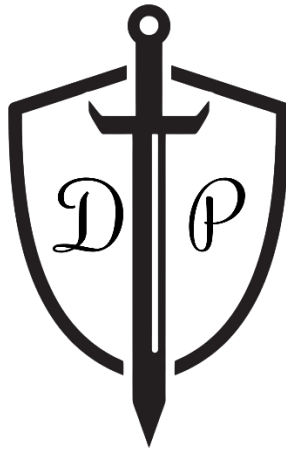


Water Rites

By MJ Douglas



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Water Rites

It was a simple dream, light filtered through the trees dancing in patterns as a breeze blew through. She lay, stretched out on her back, moisture slowly leaking through her shirt, as her nose took in the damp earthy smell. She hadn't discovered bugs, worms, spiders or a need to be clean, so the experience was worry free. Unfortunately, each dream ended with the mechanical screech of her alarm and the sterile white walls of her room.

Her mother had been smart, letting her lay in that forest for hours as a child. The memory was one of her most cherished possessions.

A knock at the door brought a grin to her creased face, "Come in, you know I'm awake. I swear you sit outside my door waiting for my alarm to go off."

A wrinkled, smiling face answered, "Who says I don't?"

Their relationship wasn't exactly tolerated or acknowledged. Tamika was, however, the last Elder and so certain allowances were made. She sat up slowly. She did everything slowly these days.

"Here, let me help." Ellie moved quickly to Tamika's side, putting a supportive hand behind her back.

"Always the butch one, you know you're almost as old as me? You should be creaking just as much."

Ellie smiled, "Same age, bah, you're ten years my senior. Besides if we both creaked as much as you, we'd never get anywhere. Where's your purple dress?"

Tamika waved a boney finger at the rear of the closet, "It's sad I only get to wear that dress once a year. They didn't consider how awful those damn white jumpers make my elderly black ass look."

"They probably hoped no one was looking at your ass, old as it is."

"Don't be sassin' me girl, I caught you looking yesterday."

It was a routine they went through every morning. Tamika couldn't help but smile. Ellie finally found the dress, and she wriggled it on. It always amazed her when it fit. It was purple with orange flower petals on a green vine design. It had been her mother's and passed to her when she took up judging duty. Sixty years of botany contests had been judged in that dress by dark haired, brown Smith women.

"You know, I'm glad they've finally changed the rules. With all the water restrictions these past two decades, the contest was becoming a farce. Families don't have enough water for their children much less their contest plant."

Ellie was right. Last year's contest had been pathetic. Only two of the sixty plants competing had more than two green leaves. Tamika remembered when she was young, people's plants had bloomed. The contest evolved over the years. It had been the best blooming plant, then heartiest growth, then the best looking plant. Now, they simply wanted her to pick the plant that most looked like those from her childhood, when humanity still lived above ground. Last year's plants were so pathetic and dried out that they decided to have each district put forth one plant. Twenty to thirty families would work together and share their water rations to generate one specimen. Tamika shook her head. It was too much to think about the degeneration of their lives.

She reached for her cane, “Whew, it’s a good thing I had Jas do my hair last night. It took her three hours to get it braided right. She kept complaining about my gray frizzy hair.”

“And let me guess, you told her you earned every one of them gray hairs and she should just stop her whining.”

“Well it’s true.”

She stood proudly even with her slightly stooped posture, and slowly walked out of her room with the assistance of a cane. It was going to be a long walk to the festival chambers, but it would take her through her favorite place, the bio-dome.

Ellie chatted as they walked, “Did ya hear about the Cruise installation?” Tamika had stopped paying attention to the old new feeds, it was always the same thing, “Junior blew the place up, kept talking about aliens.”

Well that was a new one, Tamika thought. There had been zombie rumors before, but never aliens.

“I ran into our good ol’ mayor yesterday. I told that waste of water, Reggie, that he should let us share living quarters,” Tamika knew all the old arguments and was only listening with half an ear.

Ellie chattered on, “...didn’t want us being bad examples for the youth...” they had gone through this all before, “...told him they’re smart they know we’re dykes.”

Tamika was more worried about the contest.

“...said it didn’t matter, he wouldn’t put up with that kind of behavior while he was mayor...”

Some things never changed.

“...I’ll stuff that stupid crest up his nose. Are you even listening to me?”

“You don’t want to do that, dear,” Tamika absently patted her arm, “they’d put you on pit duty”

Pit duty was no joke. The hard labor and harsh chemicals would kill an old lady like Ellie within a week.

Tamika didn’t hear Ellie’s response; they had arrived at the bio-dome. It was the only place in the whole complex where water ran freely. The stream was enclosed by a plastic shield to prevent evaporation. They played a cheesy CD that had to be reset every hour, to augment the sound of the stream. In Tamika’s mind, these things did not detract from the free flowing water. It was a treat, a rare extravagance of the complex, and one of the few things that reminded her of surface life. A mossy old fish ladder from a failed breeding experiment sat in the stream. Sometimes the inside of the enclosure steamed up so that you couldn’t see anything, but this did not bother her. The simple existence of the stream brightened her soul.

As water resources dwindled, the bio-dome had been converted from a tropical design to a desert environment. All plants were watered through subsoil methods that minimized water loss and maximized root absorption. Over time, they had engineered a complex mechanical system with the agricultural crops that recycled almost every drop of the precious liquid.

“We’re going to be late, you can water gaze after the ceremony.” Tamika turned to Ellie feigning an innocent, vacant look.

Ellie laughed, “Don’t give me that senile old lady bit, I know better.”

Tamika hobbled on, letting out a sigh. They were almost there, might as well get it over quick. Her mother had trained her as a botanist, but it was fast becoming a dead profession. The Council was more interested in glorifying her pre-apocalyptic memories than her professional knowledge.

Entering the great hall, Tamika was overwhelmed by color and music. It always amazed her that these off white people found enough tinted fabric to look bright, even cheery. The everyday wear was a pasty off white, the walls of the complex were a dirty white, but here on festival day, everything was transformed. Every last child ran around with at least some pink or orange or blue wrapped around their head or waist. The music and dancing hushed as people noticed her.

“Don’t stop on my account.” She waved her cane at them and edged around the room toward the plant stands. The primary contestants were fussing about, doing last minute primping and watering.

“Looks like this year is going to be excellent,” Tamika whispered to Ellie, catching a glimpse of the plants. Indeed, it was going to be a fine contest. The leaves were the greenest, most luscious ones she’d seen in decades, “Reminds me of the last good contest back in ’82.”

“You’ve brought up ’82 every year since. Now, act the proper elder and start judging, woman!”

Tamika’s steps became lighter as she approached the plants. She carefully tuned out the group of gawkers and officials following her. This was *her* contest not theirs. The first specimen was a magnolia. She smiled at it, making polite comments to the anxious gardeners. The plant just wasn’t the same without its russet blooms.

The second was a surprise. No one had tried lavender since ’75 when the Thompson’s entry stunk up the entire complex for weeks. She leaned in close, catching the faintest whiff of its intoxicating aroma. Nodding, she moved down to the next one. The lavender was a possibility.

She stumbled into Ellie at the next plant, purposely burying her face in Ellie’s shoulder. It was all she could do not to laugh. One contestant was busily injecting the soil with a water filled syringe while also fluffing the leaves of her dandelion! A bloom stalk rose up with a burgeoning flower bud. Tamika found it hilarious that she might have to declare this *weed* the winner. No one had produced a bloom in decades.

Ellie, having learned much about plants over the years from Tamika, also had a difficult time holding in the laughter. Tamika put on a solemn face and greeted the contestant from district 3, praising her warmly for her accomplishment.

She shuffled her way through the five tables, pausing before the last one to address her entourage, “Yes, this new format seems to work nicely. Only two wilted leaves in the whole bunch.”

They beamed at Tamika’s praise. As the contest’s official sponsors, they would take all the credit.

“And I don’t have to drag my old bones through two hundred contestants either,” Tamika added.

They chuckled politely at her wit, as they always did.

At the last table, two youngsters were fighting over a water syringe, “*I* get to do it, it’s *my* turn.”

“But papa said *I* get to do it on competition day.”

Back and forth they swayed until one of them accidentally compressed the end. Water squirted out raining down on their plant, Tamika and the entire committee. The children looked horrified. Their parents cringed behind the table, waiting to be reprimanded. Water wasting was a crime and dealt with harshly.

Tamika wiped her eyes, she had been squirted right in the face, and blearily looked down at their plant. It was some odd variety of hosta, lush with variegated green, pink, and purple leaves. She blinked again, and there, on the leaf, sat three tiny water droplets. She watched transfixed, as gravity slowly pulled the drops into the soil.

“This plant is the winner,” she quietly declared, as the entourage raged over the wastefulness of the children.

Reggie, the mayor, stared at her, “What did you say?!” he sputtered.

“This plant is the winner,” she affirmed, louder and with determination.

Silence greeted her. They had been arguing about whether or not the children’s parents should be thrown into the Pit for a month for the foolishness of their children, and she had declared them the winner?

“In my thirty years as judge, and twenty of observing my mother, I have never seen a plant so resemble a surface plant.”

Their expressions changed from outrage to astonishment.

“While you were bickering, I witnessed water droplets collect and fall down the leaf of a healthy plant. Do you gentlemen even know what rain was? I declare this plant the winner.” She handed the first place ribbon to the children and admonished them, “Now don’t fight over that.”

Leaning heavily on Ellie, Tamika walked over to a side bench and beckoned Reggie over. He came grudgingly, and she waved a finger in front of his protests, “I’m not going to talk to you about the contest, it’s already done. I’ll have Ellie here affix the rest of the awards. I wanted to tell you that she’s moving in with me tomorrow.”

He tried to break in, “B-but...”

“No, I won’t hear any arguments. I’m informing you of what we’re going to do. You know nothing of plants, rain, children, or the needs of this old lady, and I am *not* going to let you push me around anymore.”

Reggie gaped at her as she continued, “Now, run along and enjoy your festival.” Tamika waved a hand, in clear dismissal. Reggie slunk away, unable to respond.

“I love you,” Ellie whispered squeezing her hand.

Tamika, a twinkle in her eye, responded, “And you thought I wasn’t listening.”