

The Atlantis Spring

by Ruby

“When it comes to swimming, it is not just the how-to - the formal instruction - that is critical but also the ways we communicate the importance of that knowledge, through the stories we tell.”

-Bonnie Tsui from Why We Swim

There is a city

Come out from you, Atlantis

In ruins, sunken below the waves

-Kate Bush, “Atlantis”

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The water Below didn't sting and that's why she didn't trust it. She had huffily informed them she could swim, and waded into the pool the Falls made. She'd paddled into that clean cool crisp water and wanted to immediately get out. But she stayed in, she stayed in until one of the other children left, so she wouldn't be the first to leave. Then she followed next. You didn't need a bath after swimming here, to wash that chemical smell away. The blue-green smell that made you feel clean because it stung. Because it meant it disinfected anything on you. No matter how bad someone hurt you and made you feel like a gross sticky candy bar wrapper stuck to a curb. That blue-green water with the blue-green smell washed it all away.

She declined to go swimming again the next time and they didn't make a big deal about it. Things weren't big deals here. You ate your food and read from really old books, and everybody was quiet and kind. She didn't trust that either. But here was better than there, for now.

She was walking to the commons for lunch when River stopped her. River was pretty with her long ballerina legs and long brown hair that fell down her shoulders. She liked River. River never treated her like a baby.

“Hi, Nia.”

“Hey.”

“I'm going swimming today, do you wanna come?”

“Nah, we got a reading project back at the Charles.”

“I wasn't going to the Falls, this is a little off the beaten path. The water is weird too.”

Nia's interest picked up. “Like how?”

“It's a mineral pool, the water is warm and salty and it sticks to you. Good for my dancer's joints.” River pointed her feet in their sneakers and laughed.

They reached the new Commons, which were right under the nondescript building that housed most of Below now. Climate change and the proliferation of security cameras had made it necessary to constrict the entrances of Below to just a few points. The deeper places like the Falls and the Great Hall remained unscathed, but many of the residents had opted to move into the five-story building Catherine had purchased through her family's trust.

Officially the building was The Charles & Caroline Chandler Memorial Trust Building, but its occupants called it the Charles. A pleasant, nondescript lobby was there to accept packages and buzz residents in. But behind it was a honeycomb of bedrooms, common areas, classrooms, and kitchens, where Below kept their ways of learning and making, and they still shared their meals together.

Nia and River sat down next to each other at a table. Nia could see Vincent and Catherine at the opposite end of the room. Their silver hair haloed around their heads like crowns.

"They look like that king and queen in that movie," Nia said before she could draw the words back.

"What movie?" River asked with curiosity.

Nia thought about lying, but River seemed like she would be cool about it instead of like most grown-ups.

"I'm almost twelve, so it was really dumb when they wouldn't let me come when Jacob took the older kids to go that movie about the green knight. Like we had to read that stupid poem but then I couldn't see the movie. So I snuck in through the basement of the place and hid in the back and watched it. It was okay... I didn't get a lot of it; the fox was cool though." Nia blushed. She hadn't meant to babble like that.

River smiled. "Well, I do think you were a bit too young to see that one, but no harm came from it." She took a sip from her drink. "Don't be in such a hurry to grow up, you'll be sad one day when you get too old for things." And a shadow passed over River's bright gray eyes like a curtain being closed.

Nia couldn't imagine being sad at being too old to do something, instead of being a kid who everybody wanted to treat like some helpless baby. But she didn't argue the point. She ate her sandwich and looked forward to finding out about the place River was taking her to.

They put their empty dishes in the dumbwaiter that would rise to the kitchen for washing, and River picked up a small bag at the table.

"I've got the towels and a bottle of water, ready to go?"

"Shouldn't I go get my swimsuit?"

River grinned. "Since it's just us girls, I figured it wouldn't matter. I never bring a suit when I go."

Nia laughed; this was going to be fun.

They set off through an exit in the Commons that linked to the tunnels. They made their way by the old library chamber. The space was now a place for preserving valuable old books and other things in rows of neatly organized bookcases. The permanent dry cool of the rock kept them from the elements. Most of the other books had been moved up top to the Charles' library.

They kept going past old chambers. The place where Rebecca had made her candles permanently flickered with candle light now, as it was a place of memory, with people leaving a lit candle for a loved one who'd died or had left the community. Since the sickness had started last spring, they had had to add a few candles for some of their older residents and Helpers too. All who could be vaccinated, were now. But Nia remembered how haunted Doc Eric had looked the last time she saw him, when he'd lit a candle for his patients in the up top hospital who didn't make it. He'd "burnt out," the grown-ups had said, and was now recuperating at Catherine's place in Connecticut.

Nia remembered Vincent leading a group of them there to light a candle for his father. And they all talked about someone they missed. Well, she didn't. But Vincent didn't seem to mind. He wasn't always trying to make you lose your sad feelings and pretend everything was all right. She liked that about him.

They kept going down until they reached the grotto. The grotto was the size of a classroom Above. The ceiling stretched high, the waters shimmered with a blue-green luminescence. The source of the water trickled down from the middle of the rock into a basin.

Nia kneeled down to put her hand in the water. It was warm. River undressed and spoke.

"The water is about eight feet deep at the center. And it's hotter toward the back of the pool, must be where the vent is." River walked into the water and sighed. "Oh, brother, did my calves need this. I know I've always wanted to dance the Spring Fairy, but they make you pay for it."

River was a world famous ballerina. Which impressed Nia, especially because she didn't talk about it much, which impressed her more. Grown-ups were always bragging about what they did, as

though that was supposed to make you super impressed.

But River would tour the world with her ballet company and then come home for Winterfest or a birthday like it was no big deal. Her teacher, Madame Lisa, would come visit her. Lisa had been a world famous ballerina too. She had got in some kind of trouble Catherine had helped her with, and then she had retired from the stage and started teaching kids like River how to dance.

Nia remembered Madame Lisa at one Winterfest, her black hair glittering with silver in a knot at the nape of her neck. She looked like a queen. And she watched River move about the room with the proud eyes of someone who has seen a project they've been working a long time on come to complete success. She had looked at Nia and smiled.

"You've been River's little shadow all evening. What's your name?"

"Nia." She was predisposed to like Madame Lisa because River liked her and called her a mentor, which meant she was important to her. Nia wondered what it would be like to have a mentor. Most of the time she was glad people left her alone. But she felt something, like a missing puzzle piece inside, when she saw how River's eyes lit up when Madame Lisa swept her into an embrace when they'd gone to deliver her Winterfest candle.

Madame Lisa kept speaking. "How long have you been here?"

"This is my second Winterfest. Mister Henry brought me down." Nia remembered seeing the fresh unopened box of rice and vegetables on top of the trash cans and realizing someone knew she was scavenging there. It took a few more weeks for her to trust Mister Henry enough to stand a good ten feet away, just in case he tried anything, and say thanks. It took a few more weeks after that to talk her into visiting the herbal shop his wife ran and tell her about a special place she could go if she wanted...

Nia wondered if they'd hold a big in-person Winterfest this year. Things were getting back to normal and then they weren't. Couldn't trust anything really. She undressed and gingerly stepped into the water. It was warm and slightly heavy on her limbs. She swam a few feet into the pool, River slicing graceful strokes in the water.

River's ballet company was still deciding whether to hold public performances this year or continue to stream them. She hoped they would open them to the public again. She remembered the one time she's gone with some of the other kids. They'd sat in a box Catherine had season tickets for and she remembered the thrill of the lights going down and seeing River leap and turn, as graceful in air as she was in water.

Nia swam over to a lip of rock that hung over the pool and rested her head on her arms. She said, "I hope you get to go on tour again."

River swam next to her. "Me, too." She looked far away again. "I don't know how many more seasons I'll have..."

"What do you mean? You're the best dancer I've ever seen," Nia said, almost in indignation that someone could be trying to stop River from dancing.

"Why, thank you, lovely. But I'm thirty years old, and, well, that's 'old' in ballet years. Ballet years are beautiful but they are hard. Madame Lisa warned me about how hard this year is for a dancer, but I don't think I fully believed it until it happened." River gently traced circles on the rock. "But I can tell a page is turning; they asked me to dance the Spring Fairy, not Cinderella."

Nia wanted to yell at whomever River's boss was at the ballet company. But River smiled. "But that's life, and I'm not through yet. And Madame Lisa tells me I have to trust that 'life won't let me fall.' That's how she said she lost her way for a little bit in her thirties. She ran to the wrong kind of people, until she finally found her way home. She says Vincent and Catherine will be there for me too, and she's right."

Nia felt terribly sad that things had to end. And it felt especially wrong in this special place where water shadows rippled on the ceiling and the water tasted salty-sweet on your lips. River said it was safe to drink and took some from her cupped hands.

It was a special place. Like maybe this spring had been on Atlantis, and when Atlantis sank beneath the waves, this was the last little bit of it that remained. Some of the obnoxious kids said Atlantis wasn't real, but Nia secretly believed in it. And a secret wish bloomed in her heart. This was a spring from Atlantis. And its water had special magic powers. And maybe if you drank from it enough, you never had to grow old and sick. You never had to die and make everybody feel sad and yucky and scared.

She and River swam some more and when they got out to dry themselves with towels and dress, Nia carefully tipped the bottle of water River had brought into the sand when she wasn't looking and refilled it from water in the pool. She stuffed the bottle into the bag and followed River back to the Charles.

She had wanted to give River the first bottle, but she knew the king expected such a gift first. And Vincent was their king, even though nobody called him that, and acted like he wasn't. She talked Kipper into letting her take the basket of dinner to Vincent and Catherine's brownstone.

Vincent was alone in the kitchen when she got there. She was always a little nervous around him. He was so tall, and his head was a regal assortment of greying features and mountains of silver hair. She nervously pulled the bottle out of the basket.

"Uh, Vincent?"

"Yes, Nia?" Vincent asked her, curiously looking at the bottle.

"Well, uh, River took me to a place to swim today and I'm pretty sure it's a spring from Atlantis, which is why the water looks like this. And since you're our king, I know we're not supposed to call you that, but it's true, I wanted you to have the first bottle. It'll keep you from getting sick, I bet, and then you won't have to keep getting older and die."

Nia finished to see Vincent looking at her carefully. She felt a flush of shame creep up her neck. He was probably going to tell her Atlantis didn't exist. And he was probably right. And she was just a dumb stupid baby. Oh, she couldn't start crying here.

Vincent picked up the bottle carefully and looked at it. He smiled. "I thank you for this gift, Nia, even as I am no king, but I wouldn't want to live forever even if I could."

"You wouldn't?" Nia asked, confused.

"Things find their purpose in that they end. Childhood is sweet, or should be sweet, because it ends. Children grow up and have children of their own. Death is sorrowful, but it is as much a part of life as happiness or love."

Nia sighed. "I just don't want River to get too old to dance. Or anybody else to get sick from what we all wear masks up top for."

Vincent pulled her toward him. "River will one day get too old to dance, but not for a long time yet. People up top may consider her too old to dance for them, but she can still dance for us. And we will watch her dance and cherish the gift given to us in it."

Nia was starting to understand. "Things end but then something new starts. Like, it just changes, is all."

"You're a very bright young woman." Vincent gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Now, go have your supper, and dream of Atlantis tonight."

Nia surprised herself by giving him a quick hug and running back towards the basement. She did dream of Atlantis that night, not minding if it existed or not, because it always did in the palace of dreams.

And up top, Vincent poured the bottle of water into a bathtub big enough for two. And sighed with contentment as Catherine rested against his chest in the blue-green water, reading to him from a book of poetry.

What man needs eternal life when eternity is right here in his arms?

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