

Balloon Story

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The balloon lurched again, and I almost fell out. My fingers were wet and white where they gripped the edge of the basket. Another boom of thunder tore the air apart, making my head ring. The atmosphere was illuminated by the eerie blue glow of lightning letting me see for a second just how far away the ground was. All around me, black clouds massed like a flock of vindictive sheep.

Another lurched, followed by a familiar yet terrifying swoop from my stomach - told me I was on the descent.

Rain hissed against the silk of the balloon and whipped into my eyes. I struggled to wipe it away as I turned to the gas canister. *This had been such a bad idea.* It was hissing, the gas leaking out into the sodden air with its familiar sharp, bitter smell that reminded me of home.

I wondered if I would ever see it again.

More thunder tore through the sky as I struggled to turn off the gas. The metal was hot and wet, slippery under my panicked fingers.

A sudden blast of rain-filled air (which felt more like a wave of pure water) smashed into me, ripping the balloon from whatever tenuous grasp on the atmosphere it had been clinging to.

I fell, still gripping the basket - we would go down together, my balloon and I.

Lightning illuminated sudden glorious views of the storm clouds, great masses of them like a multilayered city designed by the most daring of architects. It was beautiful and terrible all at once.

The power of nature would always win in the end.

The rush of air and crashes of thunder filled my ears with an awesome symphony of doom - my exit theme. I almost laughed, inhaling rain and hydrogen in an intoxicating rush that made me dizzy. I no longer felt cold, but burned with a supernatural heat as I spun down and down, through wet and cold and life and death, towards the distant crags of the mountains which were growing closer with every flash of lightning, a mouth filled with rotting teeth ready to devour me.

Everything had been reduced to black and white in these tense final wild seconds.

I felt no pain, just a sudden *whump* and then a disorientating second of nothing before I was rising again, slowly, calmly, up through the storm.

I could see my balloon below, a torn mess of technicoloured shreds, and my body, splattered out over the rocks in a scarlet smear - strangely beautiful.

The storm was silent as I drifted through it, a churning, flashing, furious turmoil that had nothing to do with me anymore. The forks of lightning showed me all the lives that had come before - wild, erratic, branching out and zig-zagging wildly before ending, always, and disappearing. The clouds were ideas yet to flourish, cramming and boiling and flashing in a dangerous mess, and each individual raindrop was one that had set out to become *something*, on its way to make a change. It was a wonderful universe, churning with ice and fire.

I left it all behind, bursting through the clouds and up, into the sun.