Star Child

PAPER Cranes

Paper Cranes
by Star Child

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The first time I found myself in a male body I was shocked. And not without a good reason. To begin with, it was my first 'astral trip' as I came to jokingly refer to it many years later. Second, I was only thirteen at the time, and though I knew a bit about astral navigation, I had never heard about 'out-of-body experiences'. Third, the very moment when I discovered myself in that alien body was a somewhat embarrassing one. One minute I was standing in the air-lock, pretending to be an empty spacesuit in hopes that mom wouldn't find me, and the next moment I was looking down at the yellow stream coming out of... er... that ugly thing in my hands. Yuck! I got another shock when I realized that the, uh, thing and the hands looked white! I mean, not only I am a girl, I'm a black girl!

But as they say, meteors come in showers —so even that surprise wasn't the last one. The yellow stream was coming down and

disappearing in the green grass! I mean, grass! Real green grass dotted with some tiny blue flowers!

Oh, the mighty black hole in the center of Galaxy! I thought to myself. Have I suddenly gone mad? Has the spacesuit sprung a leak and was I getting delirious because of oxygen starvation? Or have I already died?

While I was watching in bewilderment, the hands gave the, uh, thing a shake and put it back inside a... *loincloth*! I managed to recall the word just as a giggle sounded behind my back.

I turned around and saw a girl, pink with suppressed laughter. She had Asian features and wore a simple dark green... *kimono*! The word came out of the blue and startled me.

'Yumiko-chan...' I felt my ears burn red hot with embarrassment. 'I'm sorry, I thought I was alone...'

The girl let out another squeak of laughter, covering her mouth with her kimono sleeve and keeping her eyes down. Her glossy

black hair was pulled back and held together by a wooden comb.

I suddenly knew that I was a boy named Takeshi. My family lived in a village on the shore and my father owned a small grocery. I was thirteen and had two older brothers and a younger sister.

The information just came flooding in. I realized that I could see, hear, feel and understand everything Takeshi was feeling and understanding. But I couldn't control his body. I had no idea how I got into that body. Worst of all, I had no idea how to get back out! I found myself imprisoned inside somebody else without any hope of escape!

At first I panicked. I tried shouting, swinging my arms, kicking and stomping, but not a muscle twitched in Takeshi's body. He was clearly unaware of my presence. I ran out of steam and tried to think. Dad always said that in a pinch self-control counted more than anything else.

I had already had a chance to apply his advice. Last year dad took us outside to help collect some rock samples. Danny and I were literally jumping with joy. The gravity on the Moon is much weaker and one can easily jump like two meters up in the air—or rather the space. That is, if one's muscles are trained for the Earth gravity. We had been living on the Moon for three years, but dad made us exercise hard every day. So we were in good shape and ran around like crazy despite the spacesuits weighing us down. We were cooped up inside the station for months on end and it was a rare chance to go wild.

Unfortunately, the Moon is not a place for humans to frolick freely. The lack of atmosphere makes the contrast of light and dark very sharp. The rock shadows were pitch-black and I didn't notice a narrow crevice. I fell right in and got stuck. Luckily, there wasn't a scratch on the spacesuit and I didn't die a slow death of suffocation. Even

more luckily, Danny saw it happen and called dad. But dad couldn't get me out on his own and had to return to the station to bring help. He wouldn't let Danny stay with me—my baby brother was only six at the time. So I was on my own for two hours until they came back and got me out.

All alone, squeezed among cold rocks so tightly that I couldn't move, I felt my mind flood over with panic. What if something happened to dad and Danny and they wouldn't make it back to the station? Nobody else knew where I was. They would go looking of course, but would they find me? And how long would it take them? Would I run out of air? How much of it was left anyway? And how long had I been trapped? Was somebody coming for me?

Then it seemed to me that the crevice was slowly closing, crushing me between its rocky jaws. I pushed and kicked madly, only succeeding in sliding further down into the trap. I panted and gasped until I worked up

a sweat. Worn out, I stopped struggling and tried to think. I realized how foolish I had been. My wild thrashing could have damaged the spacesuit. Rapid breathing was exhausting the air supply. My best chance to survive was to keep still and to breathe slowly. Dad always said that in space most people died from imaginary dangers rather than the real ones. A slightest problem would make a person panick and act without thinking. Keeping your head on your shoulders is the best way to survive any calamity—that's what he said. I drew a long breath and did my best to calm down. I tried singing my favorite song but then realized that I was wasting the air. For the rest of the time—I don't know how long it was, but it seemed like eternity to me—I was reciting 'The Sprinkles of Stardust' in my head, all two hundred something verses of it.

Those two hours were the longest and the scariest in my life. Until the moment I found myself in Takeshi's body!

Takeshi and Yumiko were walking side by side through the forest. Birds were chirping loudly in the trees. The cool wind smelled of damp earth. Rays of golden sunlight beamed down. I had never been in a forest before and couldn't help admiring it.

Once I stopped panicking, the whole thing almost turned into a game. The kind of virtual reality games Danny and I were hooked on. Only here I needed no stereo-glasses or senso-gloves and all the physical sensations were much more real. Jupiter rings! It *was* real for all I knew!

Yumiko was telling Takeshi how her little sister wandered into her dad's workshop while he was having dinner last night.

'Dada wanted to finish some urgent work and left a pan of ink out,' Yumiko was saying. 'Hanako-chan saw it and tried to open it up. The ink spilled all over her and a stack of the drying paper. Hanako-chan squealed and dada rushed in. Dada didn't know whether

to laugh at sobbing Hanako-chan who turned all purple or to cry over the ruined paper.'

Takeshi chuckled. 'Your poor dad!'

Through Takeshi's mind I knew that Yumiko's dad owned a small paper mill. His handmade paper was in high demand. He was well-known beyond their little village and got orders from as far away as Osaka. Wherever Osaka was.

Takeshi and Yumiko got to a huge pine tree. It grew on a low bank above a stream and its gnarled roots twisted out of the earth. In the spring the stream flooded its bed and hollowed a small cave among the roots of the pine tree.

Takeshi followed Yumiko inside and sat down on the dry sandy ground. The cave was so cramped that the whole left side of his body—from the shoulder all the way down to the hip—was pressed tightly against Yumiko's right side.

I felt Takeshi tense slightly. By now I could

clearly separate his mind from my own. I felt a strange sensation down below. A pulsating wave of heat. A second later I realized what it was and blushed—I mean, I would have blushed had I had something to blush with! That ugly thing down there suddenly came to life causing an intense feeling of pleasure and vague dissatisfaction.

'Look!' Yumiko took something out of her kimono sleeve and gave to Takeshi.

It turned out to be squares of coloured paper. I was fascinated. Some squares were plain, but others were printed with intricate patterns in gold, silver, red, black and many other colours. Takeshi's hands slowly spread the colourful sheets on the sand.

'What would Yumiko-chan like today?' he asked.

She crinkled her nose. 'A frog!'

He smiled and picked up the green square. His fingers quickly folded and creased, and folded again, and creased again, until out of

his hand leapt a baby frog!

Yumiko laughed with delight. She put the frog on the ground and pushed at its rear end. The frog leapt up and landed inside a fold of her kimono.

'Eek! I'm glad it's not a real one!' Yumiko fished the frog out and put it down. 'Now a crane, please!'

And again Takeshi's fingers moved expertly, folding in and out, until a bird with a long neck and outstretched wings sat on his palm. He had picked a golden square for the crane and the bird shone brightly in the narrow beam of light streaming down from a crack above.

Yumiko clapped her hands. 'It's so pretty! This is a he-crane. Now make a she-crane!'

Takeshi's hand paused for a second, then picked up the silver square. His fingers danced again, smoothly and confidently, and out came a silver crane!

Yumiko put both cranes onto her palm and looked at them admiringly.

‘They are like cranes from some fairy tale!’

‘What fairy tale?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, her eyes still glued to the cranes. ‘Maybe nobody made it up yet.’

‘Then why don’t you do it?’ he asked.

‘Nope!’ Yumiko shook her head. ‘I’m no good at it. I’m sure I’m good at something, I just don’t know yet what it is. But I know what you’re good at! This!’

She displayed the cranes on her palm proudly as if they had been her own creation.

‘And now I have a tough one for you, Takeshi-kun. Make me a beautiful lady in a pretty kimono!’

He looked her in the face. His left side, where his body touched hers, grew so sensitive that he felt the slightest twitch of her muscles and the tiniest crease of her clothes. The hard thing down there swelled and pulsated with heat, radiating it all over Takeshi’s body. I felt utterly uncomfortable and didn’t want to know what would happen next, but I had no choice!

Fascinated despite myself, I watched and listened.

'Yumiko-chan, there already is a beautiful lady here. However hard I may try, I'll never make anything more beautiful.'

Yumiko blushed and lowered her eyes. Takeshi could feel her body tremble slightly. His heart racing, he awkwardly put his arm around her. She was still, like a statue. Then he bent over and kissed her on the lips.

It was like a supernova exploding right into my face! I gasped and nearly fainted. With a jolt, I came to my senses and realized that I was standing in the airlock!

I looked at my hands. I couldn't see the colour of course as I was wearing a spacesuit —complete with gloves, boots and the helmet. But everything looked familiar and I let out a sigh of relief. I was back!

I took the spacesuit off and crept through the station back into the bedroom. Danny sat sulking in his corner.

‘Mom said we’re not allowed to play on computer today. Not even for five minutes! And it’s all your fault!’ He came over to the bunk and plunked himself down on his bed.

I paid him no attention. My head was still reeling with the memory of the kiss between Takeshi and Yumiko. I glanced at the clock—barely ten minutes passed since I had left the room! Yet I was sure that I spent at least an hour in Takeshi’s body. Was it all a dream?

An idea hit me like a meteor out of the clear space. I rummaged frantically in my desk drawers and dug out some coloured paper. It wasn’t as flash as Yumiko’s dad’s masterpieces, but it would do. I quickly cut a square out of a light blue sheet. Fold it in half. Turn. Fold in half again. Open. My fingers folded and creased, and folded again, and creased again, until a bird with a long neck and outstretched wings sat on my desk.

I raised my head and saw Danny standing by, his eyes wide with astonishment.

‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘A crane.’

‘What’s a crane?’

‘A kind of bird.’

He studied the folded piece of paper.

‘How did you do it?’

I cut out two more squares and showed him.

‘Here, watch me. Fold it in half. Turn. Fold in half again. Open.’

My fingers moved confidently as if dancing on their own. Danny was a lot clumsier, but finally he managed to finish one, too. We sat and silently admired the three colourful birds.

‘This is fun!’ Danny said. ‘Let’s make some more!’

We folded and creased, and folded again, and creased again, until we ran out of coloured paper. Twenty-four birds sat on my desk.

‘I know!’ Danny said. ‘Let’s make a mobile! We can hang it down from the ceiling and it will look like they are flying!’

I rummaged in my desk drawers again

and found some thread and wire. We were busy putting the mobile together when mom burst into the room.

'I told you not to...' she started angrily and stopped abruptly. 'What on earth are you guys doing?'

'Making a mobile,' I said.

'Uh-huh. You were so quiet that I thought you're playing on computer again.'

'We haven't touched the computer,' Danny said. 'Look, we've made a whole flock of cranes!'

Mom mumbled something and retreated back into the living room.

That night I was lying in my bed without sleep for a long time. I watched the cranes swirling lightly in the draft from the aircon system. I caught myself thinking about a fairy tale where a golden he-crane meets a silver she-crane and... And then what? I didn't know. Maybe I was no good at making up stories.

Or maybe that story wasn't ready to be written yet.

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