

# *Island of Resilience*

## **RESIO**

“Pass me another mango, will you, Raja?”

Syndi lounged in a makeshift chair in a clearing, as the palm trees danced in the breeze around her. Raja passed the requested fruit tentatively, watching to guess her mood. Not far away, the soft, white beach of the Island of Resilience lay stretched out in a lovely ribbon. It met the frothy waves on one side, and the rich jungle overgrowth on the other. Though the scene around them was lovely, Raja anticipated a storm - the storm he'd seen brewing for weeks within Syndi's mind.

Liam had an inquisitive look as he chewed his banana. “How many days have we been on this island? I'm losing track!”

Syndi leaned to one side and grabbed a piece of driftwood with a series of marks scratched into it. Pointing to each group of tallies, she counted silently.

“Twenty seven and...” she paused, squinting up at the sky, “one-half.”

Syndi shot a grimacing smile at Liam and then took a bite out of the sweet fruit.

Raja smiled briefly. Idly turning the compass in his hand, he glanced around the clearing. This was the longest they'd ever settled in a place since leaving Yalwuna, and their handiwork was strewn everywhere. They'd each made straw hats out of the reeds growing plentifully on the island. Liam and Raja both had a chair much like Syndi's. When they'd first arrived, they were relieved to have comfort, beauty, and plenty to eat. But as the days turned into weeks, Raja's desire to move forward left him feeling unsettled; and he knew Syndi was as antsy as he was, probably more.

“Raja,” Syndi spoke, eyeing the compass. “Is it any different today?”

“No.” Raja looked at the face of the compass and the wandering needle.

The compass hadn't worked since leaving the Island of Self-Discipline. Raja remembered Twist and all the penguins who'd buoyed them over water all the way to this island, barely escaping the Phoi. He absently smiled at the memory; then sighed as his mind wandered back to the compass in his hand.

“I don't know if it's broken or if we're...” he paused.

Syndi's brow furrowed slightly. “If we're what?”

She sat up, straightening.

Observing her serious face, Raja smiled to lighten the mood. “Oh, I don't know. I just wonder if we're still on track.”

He looked at her and attempted a careless shrug. "It's just, we've always found a guide... and the compass isn't working..."

When he saw her eyes drop to the ground, he continued, "I guess I've wondered if we should start doing something."

Abruptly, Syndi stood. "You're right, Raja. I've had similar thoughts. We shouldn't be sitting around here just waiting to be found. I propose we leave today...right now. I've been questioning this for some time, but I didn't want to interrupt your rest."

Stooping, she grabbed the walking stick she'd been whittling for weeks; and then retrieved her straw hat and perched it atop her black hair. She looked down at the two surprised men and smiled broadly.

Raja studied her momentarily, then glanced at Liam.

"What do you think?"

Raja knew Syndi felt pensive behind that beautiful smile, and he appreciated her efforts to cheer them.

With raised eyebrows, Liam answered, "Well, I guess we have nothing to lose. Though it has been great to relax these past few weeks, knowing the Phoi aren't following us."

Pausing, he gazed at Raja and Syndi, perhaps hoping Syndi would change her mind and choose to stay a little longer.

Receiving no encouragement, Liam finally shrugged his shoulders and said, "Ok."

Rising from his chair, Liam retrieved his hat and a loosely woven bag he'd created. Resignedly, he stood by Syndi.

Raja stood matter-of-factly. "Well, Syndi, thanks to you, today is the day!" He looked around. "I guess we'll leave everything here except what we can carry."

As Raja began to place the compass in his pocket, to his amazement, he watched the needle stop and hold steady. With a smile and some wonder, he showed his companions.

"Well, I guess that's a sign we're doing the right thing! Let's go."

With the compass held before him, Raja led his friends out of the clearing and into the darkness of an uncharted jungle.

## **Hope Fading**

The jungle was thick with vines and branches, bugs, and mud. Two weeks passed with little change in their journey. Raja, Liam, and Syndi trudged on, following the compass as their only guide.

The sudden recovery of the compass had served as a ray of hope for each of them. Though unable to see much beyond the dense undergrowth beneath the towering palms, they had confidence that they were on the right path, as the compass had always proved true before.

However, day after day passed with no sight of their next guide; and, with every setting sun, that hope began receding as well.

Liam began hitting the giant leaves absently with his stick. "I wonder if this island ever changes?" His voice was tinged with frustration.

"I'm so tired of walking," Syndi chimed in. "I'm so tired of everything!"

Raja didn't say anything out loud, but the fatigue and monotony got to him as well. Thin cuts covered his arms from the surrounding leaves, and sweat beaded on his face as he walked. Bitter misgivings began to skirt the edge of his thinking, sometimes taking center stage in his mind.

*Where are we going anyway?*

He mused how, after so many experiences on this journey, doubt and fear still held sway over him, especially when he was hot and tired. With this awareness, Raja determined to push them away and spoke with deliberate optimism.

"It always turns out. We're going to be just fine."

"Do you really think so?" Syndi asked, mustering hope.

Raja was instantly bolstered by her obvious efforts to raise her spirits.

"Yep! We've come through worse." His voice carried more confidence than he felt and he knew Liam saw right through him. Glancing back, Raja saw Liam smile faintly.

"I'm sure that's correct," Syndi replied, after some moments of focused pondering. Her voice held increased certainty. "We've always come through before."

Raja couldn't help a satisfied smile in Liam's direction. Liam grinned back, shaking his head slightly.

Suddenly, a crash in the trees caught their attention and Syndi screamed. They whipped around just in time to see a short, furry tail disappearing into the green. The clamorous sounds slowly faded as the animal lumbered away.

"What was that?" Syndi caught her breath and tried to still her beating heart.

"I don't know, but let's not follow it!" Liam blurted, clearly startled.

Raja held up the compass. "We actually need to follow it...Now!"

Glancing at each other wide-eyed, Liam and Syndi both nodded in resignation and charged in the wake of Raja's pursuit.

## **Ascending**

Immediately, the ground began to ascend. After so many weeks of sitting around aimlessly, it was refreshing to be climbing, even if it was toward a moving target. The vines grew even more plentiful on the rise, and each hiker slipped in various spots. They continued to climb, following the needle on the compass, until they spotted a spring of fresh water coming out of the ground. Gratefully, they stopped and drank deeply. Refreshed, they continued their crawl. To their amazement however, the first spring was just an indicator of things to come. Every few yards they came upon another trickle of water that saturated the ground around them, making the way incredibly slick.

“Raja, this is ridiculous!” Syndi sputtered, after rising from her third dramatic fall. “We’ve got to find a better way up this hill!”

Both men turned to see the little lady, hands on hips, shouting up at them in irritation.

“This isn’t working at all!”

Raja looked back and had to agree that the progress had been slow and minimal.

“Syndi, I’ll come and help you.”

Raja began his descent, but immediately slipped. Liam’s foot caught his fall momentarily, but gave way when Raja grabbed Liam’s arm for support, pulling him completely off balance. In a tumble, they both slid down to where Syndi had the presence of mind to jump out of the way. A few yards later, they slowed to a halt, and Liam let out a groan.

Suddenly, a low rumbling drifted through the vines. “When they knock you down, you just get back up.”

All three snapped their heads in the direction of the sound, searching for its owner. Quickly, Syndi sidled her way to the two men.

A bit louder, the voice echoed, “When they knock you down, you just get back up.”

Liam and Raja scrambled to their feet, holding onto each other’s shoulders for balance. Alarmed, they looked around, mud dripping from their faces.

Then booming, the voice thundered a third time, “When they knock you down, you just get back up.”

From behind a cluster of banana leaves, the owner of the furry tail made himself visible with a laugh.

“Pretty soon, they get tired of knockin’ you down,” he stated simply.

As he made his way towards them, the mighty claws on the big brown bear grappled the loamy terrain and maneuvered the slope with surprising ease. Aghast, Syndi grabbed onto Liam and Raja in terrible fright, throwing them into another balancing act, before coming to a shared equilibrium. Barely breathing, and perched behind Raja precariously, Syndi stared at the approaching bear with widening eyes.

Feeling hopelessly helpless, Raja could only attempt to stand very tall as he tried to protect Syndi in some way, while still struggling to maintain balance for all of them.

The bear continued to saunter slowly toward the quivering trio until his nose, within inches of Raja’s, took a big sniff. Then, pulling himself to full height, the bear bellowed, “Well, Hello! I’m Resi-O!”

Still swaying awkwardly, Raja stared up at the towering hulk in front of him, and stammered, “Resio?”

“Why yes, yes, you see! Resilient Optimism is the key!” The bear seemed to wink. “The key to getting where you want to be!”

Another jovial chuckle escaped the wide mouth.

“Unlike other animals, I see in full color. I’m the guardian of this island, there is no other!”

“What!?” Syndi peeked out over Raja’s shoulder angrily.

“You’re the *guide* of this island? Where have you been?!” she sputtered.

Unruffled, Resio growled warmly, “Why yes, you see! I’ll take you where you need to be!”

The great beast drew closer to Syndi as he spoke. Instinctively, she leaned away from him, still holding on to Raja as if he was a saving barrier.

“We’ve been waiting for you down there for weeks!” Syndi pointed down the slope but the bear didn’t respond. Instead, Resio stopped and studied each of them, then, seemingly making a decision, he continued, “Look my friends, you’re in a pickle! Grab my tail and don’t be fickle!”

The bear then turned around so that his stumpy tail was directly accessible.

Liam looked immediately to Raja, with a mixed expression of disgust and shock at this request. Syndi’s angry expression changed to pure revulsion. Raja regarded each of them with uncertainty.

Resio’s friendly face appeared momentarily from behind his round body, long enough to spew out another rhyme.

“Don’t be prudish and never fear! Grab that tail, I’ll get you outta here!” The tail wagged back and forth in invitation.

Grimacing, Raja hissed to his friends, “Do not let go of me, whatever you do.”

White-faced, Syndi nodded vigorously. Raja grabbed the furry stump with an iron grip and was immediately jerked up the hill by the massive force of Resio. Throwing her arms around his head and neck, Syndi jumped onto Raja’s back with a yelp, while Liam held on awkwardly to the side of his tunic. In this humorous way, the four of them made their way up the hill. Resio continued to express himself in rhyme, though none of them could properly hear him and were too befuddled to listen anyway.

As Resio pulled them beyond the slippery vines, Raja marveled that he was somehow able to maintain the balance of all three of them, even while sustaining his death grip on the tail of a big brown bear.

Finally reaching dry land, Raja let go of the tail and collapsed onto the soft ground. Liam and Syndi dropped beside him, exhausted. Resio lumbered around, happily congratulating them on having the resilience to make it this far! (Of course following up with a comment about a star.) Breathing heavily, Raja eyed him with a wane smile and managed a breathless, “Thanks.”

“Please don’t mention it; I’m happy to help! I’d rather be with you than eating kelp!” At this, Resio laughed at his own wit.

Liam attempted to join with him to show his appreciation; but when his mirth sounded more like a halting moan, Resio couldn’t help but chuckle.

Suddenly, Syndi was on her feet.

“I have had it!”

Raja braced himself for what would follow. Though he'd never seen Syndi's iron patience stretched to the breaking point, he knew the storm had finally arrived.

"We have been wandering aimlessly for weeks, dirty and tired; you have just scared us out of our wits; and now you're making kelp jokes?" Syndi's arms made wide gestures toward Resio as she spoke, her face flushed with anger. "I am so sick of being dirty! I am sick of being tired! I'm sick of worrying about what is waiting for us beyond the next hill --- and then YOU come over the next hill with your rym-y mym-y nonsense!"

The bear blinked. Slowly, he stood erect, then lumbered over to her, an expression of sympathy on his face. Syndi instinctively backed away.

"I see your frustration and understand. We all are required to comply with this land." He paused. "I've watched your struggle and couldn't wait any longer, so I burst through the trees to help you grow stronger!"

Syndi's sense of fairness instantly checked her rage. She remembered that the guides were the key to them overcoming their troubles. Seeing Resio's obvious concern, in the face of her outburst, tempered her. Embarrassment washed over her exhausted body. She managed a weak, "Thank you," and produce a poorly attempted smile. Then she sat down on a nearby boulder and promptly burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, Resio," she wailed. "But I can't laugh. I can't even smile!"

"It's okay." Resio sat down facing her. "Just cry a while."

She didn't speak for some moments, apparently willing to obey his counsel.

"I'm so tired of this journey," she finally blubbered through her tears, looking up into Resio's face. "Haven't our efforts been enough? I think they *should* be enough." The last of her sentence escaped haltingly.

Liam and Raja felt satisfied that their plight had such a worthy spokesperson. They sat, listening to Syndi's sobs, and watching Resio's nodding head.

"It's like this journey never ends! *We never arrive!* I am grateful to you and Respa and Inrock; but it's been so hard. We are in this jungle, wandering around for no reason! Then making jokes about it all - I just can't handle it! There's just no point to any of this!"

Resio leaned forward with care and lightly placed a paw on Syndi's shoulder. He spoke with gentle clarity. "There is purpose in everything, my friend, which you will come to see...in the end."

As she looked into Resio's eyes, Syndi remembered that the journey had never been easy; but every stretch had given gifts. Her mind seemed to churn as Resio's words sunk in. After a few moments, Syndi's shoulders drooped with resignation, followed by a deep sigh. She sniffed and attempted to wipe her eyes. Resio looked on with compassion as her breathing slowed and her crying stopped. Syndi wiped her face with her hands and then looked over at the two men and paused. They were at a loss for words. Taking a final, deep breath, she looked up to Resio once more a calm feeling passing over her.

“Resio, you are right. There is meaning to this journey, however long it may seem. I know it. I’ve felt it, just as Raja and Liam have felt it.” Syndi let out another sigh.

The truth of her words gave Raja strength. He was again impressed with her ability to focus and move forward in every circumstance, albeit with tears; but he was ok with that.

With a desire to give Syndi additional confidence in what she had voiced, Liam added, “We will continue, Resio. We’ll feed our optimism and never give up.”

A mellow light crossed Resio’s face. He gazed for a long moment into Syndi’s red, puffy eyes, staring up at him with sincerity. Smiling serenely, he nodded and stood.

“Ah, my friends, in these attempts to be brave, the path of others, you will pave!”

The words were meant to lift them and to remind them of their quest; and as Resio looked into each of their faces, he knew they had found their mark.

“We will meet again; but for now I must leave you. Be true. Be true. Be true. Be true.”

As the bear lumbered away, he turned again and gave one final, departing comment.

“Always remember: Resilient Optimism is the key, to get you to where you want to be!”

## Senshu

The three of them sat, looking dumbly at each other. Experience had taught them that the guides weren’t anything near idle; but having Resio depart so abruptly took them by surprise.

Finally, Raja spoke. “Let’s just take some time to take in our bearings.” The three all breathed deeply and looked at the surrounding flowers, trees, and listened to the sounds of a far off sea and bird songs.

Raja rubbed his shoulders, as Liam made himself more comfortable. Syndi left her perch on the boulder and joined Raja on the ground.

“We can be grateful that we’ve met the guardian of this island now. Resilient optimism is the key, eh?” Raja smiled as he eyed Syndi and Liam.

“Yeah, and I bet we have plenty of experiences ahead of us to practice.” Liam grinned, feeding the positive outlook Raja was attempting to build.

Liam’s expression immediately lightened Raja’s mood, and he suddenly felt like moving on. He stood and retrieved the compass from his pocket. It was fully engaged and pointing farther up the mountain. Silently, he showed his companions.

Smiling at Syndi, Raja asked, “Ready to go again?”

She sighed and nodded. Raja reached out his hand to assist her. She took it, stood, and looked up the mountain with new determination.

Using the compass, Raja plotted their course between the trees.

They had only been hiking for a few minutes when a long, piercing screech cut through the air. Instinctively, all three travelers dropped to the ground and covered their heads, as if preparing for an ambush. When the noise ceased, the friends slowly looked at each other, wide-eyed.

“See what I mean by many opportunities?” Liam spoke in a hushed voice.

Raja’s heart was pounding so hard, he was certain it would beat right out of his chest.

Syndi began to laugh softly.

“What’s so funny?” Raja whispered indignantly, slowly rising to his feet looking around. “What *was* that?!”

“Sorry!” Syndi whispered back through her laughter. “Look at us! We look so ridiculous.”

She crinkled up her nose as she giggled, trying to keep quiet.

Liam and Raja looked at each other momentarily; then Liam whispered, in a playful inquiry, “Why are you whispering, Syndi?”

“I don’t know...” she playfully whispered back. Then laughed out loud.

Suddenly, the strangled shriek sounded again, interrupting their banter, and making them all jump and cover their ears. This time, it wasn’t just one loud tone, but a sporadic, frantic scream.

Looking upward, Liam yelled over the din, “Where’s it coming from?”

Their eyes scanned the jungle foliage, searching for its source.

Abruptly, the noise stopped and a large white bird, with frilly feathers, landed on a branch directly in front of Raja. Raja, Liam, and Syndi regarded the bird with uncertainty. Then suddenly, it began to speak.

“You may pass,” she said in a barking voice, “if you correctly answer my question.”

The bird cleared her throat importantly, as the three stared with opened mouths and furrowing eyebrows. “*What should you give a sick bird?*”

“I’m sorry?” Raja spoke, inclining his head as though this might help him hear her better.

“Please relax, the question is very simple. *Squawk!* What should you give to a sick bird?” she repeated.

“I-I am sorry; I’m afraid I don’t know. I’ve never taken care of a bird. Are...you...sick?” He posed the last question with a side-glance at Liam.

The bird cocked her head. “Well then, I suppose I’ll have to tell you. You always give a sick bird...tweetment!”

Both men, still confused, nodded absently, while Syndi’s eyes grew wider with surprise.

The bird laughed hysterically, her beautiful white and gold feathers swaying.

“Ah, that one’s a classic!” she chuckled to herself.

Syndi couldn’t help venturing a smile, as she looked from Raja to Liam to see their responses.



“Friends, please forgive me! I completely forgot about introductions, for I never can resist a good joke. I am Senshu the Cockatoo.”

She held out a clawed foot, seemingly wanting to shake their hands.

“Are you our next guide?” Raja asked, awkwardly shaking the claw. This cockatoo seemed the type to keep him guessing.

Liam and Syndi followed suite with the...claw-shaking.

“That I am!” Senshu said cheerfully, planting her foot back on the branch in satisfaction.

Then she paused. She seemed to study them intently, as her neck slowly began stretching toward them.

“Dear me, we certainly have our work cut out for us,” she said emphatically. “Such *serious* faces!”

Senshu emphasized the words with a grave voice and lowered head, staring at them, as if they had extreme problems. They all instinctively bowed their own heads slightly, to match her gaze.

“Afterall...” she spoke slowly, shifting her feet and lowering her voice. “That joke was such a good one.”

The absurdity of the words did not break the spell of her blinking black eye staring at them, nor her voice taking on every mark of discussing a solemnly disturbing matter.

Finally, Syndi stole a glance to view Liam and Raja’s concentrated expressions, and her mood shifted immediately. Finding the entire scene to be ridiculously funny, but trying to hold in the laughter, she let out a quiet snort.

Senshu’s eye focused toward her and she straightened. Still, try as she may, Syndi couldn’t conceal her smile, and another snicker escaped her lips.

“Now this is one who knows what to do with a good joke! There’s hope for you yet!” Senshu chortled delightedly, while throwing her wings wide in approval.

The two men exchanged a humorous glance, as they watched Syndi join in with the squawking laughter. Senshu happily fluttered over to sit on Syndi’s shoulder, and the pair continued to enjoy the moment with all its mirth.

After a few minutes, Syndi started to quiet down and looked over at Raja and Liam with shining eyes. Raja was relieved to see Syndi’s former anxiety was fading away.

“Thank you for such a wonderful moment, Syndi.” Senshu gazed down at her, then fluttered back to the branch and resumed her instructional stance.

Looking at her charges, Senshu declared, “There will be an obstacle course provided for your enjoyment.”

Syndi cheerily glanced at her companions. Liam and Raja seemed content with staring at and listening to the winged fowl with furrowed eyebrows, obviously trying to understand what an obstacle course had to do with them.

“All the lessons that I have to share with you are embedded within it.”

Turning her back to them, Senshu readjusted herself on the branch. Then, speaking as an afterthought, she added, "Of course, it's harder for some to see the humor that surrounds and envelopes them." She glanced back at them and paused, as if thinking to herself. "Well, no matter! Let's take a vacation! We'll reach camp before nightfall. Follow me!"

Not entirely sure what to think about Senshu and her ideas, Raja merely grunted and fell in step behind his departing companions. *A vacation?*

For three miles, the friends followed Senshu, trudging up through thick jungle terrain. Periodically, she would swoop down with a squawk and relate a funny story or a lighthearted quip. Syndi was delighted; Liam was amused; and Raja found himself becoming more and more curious.

Despite his lack of robust laughter, Raja noticed that he felt happier, creative even. The stresses of all of the previous weeks melted away through this bird's antics. She charmed him with her breezy merriment. Her good nature and willingness to engage wholeheartedly amused him, even though he was unaccustomed to it.

As he walked the distance, Raja considered the situation and eventually decided that he was satisfied with Senshu - more than satisfied. He was pleased with her effect on him and wanted to absorb her ways into his. Her lightheartedness made their journey easier he realized, and he appreciated the way her humor helped them all forget the worries that had weighed so heavily before her arrival.

Raja's thoughts were interrupted by Senshu's sunny announcement, "Ah, here we are!"

A spacious, white tent welcomed the three weary travelers. One by one, they stumbled inside and discovered a simple meal of fruit, cheese, and nuts waiting for them. Gratefully, they each sank onto the soft fleece that covered the floor, eating hungrily. Soon, Raja found himself joking with the others playfully. As he observed his laughing companions, Raja was overcome with a sense of contentment and gratitude. Respa had delivered, once again.

After they had all eaten and were filled, Senshu announced, "We have a busy day tomorrow, so I suggest rest! Early to bed, early to rise!"

After the long day of hiking through the jungle, there was no need to convince them. Liam, Syndi, and Raja each found a snug spot and promptly fell asleep.

"Wake up, wake up!"

From outside the tent, Senshu's piercing voice awoke the travelers the next morning. "I have a question for you!"

Opening his eyes, Raja shook his head, a slow smile crossing his face.

*Here we go again.*

He glanced at Syndi and saw her grinning as well, with her eyes still closed.

*I'm grateful she enjoys this bird,* he thought. *Senshu inspires her good nature. I like that.*

When the three friends made their way to the outside of the tent, they found the cockatoo flying back and forth, diving gracefully toward the earth then climbing back up to the sky again.

“Why does a stork stand on one leg?” Senshu called from the air.

There was a moment of silence, while they all contemplated what the answer could possibly be.

“We give up,” Liam called back in amused surrender.

Pulling out of a dive, Senshu flapped her wings and perched on a branch in front of them. After pausing just a moment for effect, she declared, “A stork stands on one leg because...if it lifted up the other leg, it would fall!”

The cockatoo predictably broke into laughter at her own joke.

“Goodness!” she cried, noting Raja’s grin. “You’re coming around, Mr. Tannous!”

Syndi laughed out loud. Raja looked at her and Liam and couldn’t help but chuckle. In that moment, he suddenly realized that the change he’d found himself desiring since meeting Resio was, indeed, beginning in each of them. When he awoke that morning, he did feel lighter. Even if Senshu’s jokes still weren’t hilarious to him, he enjoyed the experience and found himself regarding his companions, the journey, and the provisions in a more appreciative way. He noted that Syndi’s laughter had given more hope to all of them. For this, he was most grateful.

“Come, come, this way!” Senshu sang. “We have something exciting in store for us!”

The small group trekked through the jungle for about an hour before they came to a clearing, where a spring of fresh water bubbled up from the ground - a welcome sight. Senshu alighted on a tree and watched them rejuvenate themselves. After he had quenched his thirst, Raja inhaled deeply; the cool air was refreshing.

“When you’re ready!” Senshu called.

Raja turned around and was surprised at the sight that met his eyes. A straight row of huge rocks spread out before him, followed by a couple of long vines dangling from a lofty tree. Beyond the tree, large rings, fashioned out of wood, were hanging horizontally from a tall frame; followed by several gigantic boulders that he couldn’t see beyond. It was a perfect obstacle course.

“You must experience this challenge, in order to continue on your journey.”

“Looks like fun,” Liam said with a grin. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Syndi blithely walked toward the course.

Making a conscious choice to enjoy the experience, Raja let out a deep breath, and followed.

The obstacles were more taxing than any of them expected, with the course ending in an ankle deep pool of mud. After their clumsy first attempt, Senshu directed them to start again, and then again. When they had finished a third time, Senshu flew over the exhausted friends and surveyed the scene. Syndi was wringing mud out of her hair; Liam was doing the same to his shirt; and Raja was massaging his leg that he’d knocked against one of the boulders. Senshu bubbled with excitement.

“Well, well! Tired once again I see!”

“Yeah,” Syndi spoke under her breath.

Raja smiled at her slight irritation.

“Yes. We. Are.” Liam shook both hands free of mud, emphasizing each word.

“Good!”

The cockatoo landed gracefully and addressed them with interest. “Now tell me - what did you find funny?”

The three looked completely shocked at her question.

“What do you mean? It was too hard to be funny.” Syndi flicked the mud from her fingers as she spoke.

“Ahhhhhhhh.” Senshu sighed with dramatic emphasis until everyone was looking at her. She cleared her throat importantly.

“There is happy; there is sad; there is bitter; and there is sweet through *all* of life. If you cannot find these moments on your own, then all I have taught you has been in vain.”

It was Raja’s turn to snicker. *All I’ve taught you? What has she taught us!?*

The other two looked at him. Raja caught himself, stopped smirking, and sat and pondered for a moment. Was this bird crazy?

Then suddenly, Liam started to laugh. Raja and Syndi looked over at him.

“Well, it was quite funny when I slid off the vine and landed on my face. Raja looked at me like I was the silliest thing he’d ever seen.”

Raja’s face lit up at the thought. He couldn’t help but chuckle at the memory.

“That’s true,” he responded. “That was pretty funny. On the other hand, what about when I ran into that boulder?” he challenged, lightheartedly.

This time, Syndi joined in.

“That was hilarious!” She started to giggle.

Soon, a barrage of comments about the obstacle course was flowing from each of the friends. Laughter rang in the air, with Senshu joining in every once in a while.

When it had died down somewhat, Senshu called out, “Marvelous! You have all come so far! You have learned what it means to have a sense of humor, especially through difficulties. Take a *vacation*, an instant vacation, and laugh!”

Raja looked at the others, still grinning from ear to ear.

“Senshu, I have a question,” he said.

Senshu’s eyes lit up. “Oh how wonderful! Usually, I’m the only one asking those!”

“What do you call a chicken that tells jokes?”

“What?”

“A comedi-hen!”

And with that, the small grove rang aloud with laughter once again. Senshu flew to Raja’s head, tapping it with her foot excitedly. “Well done, Raja M. Tannous! Well done!”

## **Etmo the Hummingbird**

Raja ducked under a vine as he, Syndi, and Liam followed Senshu up a steep incline. She had awoken them early that morning, squawking, “Rise and shine, my unfeathered friends. Today I am to take you to meet Etmo. Up and at ‘em!”

Raja was relieved that Senshu would be accompanying them to their next guide. He found that everything seemed a little easier with her near.

“Here we are!” Senshu finally said in a sing-song voice. “This is Etmo’s solarium. She loves plants.”

The group found themselves in a lovely clearing, backdropped by a continuation of the steep jungle landscape. It seemed to envelope a beautiful spot of peace where the past and future merged. On the far side, they could see the ocean sparkling like a jewel in the sunshine, far away. Before them, stood an enormous, gleaming glass building, enclosing purple, green, and pastel colors. They felt an immediate hush descend over them. The solarium was exquisite in its beauty, and it seemed it may break or vanish at the smallest disturbance.

Knowing this was a moment of parting, Raja took a deep breath and smiled. He turned to Senshu.

“Thank you for everything you’ve taught us.”

Senshu’s eyes sparkled. “You are absolutely welcome, Raja. Oh! One more thing, how do bluejays stay fit?”

Raja gave a fond smile. “How?”

“Worm-ups!” Senshu laughed softly, clearly aware of the presence of the solarium.

Then, looking at each friend lovingly, Senshu continued, “I will most certainly see you all again; but for now, I leave you to experience this precious moment of time.”

With that, Senshu flew away, calling softly over her shoulder, “Get it? Worm-ups? ‘Cause they eat worms?”

Syndi laughed softly. “I’m going to miss that bird.”

Silently, the three friends waved goodbye, then turned to enter the solarium.

As the door opened to them, they were immediately swallowed up in a kaleidoscope of wonderful sights and smells that took their breath away. Stone flower pots and marble vases exhibited lush plants and all sorts of flowers, from royal blue roses to bright pink pansies.

Raja gasped, “Amazing.”

At their feet, hundreds of tiny rainbows danced on the floor; cast by the sun beaming through the crystallized walls.

Slowly and silently, the three friends explored the room. It was a lot to take in.

They had endured much on this journey - lost almost every possession, known the joy of humor, and the relief of rescue. But here was one place that was simply...peace. Beautiful and magnificent peace. And, although they couldn't say how or why, each of them knew that this moment was part of the treasure they'd been seeking.

Unconsciously, Raja strayed away from Liam and Syndi, lost in thought.

As he approached the far side of the crystal room, Raja gazed out on the tropical island and the ocean beyond it. The contrast between ocean, plants, and sky overwhelmed him with their vibrant colors. Somehow, in the midst of this beauty and this peace, his past drew up before him like a dream. He reflected on his journey thus far: selling his business; being saved by Humil; losing Damian and Akan and finding them again; and meeting Syndi and Liam. He realized how far from home he was, and how much he missed his family. Raja closed his eyes, his adventure playing through his memory all the way until today, where he arrived in the present. This moment, he felt such peace, such comfort, but would it last. He

A soft, quick fluttering nearby interrupted his thoughts, and Raja opened his eyes. Hovering in front of him was a tiny hummingbird. They both stared at each other for a long moment, silent and calm. Finally, in a voice that was soft and mellow, yet cheerful and full of life, the tiny bird whispered, "Embrace the moment."

She paused, looking deeply into his eyes. "Raja, you are correct; this moment won't last. Yet it is *always* present; therefore, it is always yours - yours to drink deeply from and be glad. The past is gone, Raja; learn from it. The future is yet to be; prepare for it. The golden moment to feel and act is *here*. Embrace this golden moment of time."

Then, without another word, she zipped up and over Raja. He turned to see her fly in the direction of Syndi.

Raja noted that his companions had also wandered to separate areas of the solarium, just as he had.

The hummingbird fluttered in front of Syndi. The room was so hushed, Raja heard the first words she whispered to her: "Embrace the moment."

Then she drew closer, as if the next message was for Syndi alone.

Suddenly feeling like an intruder, Raja turned away and, once again, surveyed the scene in front of him.

*Embrace the moment. The past is gone. The future yet to be.*

The tiny bird left Syndi and flew over to Liam.

Raja met Syndi's eyes, and he recognized the same awe and peace he was feeling. As they gazed at each other, he wondered what she was thinking.

"Embrace the moment," the hummingbird whispered to Liam.

Raja and Syndi instinctively turned away from Liam. Raja quietly walked to Syndi's side and reached for her hand. Together, they made their way to the other end of the solarium. Without speaking, they stood side by side, holding hands, while looking out on the distant water. When they heard the bird fly to the center of the room, they turned toward each other.

Syndi smiled and then dropped her hand.

None of them made a sound. And none of them felt they needed to. They just relished this moment filled with peace and hope, owning it in a way they'd never known before. None of them wanted it to end.

The hummingbird spoke. "Hello. My name is Etmo."

They all stared at her for a moment, then Liam broke the silence. "What just happened? That was...amazing."

Etmo gave a tittering laugh. "That was a moment. It was only here briefly, like all moments. But, if we fully embrace the moment, it's almost like we're carrying it with us. Always remembering what it felt like, because we embraced it so intensely, with all of our soul, and it made a permanent impact on our hearts."

"But then it's gone," Raja said softly. "They go by so quickly - here, then gone."

He glanced at Syndi.

"Which is why we must embrace each one," Etmo replied. "Only in the present do we experience reality."

Etmo looked at them with patient, blue eyes. "These moments help us to see what we want. They help us look to the future."

Syndi stared at the tiny bird, drinking in her instruction.

"And if you don't learn how to embrace the now, then what will you do when the future becomes the now?" Her voice was like a melody. "Does the horizon ever get here? The future is always away from us, always elusive. If we embrace the moment, we will know purpose, joy, and hope, instead of being too busy- always focused on the next thing. If you learn to focus on the now, you will always be prepared for whatever awaits you in the future."

Etmo's feathers seemed to shine. "The past is gone; the future is yet to be; and only in the present is reality."

Syndi's eyebrows furrowed. "The past is gone? Shouldn't people learn from the past? Not ignore it?"

Etmo's eyes sparkled as if she was immensely pleased with the question.

"*The past is gone* does not mean that it is forgotten; but rather that it has happened, and there's no way to change it."

"But we are able to change the past! We fix our mistakes and wrong doings."

"Yes." Etmo looked at them with cheerful wisdom. "We are able to fix our mistakes; but only in the now. The past is gone, so learn from it. The future is yet to come, so prepare for it. The present is now, so act on it."

Etmo flew to an iris and stuck her beak in the center. After a long drink, she continued, “Everyone embraces moments; but so often we embrace the wrong moments. Sometimes difficult experiences can affect the way we treat people, the way we look at life. Sometimes we choose to define those experiences as bad, and we remember that bad feeling because we embraced it. The problem comes when we embrace the negative again and again - and on into the future.”

The hummingbird flitted quickly off to a marigold. “We all must learn to embrace the moments that help us. Remember what it’s like to feel joy and peace when we forgive, lift, and simply be the best we are able to be, even when it’s difficult.”

Etmo turned and smiled at each of them individually. “Now, you will have time in the solarium to yourselves. It will rejuvenate you, and increase your awareness and energy. I remember every flower I visit, but never do I land on them. I stay in one spot and drink the nectar gently, delicately. You have the same privilege now to partake of their generosity. Be still. Listen to what they have to offer you. Here are things for your use. Enjoy!”

Etmo flitted toward a basket on the floor, and then away, outside the open door.

Raja looked inside the basket. It contained paper and writing instruments of different colors. He retrieved them and handed some to Syndi and Liam.

“Wow, it’s been a while since I practiced drawing,” he said playfully.

Syndi smiled. “Are you an artist, Raja?”

“No, but I guess I could be today.”

He smiled back at her and then began strolling around the solarium, seeking his first experience.

Liam stood with the paper in his hand. His finger stroked the colored pencils lovingly. He *was* an artist. He’d always wanted to draw and had practiced in his youth. Taking a deep breath, he looked around and spotted a yellow flower with pink streaks bursting from the center, sprinkled with white sunbursts. It was magnificent. He strode over to it, sat down, and began to draw. The strokes of his pencil followed the line and curve of the petals. Each delicate stem materialized under his practiced hand, a mirror of the original. When his initial sketch was complete, he held it out and studied the drawing momentarily, before engaging again, erasing a stroke, and then repositioning it. As he worked, the paper, the pencil, the flower, and he somehow became part of a symphony of beauty. The moment stretched out and time stood still.

“Oh my! Raja, you’ve got to see this.”

Syndi was looking over Liam’s shoulder, observing his drawing of a perfect bee.

Startled, Liam glanced up and noticed that the sun was starting to set. He was stunned to realize that he had been absorbed in his work for hours. He smiled up at her.

Beside him, numerous depictions, flowers, vines, insects, even Etmo herself, were beautifully transposed in color on paper.

Syndi stooped, carefully touching one. “Where did you learn to draw like this!?”



“I’ve always loved to sketch what I saw in nature.” Liam shrugged. “I found that it helped me to really see it, to appreciate it, to assimilate it inside of myself. Do you know what I mean?”

Syndi looked back at him with surprise. “I haven’t ever created anything like this. This is magnificent.”

Raja joined them and reached for a drawing. “Liam, this is amazing! I didn’t know you were such an artist!”

Liam gathered the papers and stood up, waving away Raja’s compliment. “It’s just a hobby I have.”

“You’re very accomplished at your hobby,” Raja persisted good-naturedly.

Liam perused his work affectionately.

“It’s just a way for me to really connect with nature. You don’t really see anything the same after re-creating it on paper.”

Raja was struck with the soft expression in Liam’s eyes as he spoke--so contented. If he had to describe it, he’d have said it was love.

“He didn’t even hear me when I walked over to him, he was so caught up in it.” Syndi smiled at Liam.

Wanting to deflect all this attention, Liam set the papers down and clapped his hands together. “Well! I am hungry. What do you think we can find to eat?”

“Liam, thank you for your expression of creation. You have demonstrated the partaking deeply of the golden moments of time.”

They all looked upward toward the sound of Etmo’s voice flowing down to them. A soft commotion above their heads drew their eyes to an open window in the top of the solarium; and they watched as many hummingbirds flew in. Collectively they were carrying a satchel. Delicately, they descended and dropped the strap of the satchel around Liam’s neck.

“Liam, by embracing these moments, more of your mission and purpose have been revealed. Gather these tools of your unique voice and contribution to the world. Capture the scenes on your journey and carry them with you. By so doing, you will teach and lead others to this island, beckoning with a voice spoken to their eyes and hearts more than their ears.”

Liam was filled with awe at her counsel. He carefully opened the satchel, wondering what gift the butterflies had given him. Inside were additional tools: notepads, brushes, coloring mediums, and puddy for erasing.

“Thank you, Etmo, and all of your family,” he said, visibly touched by the generous endowment. “I will preserve the scenes that I see and I will share them.”

“It is time for you to continue on your journey; but first, come and eat. We have prepared food for you.”

The three of them began walking toward the entrance, when Raja turned.

“I don’t want to leave this place. Usually I am anxious to move forward, desiring to meet our next guide and greet the coming horizon - but not this time.”

He turned and gazed at Etmo. “Will we have the privilege of coming back to this place some day?”

Etmo’s eyes twinkled and she zipped over to a sunflower. “You see how fast I move from one flower to the next? Moments in our life go by just as quickly. We can learn to embrace them, and hold the feeling in our hearts, for as long as we allow ourselves to keep them.”

Raja nodded slowly. She hadn’t answered his question, but he felt reassured by her words as if she had.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“Raja, you will return here; however, the golden moments are always within your grasp. You will learn, with practice, how to flow through your life and embrace them. Now you must continue your journey through this island. There is still more to experience and embrace.”

Etmo’s voice delighted them all, even while soothing their reticence in leaving.

“You are only halfway to the pinnacle of the island. It is important that you reach the pinnacle by nightfall, so you must continue on!”

The friends all smiled at the birds, nodding their thanks, and left the solarium.

## **Gobafo**

“I love embracing the moment like Etmo taught us,” Syndi remarked, as the three friends continued their trek up the mountain.

An hour had passed since they’d left Etmo’s solarium. As they trudged forward, Raja, Syndi, and Liam took turns cutting through the thick vines and leafy, green bushes that blocked their way.

“It’s beautiful - just listen to the birds!” Syndi mused, smiling contentedly.

Liam and Raja nodded in agreement. The day indeed had come together perfectly; and they were making good time through the jungle.

Looking ahead, Raja was surprised to see that the path was coming to an unexpected end. An abrupt incline, ending in an overgrowth of vines and roots, loomed before them. The foliage appeared almost completely vertical, as if a wall were hidden behind it.

Liam caught Raja’s gaze and followed it. “How are we going to get up that by nightfall?” he wondered aloud.

“By climbing it, silly,” Syndi replied, smiling as she surveyed their next task. “This is going to be a breeze. Look!”

Following the line of Syndi’s outstretched arm, they could actually see the top of the mountain; and Raja felt a new surge of energy. It was steep, but their destination didn’t appear to be too far away. Raja reasoned, as it had happened with every island before, that if they held to the teachings they had received, they would arrive as planned, perhaps even earlier.

*Optimism. Sense of humor. Embrace the moment.* Raja rehearsed the principles deliberately in his mind, then stepped forward with a smile.

The path up the mountain soon became more difficult than expected. The ground was muddy and the vines thick and cumbersome. Staying balanced on the tangle of wild roots and vines proved to be daunting and required their constant attention and effort.

"I've always enjoyed the challenge of the climb." Raja grunted between the words as he hefted himself up, pulling with his arms, and struggling to find a safe foothold. He glanced behind him, and continued, "And you can't beat the view."

Though Raja was consciously practicing his optimism, the mountain truly *was* breathtaking. Tropical flowers bloomed in every color imaginable; and the lush vines twisted and turned in beautiful patterns all around them. Syndi and Liam were at his heels, slowly ascending the embankment of thick, creeping tendrils.

*Bzzzzz SLAP. Bzzzzzz SLAP. Bzzzzzzzz SLAP.*

Hours passed. The climbers, weary with their efforts, had long stopped talking to one another, as each fully concentrated on the task at hand. Their arms and legs were feeling the strain of the incline, and their lungs were burning. Flying bugs circled dizzily around them, buzzing loudly in their ears and biting them mercilessly.

"If one more mosquito lands on me, I'M GOING TO GO CRAZY!" Syndi exploded, breaking the silence of the past hour.

Raja had to admit that the mosquitos were beginning to frustrate him as well. The swarms seemed to be coming from all the damp pockets left from previous rainstorms. .

Looking to the west, Raja noticed the sun just beginning to set, and he wondered if they would make it to the top in time.

*"Resilience and optimism are key!"*

Raja heard Resio's voice in his head, followed by a picture of Senshu's whimsical feathers. He smiled and spoke to Syndi.

"Knock knock."

After a pause, and between a few grunts, Syndi replied, "Who's there?"

"Bug."

"Bug who?"

"Bugging you!" Raja mischievously declared. Liam snorted.

"Raja," Syndi sighed, as she heaved herself up with all fours, "I'm trying to focus."

Her mood had definitely soured with the annoying mosquitos and fatigue.

"I know, I know, laser focus and all; but Senshu is actually on this island. I'm just practicing my impeccable sense of humor."

"Maybe we can have both," Liam added. "Imagine, laser focused jokes! We'll definitely make it to the top!" He chuckled.

Raja joined in the laughter, while Syndi rolled her eyes; but he noticed a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Her smile vanished instantly as an abrupt crack on a vine sounded. Raja and Liam watched in horror as the main vine that had been holding Syndi's weight popped away from the wall, leaving her feet dangling. Her hands jerked out automatically, grasping to find a hold. Raja's eyes darted to descent they'd just covered, fearing that he'd be watching Syndi tumble down the expanse within seconds.

Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, a flying flash of fur swooped down, grasping Syndi and lifting her up the incline.

"Did you see that?" asked Liam, almost sputtering as both friends squinted to see her new position ahead of them. It wasn't far. Syndi was finding her balance by a large tree as a furry monkey stood by her, assisting her with a long arm. They couldn't quite make out what he was saying. They both increased their speed and clambored clumsily through the knobby vines to Syndi's position.

"Are you ok?" Raja was out of breath when they reached her. Syndi glanced at him distractedly trying to listen to the monkey.

"...Didn't expect to be saved by a howler monkey did ya? Did ya? They never do, always assume I'm some kind of opossum? An opossum? Really? I look nothing like an opossum. But hey, I don't make the rules around here, no sir, I just swing with it. Well up you go!" He pointed up the nearest tree. Liam and Raja looked at the mass of vines that hung around, and through the branches of the tree.

"Who are you?" Liam grabbed a vine to help keep balance.

"Why, Gobafo, of course the monkey began the climb with ease.

"I am small, but I don't care!  
I don't have wings, but I've got hair!  
I cannot fly or swim through the sea,  
But I can travel through the trees.  
Back and forth and forth and back,  
We'll find the resilience that you lack."

The song got quieter as he ascended.

"Are you coming?!" Gobafo turned around, looking down at the three faces staring at them. Syndi started to follow obediently and the two men followed. The further they climbed and the closer they got to the top, the more fragile the medium sized trunk felt. A deep creak began to emerge from it. Liam surveyed the scene around him. Vines were hanging everywhere. Some straight down, but most of them horizontal to the ground. It was a web of green and brown.

With a smile on his face, Gobafo stopped climbing and climbed out on a limb. "Alright my friends, the time has come. We must leave this tree before it snaps in half."

“What?” Syndi cried incredulously.

“Oh yeah! We’re going to swing our way outta here!” The monkey grinned impishly.

The tree lurched forward cracking down the middle while Gobafo continued to instruct.

“See that tree way up there? The taller one on the left? This beauty is attached firmly to it.” He patted a vine above his head. “I will show you how I travel through the trees.”

With that, he swung back lazily from one arm than flung the other forward and grasped the vine, repeatedly propelling himself through the sky.

Raja looked at Liam and Syndi then grabbed onto the vine. With a deep breath, he swung his body back as far as he could go and then flew forward. The feeling of swinging through the air was exhilarating. Raja felt powerful as he caught the next part of the vine. His hands slipped a little, but soon became secure on the vine as he flew forward in a rhythm. He glanced behind him to see if Syndi and Liam were doing the same. They were. Syndi looked happy hanging high and swinging. Liam, trying to balance himself and his satchel, looked scared.

When Gobafo reached the end of the vine, he quickly found another, turning and chattering back to them to keep following him. Raja’s arms were getting tired, but he was amazed looking back how fast and far they were traveling in such a short amount of time. He watched the top of the mountain getting closer with each back and forth movement. It replenished his energy.

Gobafo landed and waited on the ground surrounded by many tall, jungle trees. The three travelers followed his example and saw, with great pleasure, a glimpse of the Sea of Vario and relished the sight. They must be near the top! Gobafo watched them in satisfaction, then motioned them to a clearing where ancient trees stood, all hollowed out. Inside the hollows they saw blankets laden with bread and cheese, fruits and berries. With sighs all around, they fell on the blankets and began to eat. Abruptly, Gobafo burst into song while finding any stray branches to include in his entertainment.

“Back and forth - fall back, swing forward.

Everyone in this game called life

Will have their fair share of falling down

And you will find, amidst the strife

To want to give up and then to doubt

But there is always another option.

Within the problem lies the seed of the solution

Sooooo,

Never give up, never give in

Never let a failure take your passion

It's part of the game

You have to get up

So never ever, ever, ever, ever give up

Never ever, ever, ever, ever give up.”

The group took turns laughing at Gobafo's antics. By the end of the song, they were all chuckling. Gobafo came with a huge grin and sat down to eat with them.

"We have to go back to go forward?" Syndi questioned while munching on her bread. "I thought the only way to move forward is to move forward. I've never heard of anyone who won a race by running backwards!"

Gobafo chuckled good-naturedly at Syndi's confusion. "Just wait one minute, miss, just one minute. I'll show you clear as day why we should go back, don't you worry, come here!"

With that, Gobafo scrambled over to a particularly large hollowed out tree. He jumped inside, beckoning them to follow him. They did and climbed limberly up as he swung from one knot hole to another. When he arrived at the top, he jumped out of the top of the tree. Liam shrugged his shoulders and jumped up right after him.

What they saw was amazing. The setting sun was peeking through the clouds on the horizon. From this vantage point, they could see half of the island!

And then they saw where they were in comparison to where they had been when Gobafo had spotted them. Raja's heart fell. He had thought that, with all of their swinging, they had made it to the top of the mountain! At the least, closer. Unfortunately, to their great disappointment, they realized that they were farther away even than where they had started.

"Gobafo, why did you bring us here?" Liam cried dejectedly rubbing his shoulder. "We swung all that way only to find that it was all for nothing. How will we ever make it to the top of the mountain now?"

"That's the key! When it appears you have gone back, failed, declined, fizzled, blundered, fallen down, or met with disaster, get excited for you are in the jaws of opportunity!" He paused and looked at them with mouth open and expectant eyes. "Look to your right side, what do you see?"

"I see a mountain that looks impossible to climb at this point. We could never climb it before night fall. Liam is right," exclaimed Syndi looking down.

"Now look to your left, what do you see?"

"I see a path," observed Raja, "Right there! Oh, I see it; I understand Gobafo! It was hidden from our view when we were up against the ridge there. We are so close to our goal!"

"Exactly! You've swung back and now, you have a bigger picture of where you are and what to avoid moving forward."

Raja raised his arm, pointing to the clear path on the left side of the ridge where they'd been trying. He excitedly explained to Syndi and Liam, "If we hadn't swung back here to see everything, we never could've seen the path prepared for us to take! Sometimes you really do have to go back to move forward! Come on, we'll be there before nightfall!" He started to walk briskly in the direction of where a cleared ribbon path wove around the left side of the summit. "It's amazing! This will be a breeze!"

"Yes! Raja, well done! Gobafo called, while scrambling after him. "Are you ready to move backward, to go forward?"

“Raja!” Syndi exclaimed as her face reflected recognition and she turned to follow.  
“Let's get swinging!”

## **Ohwel**

The sun was just setting on the horizon when Raja, Liam, and Syndi made it to the top of the peak. The view was glorious and the low sun was casting purple, orange, and red streaks all over the evening sky. The mood at the top of the mountain was warm, tired, and content. The packs they'd carried, along with Liam's drawing bag were deposited close by.

“Anyone care for an orange or three?” Liam was juggling the fruit, trying not to drop any of it, and failing miserably. They all laughed at his antics.

“I think I have dirt covering every hair on my head.” Raja started to gather some wood for a fire while rustling his hair with his fingers.

“I think you look dashing,” laughed Syndi. “Plus we made it to the top of the mountain by nightfall! I feel great!”

Syndi paused to note Liam's raised eyebrow. "Well ok, I would feel better if I could wash some of this dirt away myself, but let's embrace this moment of tired limbs and dirt packed hair!" She gathered some loose stones and built a circle for Raja to build the fire. Syndi loved accomplishing things, and this mountain had been a great accomplishment!

There were plenty of nuts and oranges for dinner, even with Liam bruising a few. After eating their fill, they sat in quiet happiness, content with watching the shadows of the jungle dance under a dim moon. Syndi stretched.

As if on cue, a sharp bolt of lightning, followed by a roaring clap of thunder, shook the jungle. Dark clouds had gathered above and a storm was threatening.

"We'd better find shelter quickly!" Syndi called, jumping to her feet. Syndi pointed towards a cluster of trees while yelling over her shoulder to the two men as she bounded in that direction. Immediately, the wind picked up. Lightning and thunder continued to boom, and raindrops began to pelt their backs as Liam took over the lead. His eyes were fixed on the trunk of a short, yet massive, flowering tree. When Raja and Syndi caught sight of where he was headed, they changed course in his direction. Before they could reach it however, the clouds burst. Buckets of rain poured from the sky, instantly drenching them to the bone.

They reached the tree together and were happy to find that the tree was hollow and would be a perfect place to keep them dry. It was pitch black.

"I wish we had a light. It sure is dark in here," Liam lamented.

The air was dank, and the branches above waved heavily in the torrent outside. With only the flashing lightning to see by, Raja, Liam, and Syndi huddled near the entrance and looked around. At their feet, sparsely scattered moss speckled their damp, earthen floor.

"So much for staying dry." Raja wrung out his hair with his fingers. "However, I now have mud in my hair instead of the dirt I was complaining about earlier."

Syndi let out a faint laugh and then hugged her body, wishing she hadn't left the rest of her clothes in the pack by the fire. She forgot to grab it in her haste. Even if she could find it again, she knew the contents would not be dry.

Huddling together, they decided to sit and wait for the storm to pass. Each settled in and became lost in his or her own thoughts.



Moments later, out of the darkness, they heard rustling above them. Three heads turned up toward the sound. Though they couldn't see anything, they heard muffled talking. It seemed to be coming toward them, getting closer and closer. The voice was animated and lively. With every crash of thunder, the words were interrupted. Finally, the message became discernable.

“So, you're wet. Oh well!” A crash of thunder followed the exclamation.

“You're cold? Ha! Oh well!” Another crash. “And...”

A large, furry animal dropped out of the tree and shown a light pointedly in their faces. “It's too dark! Ha! Oh well!”

The voice was actually enchanting in its merriment; but the light shining in their eyes was blinding. Holding up their hands as a shield, Raja, Liam, and Syndi, tried to view the creature.

“You can't see me? Ha! Oh well!” This was followed by a peal of rolling laughter.

The light was moved out of their faces and they saw, to their amazement, a koala.

“I'm a koala. Oh well!” He finished off proudly. “I AM Ohwel! Come, come, follow me!”

Ohwel gripped the lantern in his teeth and, on all four paws, headed toward the exit. The three travelers gaped at each other and then at the disappearing backside of the koala. Flabbergasted, they stood in the dark, unsure of what to do. The light suddenly re-entered the room and dropped to the damp ground. They faintly saw Ohwel's hairy head poking through the door.

“Well? Are you coming?”

“It's raining out there!” Raja weakly protested.

Syndi joined in with, “It's cold out there!”

Liam nodded, but couldn't think of anything else to protest.

The koala entered with his entire body. “Oh well! That's my name, ya know - ‘Ohwel’! When life stops you or seems to block you, say it! ‘Oh well.’ Your life's not over. Maintain your composure. Say it again! Oh well!”

The koala again grasped the light in his teeth and scampered out of sight.

Syndi looked at Raja and Liam. “There is no way I’m following him. I’m staying here, and I’m staying dry!” She folded her arms and realized she wasn’t even close to dry. “Well, sort of dry.” In the dark she shot her companions a half-smile.

Ohwel poked his head back in, dropped the light and smiled at them. “This is the perfect time to travel! And what you thought was a challenge will prove to be an advantage by and by - if you maintain your resilience and optimism. Don’t worry, you will find yourselves rewarded. Now follow me!”

With that, Ohwel was out in the rain again. Both men looked at Syndi’s folded arms.

“Fine. Let’s go follow him,” groaned Syndi, sluggishly marching to the exit.

Raja and Liam smiled after her and headed out of the protected hollow.

Directly outside the door, Raja’s foot caught a protruding root and he sprawled face first into the deepening mud. SPLAT! Liam rushed to help him.

“Is everyone okay?” Ohwel was right in the middle of the group in no time. “Ah, Raja, I see you’ve taken a slip.”

“Yes.” Raja gritted his teeth, feeling both embarrassed and a flash of irritation.

“Well, if you aren’t hurt there’s only one thing to be done.” Ohwel stood on his haunches, handing the light to Liam.

Raja raised himself onto his hands and knees while asking, “Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

Ohwel patted him on the shoulder, so Raja would look him in the eye. Grinning broadly, he said with emphasis, “Say, Oh well!”

Such warmth emanated from his eyes and smile that Raja couldn’t help but drop his head and smile, silently laughing. Recovering after some moments, Raja lifted his head with a chuckle and said, with mock exasperation, “Oh well. Oh well. You’re right, Ohwel. It doesn’t harm anything, and I do feel more relaxed.” He added more softly as an afterthought, “Though it doesn’t solve much, does it?”

“It doesn’t solve the challenge, but it is empowering! It keeps you moving forward without cowering - keeping your control and never allowing the common bumps to interrupt your flow!” Ohwel was positively beaming as he, in his small way, attempted to assist Raja to his feet, all the while moving in and out of verse.

“Now let’s keep moving, friends,” he said.

Ohwel retrieved the lantern once more and placed it between his teeth. Then he turned on all fours and led the way forward, on the path known only to him.

The rain pelting her cheeks did nothing to lift Syndi’s spirits; and she felt rising irritation as she followed the dimly lighted furball back the way they’d come from. Though she was sure the drops were diminishing, it was still wet; and now there was mud.

Yet, even amidst the storm and mud and cold, lessons from Senshu, Etmo, and Resio beckoned to her with their warm glow. She soured at the thought of attempting to implement those lessons now - and internally fought their invitation. Her shoes were soaked through; and every few steps she would inadvertently plant her foot in a soggy puddle of muck.

*All’s well in the light and warmth of day, she reasoned. But this is ridiculous.*

Walking blindly in the deluge, she suddenly stumbled directly onto something big and soft. With a yelp, she fell, landing flat on her back.

“Syndi, are you ok?” Liam and Raja called, rushing to her.

They found her lying next to her own pack that she’d left by the fire. Ohwel joined the gathering and shone the light directly into her drenched face. She could barely see his eyes shining expectantly over the lantern looking at her.

“Oh well!” she said, standing swiftly. “I’m sure I’m fine.” She couldn’t stop an unwilling chuckle escape from her as Ohwel tried to follow her face with the light.

“Good news -- I found my pack!” she said, squinting into the beam...and smiling with a grimace.

Raja put his arm around her shoulder and whispered encouragingly, “Great attitude.” Then, “Hey look! I think the rain is stopping.” Syndi shot her hand out to feel. Raja was right, the rain had almost stopped.

The moon was starting to peek out from behind the diminishing clouds and Syndi could see Raja’s warm smile directed toward her. She smiled back in gratitude.

“Fan-twast-ic!” Ohwel managed to say from holding the light between clenched teeth. “Now, fowwow me ovej hewe.”

Ohwel again assumed his four-footed meander towards what they could now see was the edge of a cliff. Liam was the first to follow in curiosity, then Syndi, with Raja bringing up the rear.

“Do you hear that?” Ohwel asked excitedly, hopping up on his hind feet and holding the light in hand. He held the light over the side of a cliff, peering down with eagerness.

Liam strained to listen. He heard the dripping and the flowing of assorted rivulets. “I hear water.” He shrugged at his friends.

“Yes! Follow me!” Ohwel enthusiastically scurried toward a flowing sound along the bank of the mountain. “Keep coming, friends!” he called over his shoulder.

After walking several hundred yards, he pointed with delight. “You are almost through the lessons of Resilience and then you will be headed to Abundance! Your journey to Cowra is almost complete!” A mirthful chuckle pealed out pleasantly as he gazed down the side of the mountain.

At that very moment, the moon moved from behind the clouds in full splendor and shown, far below, the Sea of Vario.

“We made it!” Syndi squealed as she hugged Raja. Smiling from ear to ear, Raja gazed at the beautiful scene.

“Very nice. But how are we going to get down there?” Liam voiced thoughtfully.

“Don’t you see?” Ohwel held out both arms in front of him, pointing down the side of the mountain. Raja, Liam, and Syndi gawked. From the edge of the cliff, a waterway flowed and zig-zagged back and forth along the rock, dumping directly into the sea.

Syndi gasped, wide eyed. “You can’t be serious!”

“Why of course!” Ohwel blurted out, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. He walked to the nearby trees and retrieved four large banana leaves that had been newly separated in the storm. Placing their stalks between his teeth, he returned to the group and gave one to each perplexed traveler.

“What do I do with this?” Liam asked, examining the large, waxy leaf.

“Sit on it, and enjoy the ride!” Ohwel called behind him. With the banana leaf underneath him, he jumped heartily on to the waterway.

“We best follow him!” shouted Liam, who looked almost as excited as Ohwel.

“Liam, wait!” Syndi said too late, for he was already hidden from view by the plants surrounding the first curve.

“It won’t be so bad.” Raja laughed, seeing Syndi’s consternation. “C’mon!” he yelled, as he plunged into the flow.

With no one to protest too, Syndi’s decision was made. Rolling her eyes, she wrapped the giant leaf around her and sat, pushing herself slowly into the surprisingly luke-warm water. The water grabbed onto the jungle “sled” and carried her down. Her scream lasted around two bends in the flow and then abruptly stopped as she was thrown precariously onto a grassy knoll. Landing face down on her belly, with the banana leaf covering her head, it took a moment to lift herself up and look around. By the light of the moon, she saw Ohwelt sitting in front of her, smiling. Beside him sat the two men. Seeing her peeking out from under the leaf, they all burst into laughter. Syndi joined in, imagining how funny she probably looked. After the laughter subsided, Ohwel stood, dragging his leaf behind him.

“That wasn’t so bad, eh? Who’s ready to do it again?” Ohwel looked straight into Syndi’s wide eyes.

“It curves and swerves every which way!” she sputtered, drawing the curves with her hands in the air.

“It curves, so you swerve! All the while saying, Oh well! Oh well! Life threw me a curve. Oh well! I learn how to swerve! Look! What a great swerve!” he shouted, as he jumped into the rushing water and disappeared again.

“Here we go again!” Syndi said, as she watched a smiling Liam and Raja plunge back into the waterway.

Walking over, again feeling like her decision had been made for her, she plopped into the water, holding tightly to her leaf. Syndi bobbed momentarily before being swept away with the current.

By the time they were at the bottom of the mountain, they were all laughing. Liam was sprawled out on the ground, the banana leaf next to him. Syndi, too, was giggling and didn’t know how to stop. Raja smiled and looked heavenward. The moon was out, illuminating what it could of the island. Raja took a deep breath, feeling the chill, crisp air fill his lungs.

“Come. We’re almost there,” Ohwel said.

They followed him until they arrived at the beach.

“You have learned well. It is important to keep yourselves in control of your own emotions, no matter what life gives you. Allow yourself to remain in control, enjoying the bumps and curves that come your way.”

They got a fire going, and its warmth washed over them.

“All we had to do was change our perspective,” Raja observed.

Syndi and Liam both looked up at him. Ohwel smiled and nodded.

“Yes,” the koala said. “When you changed your perspective and attitude, instead of having a miserable experience, it turned into something invigorating and fun!” He eyed Syndi eagerly, knowingly.

She threw a leaf at him with a grin.

They warmed themselves by the fire, as they recounted their day, reflecting on what they had accomplished. Liam, Syndi, and Raja all agreed, they were stronger now than they had been before entering the island of resilience. Their ability to go with the flow, all the while maintaining a relaxing and hopeful perspective had increased. As the night wore on, their limbs were exhausted and their eyes threatened to close at any moment. They each found a resting spot around the fire and Raja, Liam, and Syndi curled up on the ground, sleep coming soon after.

Resio: Resilient Optimism - The Bear

Senshu: Sense of Humor - the Cockatoo

Etmo: Embrace the Moment - the Hummingbird

Gobafo: Go Back to Go Forward - the Monkey

Ohwel: Oh Well - Maintain composure and Control - the Monkey

