

Space Station Seven

The Science Contest

By Robert V Aldrich

Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2024

Published: 2024/03/01

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for the personal entertainment of the reader. It is copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed without the express written consent of the author.

FROM THE MIND OF

RV A

“Well done on completing the daily assignment,” Sevena eagerly praised.

Floating on Nehru’s tablet display, the fair-skinned woman with prismatic pink hair gestured to her right as his grades appeared. “You answered correctly on 26 questions. You answered incorrectly on six questions. You answered partially correct on 3 questions. You have been awarded 45 points to your semester score.” The screen shifted and it showed readouts of his weekly performance, monthly performance, and seasonal performance. “Your output has dropped slightly. You are no longer in the Top 5% of your grade, but you remain in the Top 10%. Excellent work.” She smiled and tilted her head slightly and the image went static.

Nehru removed his earbuds and looked around the classroom. He was sitting next to Phillip who had ADHD. Phillip twitched and jerked a lot, constantly fidgeting. A lot of kids didn’t like sitting next to him because he distracted them, but Nehru never seemed to be bothered by it. Phillip’s tablet was larger than Nehru’s. It was a tryptic that helped show Phillip multiple feeds at once. The video barrage kept him focused with various images and videos, then would jump back to his assignment for a few questions before it dazzled him again. The short-term distractions kept him engaged over the length of the classroom lessons.

The classroom was a simple room with several tables and a few dozen desks. Longer than it was wide, the room had a single door up by the front, which faced against the windows of the opposite wall. The metal desks at the front of the room were affixed to the floor and arranged in pairs. The adjustable, rotating seats automatically faced out when they were unoccupied. At the back of the room, the simple tables were arranged chaotically with folding seats that pulled out. This is where most of the kids in Nehru’s class were currently sitting. During open assignment time, most of the kids liked to get up from their desks.

The far wall was made of windows that ran from waist-height up to the ceiling. Today, they showed a rainy afternoon. A pleasant breeze blew in through the half-open windows, pushing moisture inside. A few of the posters stirred by the rain, including some of the pages on Mx. Delvip’s desk. A tall person, Mx. Delvip had short-cut hair and a tattoo on their right shoulder. They tended to wear sleeveless shirts which only made the tattoo stand out even more.

Mx. Delvip slapped down some pages before the breeze could blow them off their desk. Holding them, he checked the windows to see the

rainstorm. "I think I'm going to change the weather. Is that okay with everyone?"

The students at their desks and the tables in the back mostly murmured agreement. Rodney Smith asked, "Can we have snow?"

"Snow?" asked Mx. Delvip. "Is snow good with everyone?" A few more murmurs, mostly apathetic. "Snow it is, Mr. Smith." The teacher typed some commands into a control pad on their desk. Heavy shutters sealed over the windows. It was a video but it looked like the real thing. A second later, they reopened to a pristine snowscape like they were in a building on the prairie. Rolling hills were covered in snow while light flakes of snow drifted down through the gray sky. A few buildings could barely be seen nestled among bare-branched trees.

The cadre of two dozen kids in the class were all taken with the new view out the windows. Whispered remarks of delight filled the classroom. "Is this America?" asked Gwondan. He got up and went to the window, Ezza and a few of the others looking out. "It looks like America."

Mx. Delvip checked the screen built into the surface of their desk. "This is...Alberta, Canada. So no, but close."

"I was hoping we could do mountains," said Ezza, next to Gwondan.

"Who lives in that cabin?" asked Rodney.

"Can it be snowing harder?" asked Phillip.

"Hey, hey, hey," their teacher told them all. "We're going to leave it on this one for a while. We can change it after lunch, maybe. Possibly. If I feel like it. Which I won't." Some of the kids giggled. Mx. Delvip checked some more data on their desk and said, "It looks like everybody's finished their assignments. And it looks like some of you were very active on the school's search engine." Nehru and a few others giggled, looking around to see if they could tell who were the guilty parties.

"We're going to do recess here in a little bit," said Mx. Delvip. "But first, I wanted to let all of you..." They realized kids were still at the window. "Take your seats, critters." The class, barely teens, all took their seats with minimal enthusiasm. Nehru sat down in the front row with Ezza. His chair swung into forward-facing with a powered hiss.

"Okay, so all the classes are going to be doing a display on the main hub of Space Station Seven," Mx. Delvip told them. "The theme is science since it'll be Science Month soon. That means 'hard sciences', to all my aspiring psychologists and anthropologists. Now, the Space Station Seven Minister of Science will evaluate the results with the help of the publishing

board." Mx. Delvip dropped the professional tone and took up a mock sarcastic tone. "Do NOT embarrass me." He wagged a threatening finger at the whole class. The kids laughed. "It's due at the end of the week and the display will go up next Monday. All the usual boring details will be in your assignments folder. If you have questions, ask me or one of the other teachers." They looked over the kids for a moment, then further asked, "We good?"

"Yes," the kids all ambled at different tempers and registers.

"Such obedient little critters," Mx. Delvip teased, making the kids chuckle some more. "Okay, who's going to the playground and who's going to the gymnasium?"

Nehru's hand shot up and he called out, "Gym!" along with other kids, opposite those who called for the playground.

"Alright, let's go!" Mx. Delvip told them with a clap of their hands. They all got up and rushed out the classroom door.

In the school cafeteria, Nehru sat down with his tray. He sat next to Allison, across from Dipen and Akami. Dipen was wearing a navy kameez which strangely matched Allison's baseball jersey. Akami wore all black, as usual. "Did you get the science assignment?" he asked as he slid into the bench.

"Yeah," Akami and Dipen muttered.

"I think it could be neat," Allison said. "Plus, I did kind of bad on my last two tests, so I need some points to stay in my fantasy league." She turned around at some shouting. Some kids were roughhousing at the far end of the sterile white and stainless-steel cafeteria. Bright overhead lights paired with the overhead screen simulating a bright sunny day. Simulated breezes blew Allison's blonde hair into her face, which she absently brushed from her mouth as she ate.

"You're in the school fantasy league?" Dipen asked as he opened a milk carton. "Can I trade Matt?"

"No," Allison scoffed. "Matt's got the lowest grades in our class." Allison ate faster than the other three, despite having a weird penchant for chewing just on the left side of her mouth.

"Yeah, but when he finally crosses ten thousand points, his ranking will skyrocket," Dipen tried to argue. He kept scratching at the first signs of facial hair on his neck. "And the entire class gets a vacation day once the last person crosses ten thousand points."

"You guys get a vacation day?" Akami asked jealously. "We get a field trip."

"Yeah," Nehru agreed. "We went to the museum up on Level Two. It was really cool. They have a T-Rex skeleton."

"Nuh-uh!" Dipen argued in disbelief.

"Yeah, it was awesome," Akami grinned. "If you walked around it, a hologram showed what it was like."

"Did they show it with feathers, or without?" Allison asked with a grin.

"Both," Nehru told her.

"Cool!" Allison laughed.

"Yeah, they talked about how scientists aren't entirely sure what it looked like," Akami told her.

Akami was cut off by chimes overhead. The screens spaced along the walls of the cafeteria grew dark and Sevena stepped out from the side like a neighbor popping into view through a window. "Hey there," said the avatar with a cheerful smile. "I just wanted to let you know about some notices for your school track and for this level of the station."

As Sevena made the regular announcements, Nehru turned back to his lunch. He cut into his fish sticks with the side of his fork. "What are you planning on doing your display on?" he asked the others, the four not paying attention to Sevena's announcement about temporary water service disruptions. "I'm thinking about something with biology, but I can't decide. I kind of want to do the lymphatic system. Nobody knows about it and I think it'd be kind of neat, but..." He shrugged. "Again, nobody knows about it. I doubt anybody'd care."

"I'm going to do pressure points," Akami said way too quickly. "I'm going to prove dim mak is real." She made some kung fu hand movements with the appropriate sounds, then mimed hitting Dipen in the shoulder to strike a ninja death point.

Dipen looked at her, his shoulder, then her again. "Ow," he informed her lazily.

"You're not going to do astronomy? Your dad could help you," Allison said. "I might do something with stars or planets or something."

"No, I don't think so," Nehru considered. He sat his chin on his left hand. "Dipen, what about you?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "I think I might do something about heat expansion or cooking or something." He slurped his soup for a bit. "The thing is, you want to do something easy."

"Yeah," Allison agreed. "Extra credit and projects like this is how you get the little points to make up for your tests."

"Make up for...your tests?" Nehru asked. He looked to Akami to translate.

"They're grades are bad," she told Nehru. "I guess maybe when you go into the 8th grade, you get dumber?"

"You're dumber," Dipen tried and failed to retort. He leaned across the table at Nehru. "Here's what you need to do: the cell."

"The cell," Nehru restated, unconvinced.

"The cell," Allison also restated, confused.

"The cell?" Akami asked, lost.

"The cell," Dipen insisted. "It's simple, it's easy, and boom. You can bang it out in one night. Do the anatomy of the cell. You get the cell wall, you get the nucleus. You get the...the thing that makes the energy."

"Mitochondria," Allison answered.

"You get the other things," Dipen said.

"Organelles," Akami told him.

"And you smush it all inside the, the stuff."

"Cytoplasm," Nehru told him.

"Right!" Dipen explained. "You do the anatomy of the cell, you put it on one of those three-panel boards."

"Triptych," Akami told him.

"And you just sit back and get those sweet points." Dipen leaned back, putting his hands behind his head, as if the project was already done.

Allison's eyes narrowed and her brow scrunched as she stared at Dipen. "Didn't you do the cell last time?"

"Yeah," he admitted without hesitation. "Saved my grade, too. My dad was about to ground me if I didn't get out of the lower half of the class's scoring range."

"Mmm-hmmm," Allison deduced. She turned to Nehru. "How many points are you up to?"

Nehru thought. "Twenty-one something. Like, 21,392 or something?" he guessed with a shrug. "I know it ended in two. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm at like eighteen or something," Allison said. She glanced at the nearest screen as Sevena showed a graph of the cafeteria lunch schedule for the next seven days.

"Sixteen thousand, two hundred, and forty-one," Akami told her as she was distracted. Allison whipped her head back around and glared across the table at her. "What?" Akami exclaimed. "A ninja has to know details like this."

"Yeah, but it's MY grade," Allison told her.

Akami shrugged as she ate a snap pea. "They're posted for all of us to see. Every student's points determine the class' overall performance."

Before Allison could retort, Dipen asked, "What am I at?"

"Twenty-two thousand twenty points," Akami quoted.

"Wow," Nehru marveled. "Do you know my score?"

Akami shrugged and shook her head. "I'm going to get an apple." She got up and headed to the cafeteria line.

"Can you get me one too?" Allison called. She leaned on her hand now and muttered, "Yeah, I got to get over eighteen thousand soon. My mom might ground me."

"Do an astronomy project and ask my dad for help," Nehru suggested.

"You wouldn't mind?" she asked sheepishly of Nehru. He shook his head.

"Of course he doesn't mind," Dipen told them both. "He's going to do the cell."

Nehru and Allison rode the lift together, their tablets in their hands. They shared the lift with a custodian and one of the medical staff, the pair discussing a video. The lift slowed to a stop and Sevena announced, "Level 84." The doors slid apart and the two adults stepped out. "Have a good day," Sevena told them in a cheerful, friendly tone.

The doors shut and the computerized avatar for Space Station Seven appeared on the control panel, next to the buttons for the floors. She asked, "Are you two still going to Level 89?"

"Yeah," said Nehru.

“Uh-huh,” Allison said.

“Okay,” Sevena said with a big smile, like an eager mother. Her face disappeared as the lift began to move.

“I’m not sure I like Sevena’s new hair,” Allison said. “It’s always short on even-numbered months.” Nehru just shrugged. “Are you going to take Dipen’s advice and do the anatomy of the cell?”

“Maybe,” Nehru said. “I just can’t decide. I don’t know why. I mean, it’d be easy to do. He’s right about that. It’d be like free points.”

Allison studied his slight sneer. “And you don’t like free points?”

Nehru scrunched up his face. “It’s not—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” chimed Systema as she reappeared on the panel in the lift. “But we’re at Level 89.” The doors parted for the two friends. “Have a good day, you two.”

“Thanks!” they both called to her as they exited the lift. “Not sure why we’re saying bye, she’s everywhere,” Nehru remarked. They walked down the brightly-lit corridor of Section Five. The corridor waved a bit, swaying almost back and forth to break up the monotony of the apartment doors they passed. “But no, it’s not that I don’t like free points. I just...if I’m going to do a project, if I’m going to do...you know, work, I want to do something. Just copying some diagram onto a poster just seems so boring.”

“I guess,” Allison said, rolling the notion around in her head. They arrived at the central garden. The bushes and trees among the businesses were in vibrant bloom. The spring light simulated by the lamps was dimming and a subtle but constant breeze felt like a natural storm was approaching. “Think they’ll make it rain later?” Allison asked as they descended the main staircase from the third level down to the second.

“I think they said it would,” answered Nehru. They paused at the hallway leading down to the second-level apartments. “See you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” said Allison, heading on into the alcove-like entrance into the hall of living spaces. Nehru continued down the wide stairs that curved slightly as they descended to the first level. There, he passed through the pebble garden rather than take the straight path. He entered the hallway towards his apartment on the first level. Down the pastel-colored hall, Nehru walked with thoughtful steps, the echo of which kept him company. This hall weaved back and forth like a wave, never feeling perfectly straight.

Nehru arrived at the door of his apartment and it opened with a swish. “I’m home,” he announced as he came inside. He set his tablet on the table

in the kitchenette and his mother turned from the couch. "You're home early."

"I came home at lunch," she said. "I couldn't focus at the office. Janette and Dale were making too much noise."

"Yeah," Nehru said as he got orange juice from the refrigerator. He looked at the calendar on the display screen of the door. "We got a project in class today. It's a science project."

His mom turned back around from her laptop. "That's fun!" she beamed. "What are you going to do yours on, shona?"

"I don't know," Nehru said with some frustration. "I can't really think of anything." He backtracked on that. "Or, I can; I just can't think of anything I want to do. Or..." He wasn't sure how to phrase his issue. His hands on the back of the kitchen chair, he rocked it absently. "Dipen thinks I should do the anatomy of the cell, but..." He shrugged. "I mean, I guess."

"That'd be easy," his mother acknowledged.

"Yeah," Nehru also acknowledged, distracting himself with rocking the chair.

"Do you want to do easy?" she asked.

Nehru just shrugged. "I mean, I don't want to do hard."

"Why not?" his mom asked, mostly teasing. Again, he just shrugged. "Go read or something," she suggested. "Take your mind off of it. You'll think of something that will snap you out of it. Reading will inspire you."

"Read?" Nehru said. "Can't I watch some videos?"

"I'm working, shona," his mother told him in an equally sweet and equally absolute manner.

Nehru sighed, even as he smiled. "Fine, momma."

"I love you," she told him as he went into his room.

"Love you too, momma," he said in return. In his small personal room, scarcely three meters long, he swished his lips. "What to do?" he asked himself. Setting his glass of orange juice on the stand next to his bed, he pulled out some books from the shelves over his bed. With a pair, he sat down on his bed with his legs crossed. Cracking open the books, he began to pour through the pages.

With a wet squirt, Nehru laid down a base layer of mustard on his hot dog. He set the mustard bottle aside and took up the ketchup. He matched the line of yellow with an identical line of red right along the body of the meal. He turned his plate to make sure the line was perfect, then set the bottle down next.

"You're weird," his mother said before she took a ladle full of curry and slopped it down all over her two hotdogs.

"UGH!" Nehru gasped, turning away. "Mom, that's so spicy, it's burning my nose just smelling it."

"I know!" she grinned happily.

Nehru looked across the kitchenette at his dad who was equally as frightened of the curry. Plates fixed, the three all gathered onto the couch that faced the main screen of the apartment. "You want to pick up with the shark documentary?" Nehru's father asked, pushing aside a few books to find the remote.

"Can we do a game show?" Nehru asked, coughing mid-sentence as his mother took her first bite of her curry-coated hotdog. The smell of the spices were enough to clear his sinuses and make his eyes water.

As his father scrolled through the video feeds, Nehru's mother asked, "Have you decided about your project?"

There was some hesitation in Nehru's voice when he finally said, "Yeah, maybe." He situated his hotdogs differently on his plate. "Dipen said I should do the cell but I think I'll do something just about the mitochondria."

"The what?" his dad asked.

"The mitochondria," Nehru said. "It's a part of the cell that helps it make energy."

"Oh," his dad said. He kept scrolling through the video feed.

Nehru's mom couldn't help but tease him. "Don't they talk about that stuff in college, shona?" she asked her husband.

"I'm an astronomer," he said back. "If it's not in the sky, we don't spend a lot of time on it." Nehru's mom laughed. "Well, I think that sounds fun," his dad said. He selected a trivia show and set it to start on a random mid-season episode. As he settled in to eat, he asked, "Are you going to do a diagram or a display?"

"I don't know," Nehru shrugged. "Something like that, I guess." His enthusiasm dwindling already, he distracted himself with the show.

The lift doors parted and Sevena told Nehru, "Have a nice day."

"Thanks," he told her as he exited out onto the main promenade. In the very center of the massive orbital city, it was where the best businesses were found. Bright lights. Colors everywhere. The soft music of store displays and the clatter of conversations echoed off the smooth walls.

The Fifty, as it was known, was the main shopping hub of Space Station Seven. Three levels of shops and stores, it was a perpetual bazaar that ran every hour of every day. Unlike the shopping center near Nehru's apartment on Floor 89, which were more like neighborhood stores, the Fifty was about as urban as it could get. The sidewalks moved, projecting shoppers along in different directions, allowing those who preferred to walk plenty of space to do so.

Nehru arrived at a large store with linings around the windows. The linings slowly changed colors, passing through the whole chromatic scale. In the windows, reflections of people walked passed. Digital projections, they looked like shoppers on the other side of the window but with different biomes behind them. They looked at Nehru and smiled, waving, then they walked on, to be replaced by others.

The friendly display always captivated Nehru and he stopped for a moment to watch the people. Through the sliding doors, the smell of wood adhesives and various paints practically inspired artistic creativity all on its own.

Nehru crossed the store, passing spools of yarn and shelves of model kits. He headed down the aisle of the raw materials, surprised to find Akami. The taller girl was dressed like she usually was: as a ninja. Wearing jungle camouflage complete with lacrosse armor spraypainted to match, she looked like she was trying too hard. Like usual.

"Hey Akami," Nehru said as he joined her. He looked at a wall of washers and discs. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for soft metal discs," she said, comparing two discs that were quarter-sized. She balanced them in each hand, raising and lowering each like they were scales.

Nehru stepped closer to the shelf to let two adults pass down the narrow aisle. The light overhead flickered a bit. "What are they for? Your science project?"

"No, I'm making shuriken," said Akami. "You know, throwing stars?"

"Out of coins?" Nehru tried to reason.

"Yeah," she said. "Dad's going to take me to the materials lab and let me use their metal lathe and grinder."

"Uh-huh," Nehru nodded. He turned and faced the coins, then just shrugged.

"You got to get soft metal," Akami said. "They need to get sharp, but they don't want to be heavy. And they don't need to be sturdy. Ninja use them as a distraction, not to actually hurt anyone."

"Kay," Nehru nodded. He exhaled. He looked over the wall of available materials and felt instantly overwhelmed. "That actually sounds kind of cool." He rubbed his eye as he said, "I wish I was doing something cool like that."

"Are you doing Dipen's cell thing?" Akami asked, putting away one disc and taking out another. She balanced them in her hands.

"No, I was going to do a thing on mitochondria but..." He shrugged again. He took a disc off the wall and considered it, just out of curiosity. "It seemed cool in my head but now that I'm here I'm like, bleah." He stepped back and considered the whole aisle of materials. "I just..." He shrugged again, mostly to himself.

"So don't do the cell stuff," Akami recommended with her usual indifference. "Do something that you know." He didn't follow. She put the two coins away and began to walk towards the back of the store, getting out from under the overhead speaker that was playing classical. "Do you remember back when I broke my arm?"

"Everybody remembers; you kept hitting us with your cast," Nehru groused.

Akami giggled childishly. "Yeah, that was fun. Anyway, after that, I did all my projects about that injury." At the rear of the store, they were surrounded by panels of wood, dowels, and other carpentry projects. "I did a display on the treatment plan, and how the cast helps you heal. And then when we had that programming project, I did the video on time-lapse bone grafting stuff."

"Yeah, that was pretty dope," Nehru said. He took one of the dowels off the shelf that sorted them by diameter. "So I should do a project on some injury I had? I've never broken a bone."

"Yet," Akami said.

"What?"

"Nothing," she smiled.

Nehru thought for a moment as Akami took two of the shorter dowels and spun them like short swords. Two customers passed by, chatting about trains. "I guess I could do something on when I couldn't swallow." Akami's head snapped to him, confused. "When we moved to Space Station Seven, for the first few months, I couldn't swallow," he told her. "It's this thing little kids have where their insides don't know how to handle the artificial gravity. That's why I had to go to therapy. Remember? I would leave school early."

"I remember you leaving class; I didn't know why," Akami said. She smiled, a rare sight of normalcy for the girl. "I had no idea."

"Yeah," Nehru nodded.

"Cool," Akami told him, before she faced the wall of wooden dowels. "That would be good."

The front door opened and Nehru's mother entered, a hand towel wrapped around her sweaty neck. "Hey," she said, still panting from her run.

"Hey," he said. "Allison's mom called. I told her you were at the gym."

"I skipped the gym; I decided to run the outer rim," his mom said as she went to the refrigerator. She filled a glass of water as she checked the messages on the fridge's screen. She cleared them out when she was done. She turned around and saw Nehru had taken over the entire sitting space in the main room of the apartment. He had supplies laid out over the coffee table, as well as a tablet set to a display of the human throat. "What's this?" she asked, picking up the computer. "This isn't the mitochondria."

"I decided to do something else," Nehru said as he measured a piece of string with a ruler. He marked the length he needed, then measured once more to be sure. "I went to the store on the Fifty, and Akami was there, and she suggested I do a project that meant something to me. Like how she did a whole bunch of projects about breaking your arm after she broke her arm." His mom sat down in the loveseat adjacent to him. "So I thought I could do a project on how kids can have trouble with artificial gravity, like when we first moved here when I was little?"

"Oh, I see," his mom said. She looked over his materials, getting an idea. "So you're going to make a diagram of the throat?" Nehru shrugged as he cut the string. "Maybe?" she asked him, teasing him by sounding bored.

Nehru looked up at his mother, an uncertain look on his face. "You don't think this would be a good project?"

"No, I think this is a great project," she all but promised him. "But I think the cells and the mitochondria were both good projects too. I think you don't think this is a good project."

Nehru looked at the materials he'd purchased, gathered, and laid out. He sighed. "I just..." He shrugged again. "You know. It's school work. School work isn't supposed to be fun."

"Says who?" she laughed. "School work is supposed to be fun. The challenge isn't always the project or the assignment, but figuring out what about it is fun to you. Just because you've been assigned to do a project about the body doesn't mean you're learning about the body. Maybe what you're learning is something about the body you didn't know, something that interests you. What you're supposed to learn might be all the ways a subject like the body can connect to your life."

"I guess," Nehru said again. "And it's science, not the body. I just...and it's not a mandatory project; it's just an optional thing."

"I guess," she parroted back at him as she drank more water.

Nehru was sitting at the back of the classroom. He didn't feel like sitting at a desk so he was sitting with Gwondon and Ezza at the back at the furthest table. Ezza was working on the same assignment as Nehru: coloring the heads of different scientists. Blue for physicists, green for chemists, red for astronomers, and yellow for biologists. Ezza was just coloring their hair, doing little more than filling in the graphic with the paint bucket icon of his tablet. Nehru was using the pen option and actually coloring them fully. It occurred to him his dad might be on the list of scientists, but it didn't look like it contained anyone less than a hundred years old.

There was a chime from the front of the room and Mx. Delvip was startled. They sat up abruptly and announced comically, "I'm awake!" The kids all laughed as the teacher tapped some controls on the desk.

One of the windows that looked out over the snowy field grew dark, as if blinds had closed over the view. The window was black for a moment before Sevena appeared. "Good morning," she told the kids. "I'm sorry to interrupt but I needed to let you know that the primary northern lifts are shutting down for the rest of the day." She made an apologetic smile and bowed slightly. "I know! I'm so sorry. We're going to have to reroute anybody using any of those lifts for their route home. If you know your

way, then just make sure to tell your parents you'll be a little later. But if you need some help, let me know and I'll help you find the quickest way. Or you can ask your teacher." The computerized personality gestured over to Mx. Delvip, who exaggeratedly pretended they didn't want to be asked.

Sevena laughed with the kids, then said, "Sorry again for the trouble." She waved and then disappeared. The screen turned black again and the simulated image of shutters opening up again onto the snow field completed the wall of white.

"I was thinking about going to a concert tonight," said Mx. Delvip. "Shame." They absently straightened some of the papers and visual aids around their desk, more shifting mental gears than actually tidying up. "Oh!" the teacher remembered. "Since we're doing announcements, just a quick reminder that your projects are do before class. BEFORE. CLASS," they repeated before snapping their head at Akami. "Before class on Friday." Some more giggles and Akami blushed, laughing too.

"Is everybody going to the cafeteria for lunch?" they asked. The hands seemed to indicate so. "Okay," Mx. Delvip nodded. "Okay. Go back to what you were doing. We'll do the math lesson in about fifteen minutes or so." They returned to their desk.

Gwondon looked at Nehru and asked, "Is your project done?"

"No," Nehru chuckled sadly. "I just...every time I get started, I just lose interest."

"Yeah," Gwondon agreed way too quickly. "Yeah, me too." Ezza looked up from his coloring, a disbelieving squint to his eyes. He shook it off and went back to work. "Wanna to do a project together?" Gwondon asked.

"I don't think we can do them as a group," Ezza said from his coloring.

"Shut up!" Gwondon growled at him.

"Thanks, but no," said Nehru. He leaned his chin on his hand and looked at the faces of scientists. "Do you think THEY ever weren't sure what to do?"

"What?" Ezza asked.

"Yeah," said Gwondon, strangely certain. Taller than Nehru, he had a few strands of dark hair across his upper lip. "Most of the older guys were like scientists as well as other stuff. Like inventors and stuff. Or doctors and things. Their job wasn't to discover stuff. That'd be cool. They were working their jobs and they found something they decided they needed to figure out and..." He shrugged.

Nehru looked at the faces on the digital page before him and found himself with a whole host of new questions about them.

The lift doors parted and Allison got on first, Nehru coming right behind her. "Heading home?" asked Sevena from the touchpad of the lift.

"Yeah. Level Eighty-Nine, please," Allison told her.

"You got it," the space station's avatar told her. She faded out of sight as the lift began to move.

"The project's due this Friday and I still haven't done it," Nehru told Allison as he stared vacantly. "I've started two different projects and I still don't know what I'm doing." He looked desperately to his friend. "What am I going to do?"

"Nothing?" Allison suggested. Nehru scowled at her. "Ask your dad to help you? He helped me with mine Monday night."

"Lucky duck," Nehru grumbled.

"So don't do it," Allison told him. "It's extra credit, you know. It's not like it's a required assignment. You've seriously been way stressed out about it. Just skip it. Do the next project or something."

Nehru looked down. "No, I...I want to do it. I just, I just can't find something I want to do."

"Well, you don't exactly have much time left," Allison reminded him. "You didn't do the cell diagram, you didn't do the organelle-mitochondria thing. You didn't do that weird throat thing from when you had to go to speech therapy."

"But I do want to do something biology," he said.

"Well, yeah, it's a science assignment," Allison teased.

"No, I mean, I want to do the project. I just...can't find something I'm interested in doing as a project," he said. Allison didn't have a response.

The lift slowed. Sevena didn't appear on the touchscreen but she did speak up, saying, "Have a good afternoon you two. Don't get into any trouble."

Nehru and Allison looked at each other, then smiled, then giggled. "Don't get into any trouble?" Nehru repeated.

"Yeah, we'll get right on that," Allison further laughed as they exited.

Nehru came home to find the apartment empty. Neither his mother nor father were there. He dropped his backpack on the kitchenette table and enjoyed the quiet for a second. When he closed his eyes and listened, he could hear the hum of the space station. He could sense the vibrations of the engines and the computers. It felt like a heartbeat.

He went to the refrigerator and tapped the controls. "Mom, I'm home. Can we do tacos for dinner? Thanks." He closed the message and sent it to his mother's work account. He opened the fridge and got out one of the chilling bottles of water. He turned around to the living room and swished his lips in thought.

Bottle of water in hand, Nehru went and sat on the couch. He looked at the project materials scattered on the coffee table in front of him. He swished his lips again and slowly scowled, his mood souring. He looked out the window of the living room, at the starfield outside Space Station Seven. He clicked his tongue before deciding, "Let's get to work."

In the late afternoon, the apartment door slid open and Nehru's father came inside. "I'm home," he called a little too loudly, startling Nehru on the couch. His surprise caused the project he was constructing to begin to wobble and shake. "Crud, I'm sorry," Nehru's dad said quickly.

"It's okay, it's okay!" Nehru said frantically as he tried to stop a tower of hastily-attached materials from falling over. The top portion crashed but he managed to keep the majority of the structure from falling. Once certain the structure would stand, he sighed with relief. He turned around as his father came over, covered in sweat. "I asked mom if we could have tacos for dinner."

"Ooh, sounds good," his dad approved. He looked at the tower for a second, then asked, "This isn't a cell."

"Yeah, I'm not doing the cell diagram," Nehru said. "I switched to doing the mitochondria. Then I was going to do a zero-g's effect on kids. And then I switched to..." He shrugged. "I keep switching. I just can't get something..." His dad listened. "I mean, I want to do it, but...I don't."

"Do you?" his father asked. He slumped down onto the couch next to his son and dabbed his forehead with his hand towel. He looked at his son for an answer but Nehru was confused. "Do you want to do the project? It's extra credit, right?"

"Technically, all our assignments are extra credit," Nehru told him.

His dad chuckled. "Yeah, well." He got up and walked to the kitchenette. "When your mom and me were your age, grades weren't cumulative." He filled a glass with water. "If you didn't do assignments, you lost points."

"That stinks," Nehru said from the couch.

"Yeah, it did," his father told him as he came back over. He didn't sit on the couch but on the armrest. "But I mean, don't do this if you're not interested."

"But that's the thing: I am interested," Nehru said lethargically.

"Are you?" his dad asked. "Or are you just interested in the bonus points or whatever?" Nehru considered that. "Do it because it's fun, or do it for the points. But if you don't know which one, then that might be part of the problem right there."

"Couldn't I do it for both?" Nehru asked.

"Yeah. Are you?" asked his father. Nehru made an uncertain face. "When you first heard about this project, you were excited, right?" Nehru nodded. "What got you excited? The extra points or the project?"

"The project," Nehru said without hesitation.

"What project?" his dad asked. He gestured to the tower. "This one?"

"This isn't a project; this is me farting around," Nehru admitted.

"Yeah, I figured," his dad said. He looked at the tower of various materials with some thoughtful approval, then put his hand to his mouth and made a flatulence sound.

"Gross, dad," Nehru said.

"I try," he assured his son. "So what was the project that got you excited?"

"I wanted to do the lymphatic system," Nehru said.

"The what?"

"The lymphatic system," Nehru repeated. "It's like the veins, but it carries waste projects instead of blood," he said. "It's part of the immune system. Nobody knows about it and I thought it'd be kind of cool."

"So do that," said his dad.

"But everybody said I should do something else," Nehru explained. "Nobody seemed interested in the lymphatic system."

"Are they doing the project with you?" his dad asked.

Nehru shook his head. "No."

"Do you want to do the project because you want to do it, or because you want to entertain your classmates?" Nehru shrugged, even though he knew the answer. "When in doubt, stick with your gut instinct," his dad told him. He put his hand on his son's shoulder supportively, then made another farting noise.

"Thanks dad," Nehru nodded, trying not to laugh.

The lift doors parted and Sevena told Nehru, "Have a good day at school."

"Thanks, you too!" he told her as he carried the tryptic board in his arms. His satchel banged against his back as he walked. Overhead, a pair of red stripes ran adjacent to the main light, while the striking white and red walls echoed each footstep. He passed down the hallway, shifting from side to side as scientists, custodians, and other workers passed him. The hallway was bright and spacious but people still had a tendency to walk down the very middle.

Nehru turned down the school hallway which led to the classrooms. Down the bright hall that was less red and more orange, the lights were accompanied by pleasant morning music. Today, it was string instruments with a playful electrical guitar while the sounds of a few birds chirped through. Nehru passed by two other classrooms to get to his own.

He headed into his classroom where Mx. Delvip was helping Akami make room for her project. "Good morning, Nehru," said his teacher as they made space on the tables at the rear of the room. Akami tossed out a 'hey' that was little more a grunt as she set up her tryptic.

"Hey," said Nehru. He set the tryptic on one of the tables at the back of the room and pushed it open. The label at the top read, 'The Lymphatic System'. Nehru stepped back and looked over the three-panel presentation and smiled proudly to himself.

The teacher came over and studied the presentation quickly. "Nice use of color," they said.

"Thanks," Nehru said with a smile. "Over here, I did a diagram of a lymph node. On this side, I show how lymph transports cellular waste products away from the body. And in the center, I show the whole system." He pointed at the bottom. "There's even this mnemonic to remember how

they're bundled in the body: NAVeL. N for Nerves, A for arteries, V for veins, e for empty space, and then L for Lymph."

"Very nice," Mx. Delvip said again with an approving nod. They read the bullet points across the display. "Breakdown...cistern chyli. Very good." They pointed at the map of the human body on the right side of the panel. "Did you draw this?"

"I copied it," said Nehru.

"Good work," said the teacher. "I—" They were all startled when Ezza came inside, nearly falling over with his giant poster. "Excuse me," said Delvip. They rushed to help Ezza before he crumpled under the load.

Akami came over to Nehru and looked at the presentation. "What's the 'lie-umph-atic' system?" she asked.

Nehru snickered. "Limb-fatic," he said. "It's part of your body that clears out diseases and waste products and stuff from your cells."

"I thought that was the veins," said Akami, moving out of the way for another of their classmates to set up their diorama of the rise of amphibians.

Nehru shook his head. "Nope, but they're a lot alike." Looking over the various other displays, he saw plenty of diagrams of organs. A few models had also been turned in as well as one video project that was playing on the rear-most window of the room. Nehru turned to Akami's project and saw a human body with numerous anatomical spots identified for lethality. "You did yours on vital targets on the human body. Again."

Akami turned and looked at her presentation, then nodded. "A ninja has to keep up with her practice." She turned to Nehru's presentation. "You didn't listen to any of us. You didn't do Dipen's cell project or my idea or Allison's."

Nehru shrugged. "I did listen, but...but I ultimately made up my own mind."

Akami patted his shoulder and told him, "Good for you." She walked off, saying, "You'll get a C at best."

"Your D will look good with all the other ones," Nehru teased.

Overhead, there was a soft chime and the voice of Sevena came overhead. Through the halls of the learning section of the space station, Sevena said kindly, "Students, please make your way to your classrooms. School will be starting shortly."

For more science fiction adventures with a charm-of-life spin, check out [A Rhest Before Dying](#), available as an ebook or in print. Or you can find more stories and tales as well as RVA's other writings at:

<https://teachthesky.com/>

Teach^T_H_ESky.com