

FIRST PRIZE

The Red World

I was trembling with fright, while simultaneously experiencing the most electrifying rush of excitement. It was a rather fascinating feeling—fascinating being the perfect word to describe this incredibly peculiar event. I was going to be the first man on Mars! It was the year 2069, exactly one hundred years since Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. Spaceship *Centurion Four* hovered above the red planet, looking extremely out of place with its modern white panels and fiery engines. I looked down at the alien world, wondering what I would find.

Suddenly, a green light flickered on, and a deafening alarm sounded. It was time to go.

The spaceship began plummeting down at unbelievable speeds! Before long, I could see the red landscape. Knowing what was to come, I walked towards the airlock, took a deep breath as it opened, and jumped! I was met by strong winds blowing against me. If it weren't for my protective helmet, I would have been blinded. I spread my arms and legs to maintain my position and activated my jetpack. The engines roared as they fought against gravity, finally manoeuvring my body into a vertical stance, slowly lowering it down.

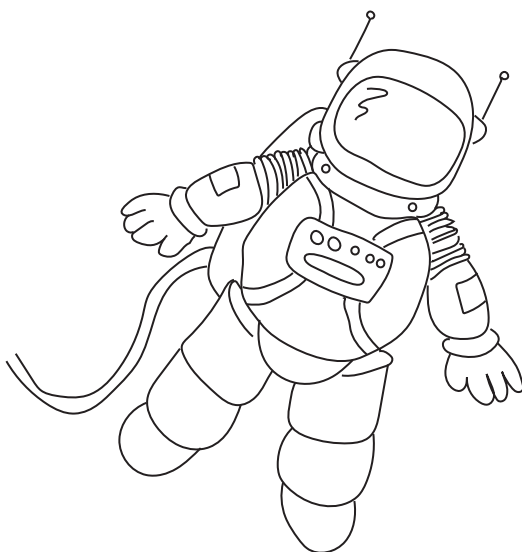
The second I made contact with the rust-coloured, iron-oxide-rich ground, I immediately collapsed, not being used to gravity. I gathered the last of my strength and used it to hoist myself up. I looked around, admiring the fantastic land. With massive rock structures, hazy atmosphere, and infamous red ground, Mars looked straight out of a movie!

Then, suddenly, a hand touched my back. I wheeled around, staggering. To my horror, a skeletal, vaguely humanoid creature was standing! It pounced on me without warning! Judging by its appearance, I stood no chance against this beast, but I wasn't done yet. I tapped my computer, and all of a sudden, my jetpack buzzed to life! I was thrust at 150 km/hr, knocking the alien aside. As I was hovering, I saw the alien more determined than ever. It was running up a strange ramp with incredible speed as it leapt towards me. But I was prepared; performing a figure-eight manoeuvre, I dodged the creature. As the beast lost altitude, it emitted a terrible sound. I held my head in an attempt to protect it.

All of a sudden, the scream stopped, only to be met by stranger things. The ground itself began to open, sucking the alien in its void. Common sense would prevent any normal person from following him; however, I was an explorer, an adventurer, an astronaut above all! I wasn't going to let this stop me. I cautiously lowered myself into the void, curious of what I would find.

by Muhammad Taha Lodhi (Grade Seven)

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FIRST PRIZE

Static

A futuristic space patrol ship orbited just inside a planet's gravitational pull. It was a rather small ship; just by looking at it, you could tell about one passenger could ride in it. There was a girl the age of approximately sixteen piloting the small ship. Her dark-turquoise hair was draped over her tense shoulders as she angrily clenched the control sticks.

"There's nothing out here!" she yelled to herself; she had forgotten her radio was still on.

"Just keep looking . . .," a man spoke through the radio; his voice sounded a bit fuzzy.

"All I see is our planet and the other planets, but nothing else! Just face it, there's nothing out here!" she yelled back at the man.

"Riveriya—" The man paused. "Just keep looking. . . ." He sounded as if he knew there were more out there.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, in the corner of her eye, there was something. It seemed to be a flashing light in the deep shadowy darkness of space. "What is that . . . ?" she whispered nervously. Riveriya's radio suddenly went to a static sound, which filled her ears and made her hold on tighter to the controls.

"Riveriya? Riveriya, do you copy?" the man yelled into his side of the radio, worried.

"Communications is down, sir. There's no way of knowing what's happening," stuttered one of the communications officers.

"There's . . . something . . . coming . . .," Riveriya's voice was cutting out over the radio.

The man hesitated. Then, he spoke clearly, but he sounded very uneasy: "You need to get out of there—now!"

Riveriya looked through the window of the ship; the light was getting closer. The ship began to shake. There was a loud bang. Sparks began to fly out of the control panel in the ship. She yelled out in fear. Her eyes closed tightly as she felt the ship spin around chaotically. Her eyes opened for a split second as she saw giant flashes of energy all around her. She could feel the ship moving at almost light speed. Her hands were shaking, her pointed ears twitched every time she heard the static sound coming from her radio. Her heart was racing as the sparks flew around the ship more violently.

Then, out of nowhere, there was a planet; it wasn't hers. Riveriya could only see it for a second as she plummeted towards the land.

"Commander!" a man who worked at NASA came running down the hallway.

"What is it?" questioned the commander.

"We've picked up a strange signal heading for Earth, and it's coming quickly," the man blurted out, almost out of breath.

They ran to a window and grabbed binoculars. "That ship . . . it's not one of ours; it's one of theirs. . . ."

by Emilee Wittke (Grade Eight)
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SECOND PRIZE

Mother

I can remember how she used to sing lullabies to me when she sat near the edge of my bed as I fell asleep, her sweet-sounding, dulcet voice barely a whisper. I would keep one eye open as I watched a winsome smile appear on her face while she caressed my umber brown hair, her gentle, almond-coloured eyes looking back at me. My mother was perfect.

As we drove on the damp, slippery roads, the pitter-patter of delicate raindrops could be heard dabbling against the windshield of the car. Suddenly, as if mother nature had a change of mood, the soft beat of raindrops hitting the glass became a downpour of water splashing against the windshield. The mellow beat calmed me as I began to fall into a state of relaxation.

I leaned my head against the cushioned armrest of my seat. A screeching noise of what sounded like tires rubbing against the road filled my ears. Before I had time to look out the fogged window—

Bang!

A burning sensation of pain struck me as my vision only extended to darkness.

Beep. Beep. Beep. . . A constant, irritating sound vibrated in my ears as I took my first few blinks. I strained my neck as I looked around the foreign place surrounding me. As if my body were covered in piercing needles, I winced in pain, and I tried to rise from the uncomfortable bed that was certainly not my own.

Beep. Beep. Beep. . . The vexatious noise became faster as my heartbeat raced in my chest. I scanned the unadorned, plain room before my eyes. I finally came across a large machine that had an overwhelming number of wires attached to it; I followed the trail of narrow tubes until I realized that they were connected to my bruised wrists.

“Beth!” a familiar voice cried out to me. I looked up to find my father running towards me from the doorway. I was relieved to see his face but saddened by the bandages and bruises that covered his head. “You’re awake!” he said as he tried to shield his eyes when teardrops rolled down his cheek. As we embraced each other with immense, emotional hugs, I felt safe. I felt complete.

A peculiar feeling struck me. *I am not complete*, I thought. *Mother.*

As I tightly held on to my father, I quietly asked, “Where’s Mother?”

No reply. I looked at my father, his ocean-blue eyes staring back at me. After what felt like hours of silence, my father just looked at me. He shook his head.

I could no longer hear the beeping noises. A dead silence filled the air as my world began crumbling apart.

by Tiana Alexander (Grade Seven)

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SECOND PRIZE

Hope Immersed in Anguish

Wisps of silvery-grey smoke uncoil from the rubble beneath my threadbare boots, clawing at the daylight with its ghastly fingers. The sickening stench permeating the air announces the company of the deceased, upon which the blinding June sun shines. The commander's booming voice echoes in my ears, penetrating the blanketing silence of remorse. My heart beats without rhythm, closeted safely within me yet deceitful at the same time, ready to surrender to the combat at any moment. I glance in admiration at the hundreds of courageous soldiers around me, their immaculate uniforms and twinkling medals showering them with an aura of powerful authority and respect. Determination and fear radiate from their eyes, and a few pronounced creases from years of punishing preparation are intricately engraved on their otherwise-impassive faces.

Our firearms glint wickedly in the light as we gaze upon our rivals dressed in muddy brown and emerald-green fatigues. The unmistakable sound of gunfire pierces through the blazing midday sky, signalling the commencement of the awaited battle. The thunderous sound of feet stomping against the sun-baked ground spouts a thin veil of filthy dust into our vision as a storm of bullets and shrapnel whiz up above. Soon after, a surge of pain jolts through my body and swallows me whole, and a helpless cry escapes through my lips before I crumple to the barren ground.

I wake up to the sound of mellifluous chatter, and I see the figure of a nurse patching a wound of an injured soldier nearby. The putrid smell of disinfectant blankets the first-aid tent, yet somehow it is overpowered by the raw, acrid scent of blood. Glancing at my left leg, I see fresh, dark crimson seeping from my bandaged wound like tears spilling onto the crisp white bedsheet.

Suddenly, a small tangle of wiry limbs and raven-coloured hair scrambles to my bedside from outside the tent, his electrifying presence lighting up the room. The little boy introduces himself as Tim and has black diamonds for eyes and a face of rich caramel. "Sergeant Oliver? I saw you fighting outside for my people. Thank you, sir, for giving us hope when the light was fading."

I stretch my cracked lips to produce a small smile. I remember my own past: timid hands trembling by my side as threatening battle cries encapsulated me in a cocoon of despair. Perspiration tickled my forehead tauntingly as I stood frozen, drenched in a coat of hopelessness and remorse. Bringing me back to reality, Tim hands over one striking red flower. "What's this?" I ask, intrigued.

"A poppy," he whispers. I gaze into his shining eyes and see a young, admirable soldier, flickering with nostalgic spirit.

by Vaishnavi Nair Reji (Grade Eight)

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THIRD PRIZE

Meaningless

“Meera? The answer?”

I just don’t know. I shake my head and blink back tears.

She looks at me skeptically. “Meera, what’s the answer?” She sighs.

“I don’t know.” Now, I’m fighting to not cry. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s why you need to stop wasting time and start focusing on your studies. You are going to fail.” She cheerlessly logs out.

I do the same, and I return to the real world. I step off the treadmill and wipe my eyes, silently staring at my hamster. It runs and stops to eat. Over and over, it’s redundant, though it is familiar. It’s puzzling.

The loud pop of the vortex startles me, and I recognize Libb.

“Where’s dinner?” she snaps. She walks around our brick room, and I notice an obvious limp.

“There are some pellets in those bags over there,” I reply quietly, looking down at my hands.

“Okay.” Her tone lifts slightly, but her face shows no sign of appreciation. “I need to be out by dusk, so I want you to clean up.” She takes a handful of pellets and shoves them in her mouth. She chews them slowly, regarding me carefully. I look away.

She finishes and takes a decayed blanket off the cement floor and curls up in a ball. Her back is towards me, and I hear her muffled snores. I look around our room. The brick is pasty white, and we have no windows or doors. I see the treadmill, five full bags of pellets, an old battered chair, and a cracked toilet. Our room is cramped, but I’m grateful we don’t have ten family members. I grab a moth-chewed towel and quickly fall asleep.

I wake up about two hours later. I try to get up, but my weight is almost unbearable today. Libb is gone. I roll onto the side of the treadmill and grab the handles, pulling myself up. I stumble slightly and hit my calf on the wall. *That’ll bruise.* I put on my VR headset and begin my day.

I log out five hours later. Libb still hasn’t come back. I sit on the floor with my back against the wall and stuff my face with the tasteless pellets. I stare at my hamster.

I suddenly realize the connection. *All I’m doing in my life is exactly like the hamster.*

Oh my God.

Life is meaningless.

by Hannah Brockington (Grade Seven)

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THIRD PRIZE

Gentle Universe

The war of the empire has just passed, and the cities are filled with civilian casualties. Cheng Xin, a decorated retired admiral, finds a wild man while walking along the riverbank. Cheng wipes the mud on his face and asks, “What is your name?” The savage looks at him, but at most, he could only spit out some broken syllables. Cheng takes the savage home and says, “You are Huang Yu Hang.”

The next day, Cheng helps Huang brush his teeth. The savage man not only breaks his toothbrush but also eats the toothpaste. Before heading out, Cheng locks all the doors.

When Cheng returns, the living room is completely unrecognizable. The feet of the tables and chairs have been bitten, sawdust floats, and milk is spilled on the ground. Huang is lying on the ground, bleeding in a corner.

The news of the situation spreads. The elder son of the emperor, Ma De Pu, takes a group of policemen and a doctor to identify whether Huang is a monster. Huang glares with bloody-red eyes at Ma. He squats on the ground and tries to climb forward, slamming his hands on the floor. The bloodstained bricks crack and fly together with the wood chips in the house. Ma throws a photo in front of Huang. In the photo, Huang and Cheng stand side by side and smile happily. “I know the reason why Cheng protects you. You are just a substitute!” Ma points at the photo. “This is the real Huang, a warrior who died on the front line. You are just a monster.” He looks up and sees Huang change. His teeth grow, and he looks at Ma with a grimace. Ma screams. Ma is slammed on the ground by Huang, sharp fangs appear at the side of Ma’s carotid artery.

Just as Huang is about to bite Ma’s neck, a familiar voice comes from the door: “Stop.” Chang opens his hand towards Huang’s muzzle and slowly walks in his direction, kneeling down and reaching out. “Please stop.”

Slowly loosening the grip on Ma’s neck, the blood on the face of Huang fades. Cheng takes him into his arms. “It’s all right.”

During the Patriotic War, the imperial government added genes of animals to humans in order to improve the combat effectiveness of soldiers. Scientists secretly experimented on active military personnel. Huang was selected because of his physical fitness. He became one of the last remaining experiments alive, but the consequences were not explained. Cheng lost Huang once, he would not lose him again.

Cheng looks into Huang’s eyes and says, “You are not a monster. You are Huang. You just don’t remember it, and I will help you.”

by Amanda Zhu (Grade Eight)

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