

Water gods once reigned on Mars, but now they're all dead except for me. In fact, most of the planet's gods and spirits were dead aside from the god of the wind, some desert spirits, and a few mountain gods. Once a lush tropical planet filled with every deity, lord, nymph, daemon, god and spirit you could imagine - Mars today was, by most definitions, dead as a door nail.

In my prime they called me *Rhji*. I was the strongest of Mars's seven water gods. Telop, the strongest civilization on the planet, cowered when approaching my rivers and seas. Before embarking on their journeys, they placed glittering jewels upon my sandy shores as a gesture of goodwill. Blue jewels were my favorite. If they gave me a blue gem, I'd just part the whole damn sea.

"Come on, y'all!" I'd say as everyone strode across the ocean floor with water as high as mountains on either side of them.

For the record, I hated green gems. I'd go out of my way to drown whole villages if they offered me green ones.

Those were the days.

When Mars died and the dust took hold, I retreated into a cavern and stuffed it with as much water and aquatic life as I could, yet after three billion years this was all that remained of my vast empire: a puddle in a cave. I had cultivating this ancient plashet through tedious erosion management combined with careful evaporative prevention techniques. I lived inside its water molecules, commanding and molding the oxygen and hydrogen to my will. I could leave it when I pleased, becoming water vapor, or lift myself from it like a geyser, but at the end of the day the puddle was my home.

However, I didn't live alone, oh no! I shared this primordial lagoon with the last living microorganisms on the planet. My roommates, if you will.

It had become my life's work to protect these little rascals. I had hoped they would one day evolve and leave my puddle, thus populating a new Mars and freeing me from this stupid cave, but after billions of years I'd resigned myself to the notion that I might just be a glorified babysitter. I figured one day they might get their act together and march out of the cave. Until then I just kept the puddle safe and waited.

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I shook awake, scattering ripples across my puddle's surface. The cavern was dark and quiet as a tomb. No spirit had ventured into my cave for billions of years. The only sounds which ever graced its ancient walls was the soft rippling of my water.

I stretched, careful of even the most minute movements that would shift the clay from under me. One crack in delicate mud meant that not only would my finite water disappear into the hungry Martian soil, but the microbes would as well.

A zephyr spirit whistled by me as it made its morning rounds. It spoke of the latest news from around the planet:

God of wind mad again, kicks up strongest dust storm in millennia. Boring.

Asteroid hits Mount Northmis, mountain god ejected into space. Serves him right.

Terran rover lands in Hyli Desert, formerly Hyli Lake - searches for Rhjji's puddle in hopes of taking its contents back to Earth.

I paused.

Terrans never landed so close to me. They surveyed mountains, or vast canyons, never ancient lakes. How'd their tiny brains even comprehend what an ancient lake looked like?

Buzzing erupted throughout the cavern, jolting my puddle into violent ripples. I felt the dirt shift below me, releasing tiny droplets into the sand. Billions of microbes dead in an instant.

I squeezed myself into a faint cloud of water vapor and floated to the cavern's ceiling, then slithered through cracks in the Martian soil searching for the buzzing's source. Suddenly, pieces of me wrapped around a monstrous drill, splattering me against rock. I twisted free and rushed back to my puddle, hitting the water with a delicate *plop*.

The buzzing grew louder. Dirt shifted again below me. I figured I had only minutes before this drill monster found me and slurped the puddle up, killing me and stealing the civilization of underachieving bacterium I had for so long protected. Not only would I be dead, but three billion years of work would be wasted. I had to stop this monster.

I poofed into vapor once more and slithered past the metallic horror up, up, up to the mouth of my cave which overlooked the vast desert formerly known as Hyli Lake. I had called its once lush shores home for a billion years, but now it was just an expanse of dust guarded by Reggie, a lowly desert spirit and absolute doofus.

"Reggie." I hissed across the nothingness. "I don't have long. Come here."

Through the rusty clouds I spied a metallic bird hovering. It strafed left, then right against the dim sun. Laser beamed from its belly, spewing dust as the slender rays penetrated red soil. How many of these monsters now explored our sacred world I had no idea, but I knew their presence was becoming more common.

"Reggie, wake up!" I said. I glanced around the cave's mouth and found a loose stone. Steam expelled from me as I thrust every molecule against the rock. It tipped and tumbled down the hillside, smashing into a pile of dust. The dust suddenly grew as tall as a tree and crawled up the slope toward me. It stopped at the cave's mouth and clumsily swayed from side to side.

"Rhjji!" The dust said. Its voice had a drawl to it as if it just ended a relaxing day of surfing at the beach. "What brings you to my desert on this tremendously fine morning?"

"Reggie, I'm in danger, the--"

A laser suddenly ripped through the dust, splitting Reggie the Dust Cloud in half. "Bogus." Reggie said as half of their dust fell to the ground. The other half continued floating. "Wild times are certainly afoot, huh?"

I groaned. "Have you seen the drill beast?"

"The whaat?"

“There is a metallic beast in my lake-“ I paused, “Your desert. It’s drilling deep into the soil. It wants to steal my puddle.”

“Whoa,” Reggie said. “That puddle’s still around?”

“Of course the puddle’s still around. It’s the only thing keeping me alive.”

“Right on.” The dust said.

“Listen, I need you to find this monster and kill it. Whatever it takes.”

“Whoa, hold on. Maybe we can just talk to it first? What does this *metallic beast* look like?”

“Like a - I don’t know, *metal*?”

“It’s not that flying one behind me, is it? Cause then mystery solved. Easy-peasy.”

“No, it’s another one. It’s on the ground.”

“Right on, right on.” Reggie said. “Well, what should I do if I find it?”

“Kill it! Cover it in dust! Bury it forever!”

The dust studied me. “You’re asking a lot of me, Rhjji.”

My vapor cloud slumped down to the soil. “Reggie, I’m going to die if you don’t do something.”

“No, I hear you.” They said. “That wouldn’t be cool at all. For sure.” The dust shifted its form into an oval. “OK, I’ll go hunting for this beast and, then, uh, I’ll push it over.”

“You can’t push it over. Its drill is embedded deep into the soil.”

“Oh. Well, I can’t muster enough dust to bury it. I’m not a *god*.”

I glanced at the hovering metal bird behind the floating dust. The bird’s glittering wings struggled against a strong Martian breeze. “We can contact the god of wind.”

Reggie’s shape went rigid. “Menkauhor won’t answer to a bogus desert spirit such as myself.”

“We’ll do it together. We can call upon Menkauhor through the jet stream above the clouds and attach a piece of my water vapor to the message, that way he’ll recognize it’s from me. He’ll come. I know he will.”

“Yeah,” The dust nodded, “I guess we can try it.”

“Of course we can try!”

“But,” Reggie leaned close to me. “If he gets mad, it’s on you. I’ve lost too many stones to that dude already.”

“Yes, fine. Come on!” I joined my vapor with Reggie’s dust. We soared into the sky, dodging lasers from the metallic bird. We climbed up, up, up through the rusty veil then parked our tangle of dust-water beside the jet stream high above the desert. The screaming wind threatened to tear us into pieces.

"I will shout into a portion of your dust," I said to Reggie. "Then you will send that combination of water-dust into the jet stream as my message to Menkauhor. He should catch wind of it within seconds."

"Right on!" Reggie the dust cloud said.

"Menkauhor," I screamed. "This is Rhjji, the last water god. I am in danger. The future of our planet is at stake. Come to Hyli Lake- er, Hyli Desert. Hurry!" I turned to Reggie. "How did that sound?"

"Excellent! Let's send it!"

Reggie blew the message into the jet stream. It darted far into the red sky like an arrow, quickly disappearing.

We floated back to the cave's mouth. The metallic bird was gone, off to zap another patch of desert. We perched atop a rock and waited for our message to be received.

"What are you gonna do if you die, Rhjji?" Reggie said.

I shrugged a puff of steam. "I'll just be dead, I guess."

"The microbes too?"

"Them as well."

Reggie slowly shook dust from side to side. "Crazy."

I glanced at the floating cloud. "What is?"

"It's- I mean, death. You know?"

Suddenly, a thunderous roar echoed from across the desert. Wind ripped dust into the air, blinding us in red. A tornado formed in front of the cave, spraying hundreds of rocks into the air which Reggie instinctively tried to catch without success.

"WHO DARES TO CALL UPON THE MIGHTY MENKAUHOR?" The god of wind bellowed.

"Rhjji." I said.

"RHJJI?"

"The last water god."

"OH." The voice boomed. The tornado shrank into a small dust devil, then danced up the slope to the mouth of the cave. It studied my tiny water vapor form. "How did you send that message from such a tiny body?"

"Nice to see you too, Menk." I said. "Reggie helped me with it."

The small tornado turned to Reggie, who was still panting after the failed attempt at catching all the misplaced, flying rocks. Dust spewed from their cloud with every huff.

"The Terrans seek to kill me." I said. "They desire the microbes."

“Yes,” Menkauhor said. “I had heard that from the zephyr this morning. How have you been, by the way? It has been too long.”

“Aside from being a puddle for billions of years? Just peachy.”

“Yes!” The god laughed, blasting me with a gust of wind. “Still a puddle and saucy as ever. How I missed your quick tongue.”

My vapor narrowed. “Listen, I need you to kill the beast drilling toward my puddle. Can you do that tornado thing you just did and throw it into the sky?”

“I could,” The wind said. “But I must say, Rhjji, I do not believe such an act of violence is worth the trouble.”

“*Worth the trouble?*” I hissed.

“If I destroy these beasts,” The god continued, “They will only return with stronger contraptions. Contraptions that could withstand wind itself. They will harm us further if we fight them, but if we accept them I believe the Terrans second chance we have desired for all these years.”

“You’re joking.” I said.

The wind laughed. “Look around, Rhjji. Everything is dead. It has been dead for a very long time. You will never reign as you once did, so why should I worry about the life of an antiquated god?”

“It’s not just me we’re saving here, Menk. It’s the microbes too. Our future. If they evolve, we can bring all of the spirits back. We can start over!”

“It has been three billions years.”

Steam whistled from my vapor. “And I can wait three billion more. I just need more time. They’re not ready yet.”

The dust devil shook from side to side. “And when *will* they be ready, hm? Five billion years? Twenty billion? This might not be the rebirth you envisioned, but I believe the Terrans are the real future for our world.”

“They’re not even *Martian!*” I hissed. “They don’t care about us. They’ll ensnare our world and find ways to control us - to destroy us. They’re already doing it.”

The wind studied me. “I do not agree.”

I turned to Reggie who shrugged with a puff of dust. Menkauhor’s small tornado leaned toward me. “We gave you and your microbes a chance, Rhjji. It’s time to move on.”

My vapor heated. “No.” I said.

The god of wind pulled away. “No?”

“They’re still worth it.”

“Rhjji...” Menkhauhor said.

“I’ll kill the beast myself!” Steam exploded from me as I rushed into the cracks of the cavern’s dirt, down, down down. I raced through tiny jagged tunnels, past the metallic beast. I splashed into my puddle with a tremendous *plop*.

The buzzing from the drill was deafening above me. I rippled as I thought, carelessly sloshing liquid into the thirsty soil below. I sensed the microbes buzzing around me. They knew something terrible was coming. That their survival was at stake. That it was time to defend our home.

I concentrated all of my energy into a surge of water, utilizing the collective might of the microbes as my soldiers, and charged at the drill as it finally tore through the cavern’s ceiling. We climbed as a mighty geyser through the empty cave and crashed against the drill, thrashing at the monster and pushing it away from the puddle.

I shouted in the beast’s face as it shoved against us, twisting us with its wretched arms. We returned its blows with greater thrusts, my microbes and I punching and pushing. The monster sputtered and groaned as we shoved it up, up, up back through hole it slithered from.

“We’re not yours to take!” I cried.

We were an unstoppable army. A future spilling with strength and hope. For every microbe that died in this carnage, billions more surged in their heroic name. Then suddenly my stream ceased and I was nothing but droplets. I had expended all of my excess water. All that remained was the essence of my puddle. If I utilized any more water, I would die.

I tumbled down the hole and fell like rain through the stale cavern air back to what was left of my puddle, splashing with a *plop, plop, plop*.

I watched helplessly as the drill once again descended toward what was left of the microbes. What was left of *me*.

“Reggie!” I called out.

“Menkauhor!”

A slender straw slithered from the drill’s tip and dipped into my ancient water. With surgical precision the monster sucked the remaining droplets of my life into its belly, consuming billions of microbes in one swift gulp. Then it ran its wretched tool around the clay basin for one final slurp - billions of years of my memories, hopes, dreams, conquests, adventures, loves, losses, triumphs - everything I was, all devoured in seconds.

“No one opens it but me.” Regina said to her bright eyed colleagues covered head-to-toe in sterile plastic suits.

She stepped into the decontamination room with her four other colleagues. It was a cold room and quiet as a graveyard. Her eyes strained from the glittering white of the walls. Her heart thumped. Sweat trickled down her neck.

Through the length of Project Fortitude she had published seven books, divorced twice, watched her mother die, foreclosed on her home, bought a new home, received tenure and was awarded three international science awards. Now, after fifteen years, the stupid rover she had bet her career on had finally returned from that rusty planet.

The decontamination room hissed. A light above a white metal door flashed from red to green. Regina pushed it open with all her weight, battling the suck of the vacuum on the other side.

The SUV-sized rover rested in the center of a vast white chamber. Its wheels were caked in the red of Martian soil. Its silver metal was stained in streaks of black. The word, FORTITUDE, shimmered in bright blue along its sides. It had flown, on its own, to literal Hell and back with one purpose: to collect the remnants of an ancient Martian lake.

Regina crawled under the metallic beast, then turned onto her back just under the robot's belly. She wiped dust from the metal, revealing a small hatch and a blue, pulsing button. She held her nervous breath and pushed it.

Slowly, the hatch slid open and a tiny metallic crane handed Regina a small transparent tube no larger than her fist. She had designed the tube so that she could instantly verify if the water successfully survived the journey home. If this mission was a failure, she wanted to know immediately and as privately as possible, away from the prying eyes of her colleagues.

Tears cascaded down Regina's cheeks as ancient alien water splashed inside the tube. It was far more water than she could have ever dreamed of collecting.

"Did we get it?" A colleague asked unseen from beyond the rover.

Regina sniffled and held the tube as close to her eyes as possible, almost unbelieving.

"We got it." She said, then heard her colleagues clap their plastic gloves in excitement.

"How much, Regina?" Another colleague said.

"At least a puddle's worth."