ebbed. I slipped beneath the surface and swam deep

enough that my passing would make barely a ripple in the weeds. Jeriah's sharp eyes could see it if he looked, but I didn't think he was anywhere near.

From time to time I surfaced to breathe, and to scan and listen to my surroundings. But I made my way mostly underwater to within view of the canoe tethered to the shore in the distance. I paused beside a massive boulder that had rolled down from the sharpfall above. There were smaller rocks, too, that had probably slid down at the same time as the boulder. In fact, I stood on one, submerged from my mouth down, and studied the shore. A glance at the sun told me I'd soon win the game. I might as well head for the canoe and wait for the boys.

But a ripple in the water made me freeze in alarm. Was that Jeriah? Where had he come from? But no, it was too long for a boy. And a horny ridge projected from its back. My heart nearly stopped. A dragon. Coming this way.

I held still, not wanting to attract its attention. But what if it already knew I was there? Wasn't that why it was heading my direction? I was a good swimmer, but nobody could outrace a dragon.

I had to know if he was after me or something else. After a deep breath, I lowered myself slowly beneath the surface. I couldn't see much in the murk, but fish scattered, and I thought I could make out... was that a mudhog? Yes. With a shadow paddling toward it.

The dragon lashed out and snatched the big rodent. I started and stood upright, blinking the water out of my eyes. The stillwater reddened with blood a few meters away, and the dragon wriggled off with its lunch.

My knees trembled. The water seemed less comforting than before. Once the dragon was out of sight, I swam about half the distance with all the speed my remaining strength could produce. Then I slowed so as to make less noise, in case one of the boys was nearby.

I found nothing out of the ordinary as I approached the canoe, and I grinned. They hadn't found me. A few minutes from now, when they came back in defeat, I'd be here waiting for them.

I swam to the rock Mayne had stepped out onto that morning. I'd pulled myself halfway out of the water when a voice behind me said, "Gotcha."

It startled me so much I fell back with a splash then turned around. "Mayne!"

He lay in the canoe with only his head visible over the side. His laughing head. Laughing at me.

It filled me with rage. "What are you doing? That ain't fair!"

"I found you, didn't I?" He ducked to avoid the wavelet of green slime I splashed his direction. It slapped against the canoe.

"Cityslime! How can you say you found me when you didn't even look?" I swam toward him. "You waited here for me, you slotting cheater!" I grabbed the side of the canoe and tried to capsize it. "You're supposed to look for me."

Throwing himself back against the opposite side to counterbalance, he grabbed a paddle and raised it. "Let go. I don't want to have to explain to Jeriah why his sister has a lump on her head."

I knew he wouldn't make good his threat, but I let go. "He'd kill you if you hit me."

"He'd probably thank me." Mayne lowered the paddle. "I did look for you. But I knew I'd never be able to track you in that rain, so after a few minutes, I came back. Figured you'd get here sooner or later."

"Well, I still won. You didn't find me, I found you."

He tossed his hair from his eyes. "Ha! You never saw me 'till I said gotcha. It was me who found you."

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WE LAY IN the canoe head-to-head, hashing it out in a lazy argument. My head hurt, my stomach hurt, and all I wanted to do was sleep. I think Mayne had been napping, because he seemed almost as groggy as I.

At the sound of dislodged stones skittering down the sharpfall, we sat up at the same time to see Jeriah clamber toward us. I pointed. "There he is."

Mayne yawned. "Good thing, too. I was about ready to leave without him. I gotta get home."

Seeing us both already there, Riah scowled. "Cityslimes. Both of you." He untied the canoe and climbed in. "Slithering cheaters, too." He grabbed a paddle and plunged it into the water. "Couple of dripping slotters is all you are."

Mayne sat on the stern seat and helped maneuver the canoe away from the rocks. I stayed where I was in the center, arms wrapped around my bent legs. "You're a sliming sore loser, Riah."

"Shut up," was all he said, and I closed my eyes, rested my forehead on my knees, and dozed while the boys paddled. He was a sore loser, that was for sure. He could never find me, so why did he keep trying? If I didn't want to be seen, nobody could find me. Nobody. Not even him.

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Mayne nudged me with his bare foot. "Outta my canoe. I gotta get goin'."

I lifted my head. We were at the island.

I forgot to mention when I described the sharpfalls and the stillwaters that sometimes rockslides made a build-up of soil and rock in the water. In some places, there was enough rubble to form an island, and Pa lived on one of those, him and Gran. They'd been there since forever, almost. Gran grew up there, raised her family on that same lump of muddy rock, and after being away for a while, Pa had come back to it. Jeriah called it home, too, but I couldn't. My home was all of Freemansland.

The one-room shack hung out over the water in front, supported by stilts. A rope ladder dangled from a hole in the floor. A dock extended under the building, so a person could tie a canoe and climb up the ladder. If you were carrying a load, you could haul it along the dock onto the land and then carry it up the path to the shack's door. Or to one of the sheds on the island, if that's where you wanted to put it.

Gran kept swamp chickens in one of those sheds, when she remembered to feed them and keep their trough flooded in the dry season. If they couldn't wade in water, they'd dry up and die. They could find enough insects and rodents and things to stay alive for a few days on their own, but they couldn't live without water for more than half a day.

Pa had a shed for dragon skinning, one for tanning the hides, and another for storing them until he took them to the buyer. There was a second storage shed where he kept other stuff, including the whisky he made. I'd have to swipe a bottle before I left.

Mayne steered to the dock, waited for Riah and me to disembark, then took off for home.

Sore-Loser Riah was still grumpy. But I was in a hurry to help him get his work done so I could be gone before Ibro got back. My nap had refreshed me a bit, and I trotted along the dock, then followed the path to the skinning shed. I opened the wide double doors to let out some of the fishy smell before Riah and his scowl got there.

I could scarcely blame him for being upset, though. It was bad enough he could never seem to win at Stealth. Worse yet, it was no fun getting things ready for Pa when he came home with a catch of dragons. We didn't know how many he'd bring, but we scrubbed all three boards just in case. We checked that the salt bin was full and had a scoop in it. We fetched a couple buckets of water and set them beside the skinning table. Then we sharpened the knives, lined them up on the supply shelf, and made sure there was a good stack of towels.

That was the easy part. Getting the soaking pots ready for the tanning process was where the hard work came in. "You go get started," I told Riah. "I'll run and get a bottle for Pa, so he'll have one handy when he skins."

Jeriah grunted and trudged off. I ran to the storage shed and grabbed a whisky from the shelf. The dwindling supply worried me a little. It wouldn't be good for either Jeriah or me if Pa found out we'd been taking it. Until he made more, I'd have to find someone else to steal it from.

I worked off the stopper and downed a swig. It snatched my breath away and made my eyes water, but as soon as the burn eased a little, I took another. Then I closed the bottle securely before grabbing another and tucking it under my arm. I carried the first bottle to the skinning shed and set it on the shelf with the other supplies. The other, I hid in the swamp chicken pen, which currently had no residents.

The quick nip did make me feel a little better—or maybe it was the promise of more to come from the fresh bottle later. Something, at least, gave me the energy to hurry to the tanning shed, where I picked up two buckets and headed down the path to the water.

Riah was already kneeling on the dock and dipping in a bucket while a full one stood nearby. His posture told me he was still put out that I'd beat him at Stealth. A cold wave of panic swept over me. I couldn't stand having him mad at me. He was the only person in the world who cared if I lived or died. In fact, most people seemed to wish I *would* die.

A vision of Mayne's grin flashed through my mind, but I tossed it aside. He might not hate me all the time, like some people did—Pa, for instance—but he could never love me like Riah.

Well, Gran was nice to me, if her mind was working. But all too often she took off for someplace else, leaving her body behind. Those times, she'd just stare through you like you weren't there, and only time could bring her back.

Riah lugged the full buckets toward me, and I stepped in front of him. "Sorry you didn't find me."

He scowled deeper. "Get out of my way."

I stepped aside. "It's the rain's fault. Neither of us could help that."

He snorted without turning as he trudged toward the tanning shed. "You gonna carry water for the kettles, or do you plan to let me do it all?"

I scampered with my buckets toward the dock. "It was you Pa told to do it, y'know."

We each made a couple of trips, passing one another on the way. Then, after my third load, I needed a rest. I had a stitch in my side, my arms ached, my heart pounded, and I could hardly catch my breath.

Maybe I'd begin making the brine. There probably wouldn't be enough salt, since Gran had to get more. But at least I could get started.

I went to the bin and opened it. Sure enough, it was low. I leaned in to pick up the scoop, when something—or rather, someone—pushed my head down from behind, and the rest of my body tumbled into the bin after it.

The force of the shove and the surprise of it all knocked what little wind I still had out of me. Salt in my mouth choked me and salt in my eyes made them burn.

But the sound of Ibro's laugh made my stomach spin like a waterspout. "Haven't seen you lately, little sister."

My mind went numb with terror. I think I threw up, because I remember my throat burning almost as bad as my eyes. But what I knew most was panic as he snarled something like, "You can't hide from me in there" and yanked me out of the bin by one arm and my hair. My head cracked against the bin, but it didn't knock me out—and I remember wishing it had.

With my face full of salt, I couldn't see, could hardly breathe, and couldn't yell. But I fought with every part of my body I could use. He rewarded me with a hearty slap.

Ibro tore off my shorts and I fought some more, wondering how hard you have to wish before you can die. Surely all the power of my wishes at that moment should have done the trick, but no. Ibro went to work on me, and I still fought and wished, but stayed alive.

I guess Jeriah ran in then because he screamed, "No! Get off her!" He must have thrown a bucket of water, because in the same moment, Ibro and I were both drenched.

Ibro withdrew and spun around with a roar while I tried to crawl away. There was a crash, Ibro grabbed my ankle and dragged me, and the rest is a nauseating blur of salt and pain and noise and darkness.

Though I don't remember the rest, one thing is clear: that was the day my first life ended.