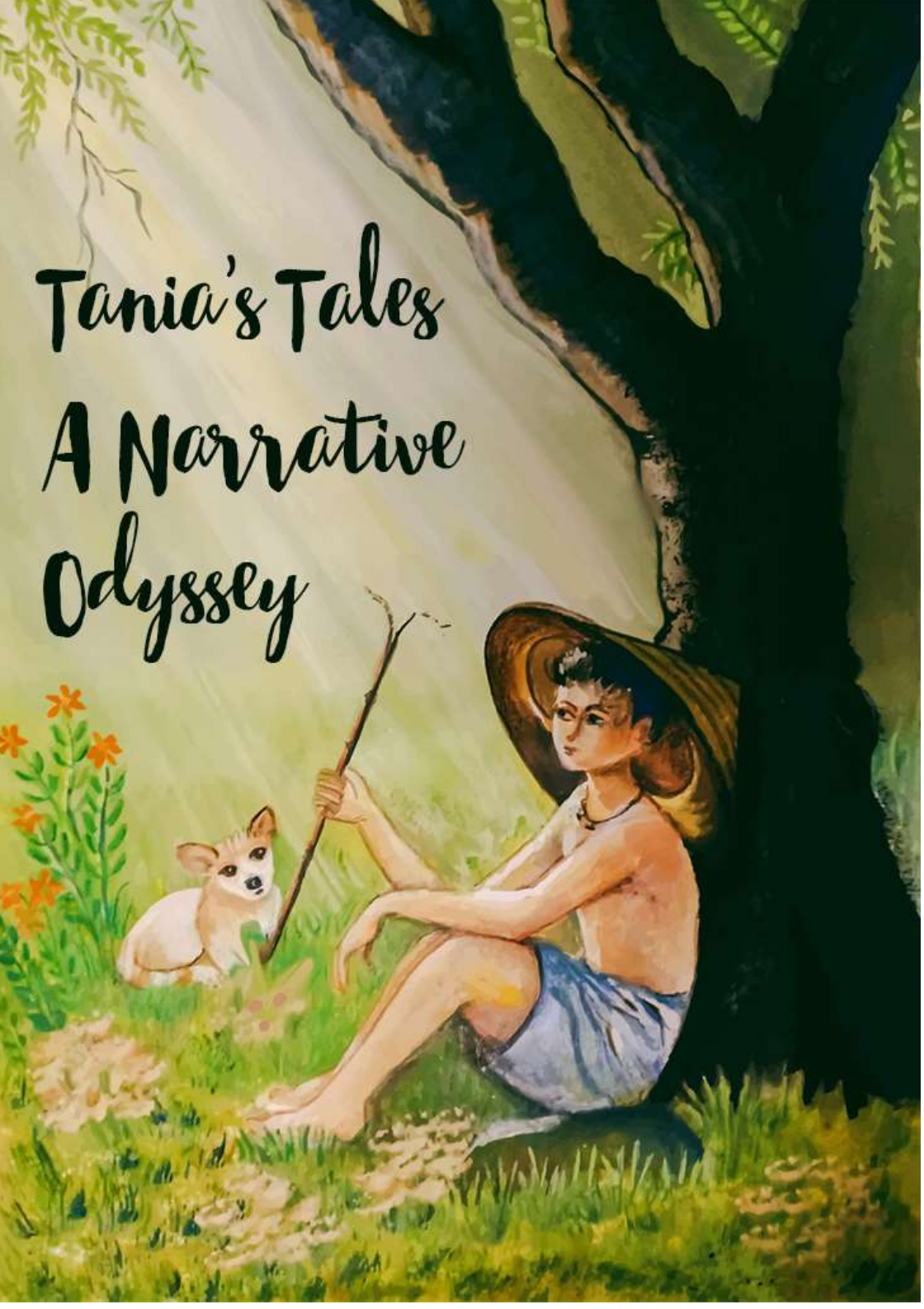


Tania's Tales  
A Narrative  
Odyssey



"Tania, what are you up to?" Sonia asked, bouncing on the bed next to her sister.

Tania was scribbling away in a notebook at lightning speed. "Stop bothering me. Can't you see I'm busy?" she snapped.

"Of course, I can see you're busy. I just want to know what you're doing, Tania." Sonia persisted. "Tell me, and I won't bug you anymore." Sonia craned her neck to look over Tania's shoulder, trying to peek at her notebook.

"I'm writing a story. Now, go away! You promised." Tania grumbled, trying to concentrate on her work.

"Okay, okay, but will you tell me the story when it's finished?" Sonia chirped.

"Go away. Shoo." Tania waved her arms around like a hurricane, and Sonia scampered away, but we all know she'll be back, don't we?

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That evening, Sonia was back at Tania's side.  
"Have you finished your story yet?"

"Yes, I have." Tania beamed. "I'll read it to you after you get ready for bed."

"No, I don't want you to read me the story."  
Sonia shouted.

"But I thought you said..." Tania was puzzled.

"I want you to tell me the story. No reading, just tell. That's more fun."

"It is?" Tania's eyebrows were scrunched up in confusion. "But it's the same story. How does it matter if I read it or tell it?"

"You'll see," Sonia replied, sagely nodding her head. Then she changed into her pajamas, brushed her teeth, combed her hair, picked up Brownie, her favorite teddy and jumped into bed.

Tania grinned as she watched her sister dash about like a hurricane. "I've never seen you get ready for bed so quickly," she said, amused.

"Now, tell, tell, tell." Sonia sang, bouncing around the bed.

"You're so excitable and silly," Tania pinched Sonia's cheeks. "You know, little Myketine was just like you."

"Like me?" Sonia beamed. "See, I bet you wouldn't have said that, if you were reading the story. I told you, telling is better." She wagged her index finger. "So, who was Myketine?" she asked.

"Little Myketine was a mischievous little Myk, who had wandered off onto the wrong Wind."

"That does sound like me." Sonia nodded. "Was Myketine in trouble?" She hugged Brownie, as she bubbled with anticipation.

"Oh yes!" Tania nodded. "Little Myketine's mischief landed her in deadly danger, this time," Tania whispered, and Sonia gasped. "But let me tell it properly, from the beginning." Tania cleared her throat.

§§§

## **Mischievous Little Myketine**

*Myketine was only a few weeks old, and terribly playful and curious. Her siblings had a hard time*

*keeping her on the straight path. She kept wandering off to investigate every little novelty.*

*One day, her curiosity led her to the edge of the Wind her family was traveling on. She wanted to know why the adjoining Wind was named The Forbidden. Before Myketine and her siblings had taken off for independent life on their Wind, Mama had cautioned them all to stay away from The Forbidden. Legend had it, Mama had said, that no Myk had traveled that Wind for over a century. Why? No one knew for sure, but there were stories of monsters, devils and slow painful deaths.*

*Myketine wasn't sure what to make of it. She thought it was just a silly story someone made up for fun. Myketine had only wanted to take a peek at the dangerous Wind she had heard endless stories about since the day she was born. This was the first time her family Wind had come so close to it. This would be her only chance to take a look, and she simply couldn't resist.*

*So she carefully crept as close to it as she dared, but at a precarious moment, a flapping butterfly pushed her over the edge of her family Wind and onto The Forbidden.*

*Yikes! Myketine thought, when she realized that she had transferred over at just the place where The Forbidden Wind was starting to diverge away from her own family Wind. She had crossed the point of no return and was stranded. Whats more, The Forbidden Wind was headed over open sea. Too shocked to react, Myketine just floated along dumbstruck. Then she howled and cried, but of course, no one could hear her. Just when Myketine thought things couldn't get any worse, she smelled it. An overwhelming pungent odor was warning her away.*

*She didn't know how she knew it, but she was certain. Some innate instinct told her, it was the stench of death. And it was coming from the only island in sight. Myketine had two options, either to heed the warning and wander aimlessly at sea, or face whatever monster lived on the island. For now, she no longer doubted the old legend.*



"Oh no!" Sonia gasped. "She should have listened to her mama. But how did she know it was the stench of death, Tania?" Sonia frowned.

"You see, when Myk died in large numbers due to disease, poison or when attacked by their enemies,

they sent a chemical signal to warn their kind away from the inhospitable location," Tania explained. "The signal had kept all Myk away from The Forbidden Wind which led straight to the island for ages. Even today, the signal was strong, and little Myketine knew she was in deep, deep trouble."

"Oopsie," Sonia grimaced, and Tania continued the story.

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*The salty sea air made Myketine desperately thirsty. She simply had to find fresh water. Whatever dangers the island of doom concealed, Myketine knew they had to be lethal for such a strong smell to persist for so long. But she also knew the island had the only reserve of freshwater she could reach before she died of thirst. What should she do? Perish hopelessly wandering over open sea, or avenge the slaughter of her distant relatives. Yes avenge! Because now, as she tentatively drifted towards the island, she knew her kind had been viciously massacred, for only such butchery would explain the persistence of such an intense odor.*

*Myketine was angry and terrified, but most of all she was thirsty. Her thirst became so overpowering, that she could think of nothing but quenching it. So*

*forgetting everything else, Myketine landed on the dreaded island of Vanstan.*



"She landed on an island where she knew millions of Myk had been murdered?" Sonia gasped, unable to stop herself. "Even I wouldn't do something so crazy!" she added hugging Brownie.

"Don't be so sure. You'd do anything to get water, if you hadn't had any for a day and a half."

"No way! I don't even like water. Mama keeps nagging me to drink some. I'd rather have apple juice."

"Oh yeah? Well, apple juice has loads of water in it. Try going a day and a half without drinking anything. Then you'd know how Myketine felt."

"But what about the sea water? Couldn't she just drink some of that?" Sonia inquired.

Tania shook her head. "The salt in sea water only makes you more thirsty, not less. Besides, in spite of her fear, she wanted to know what had happened to all those Myk."



"Oh!" Sonia's eyes were as wide as saucers.  
"Yeah, I want to know too."

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*Trembling, Myketine landed gently on the forest floor of the island. She looked around wondering where the monster or monsters might be lurking. Perhaps they were dead, she hoped. A hundred years had passed by after all, and even monsters did not live forever.*

*Then she noticed the tribe of Ancients, and she was pleasantly surprised. The tribe was supposed to be the Myk's oldest and closest allies. Every Myk's destiny was to befriend a family of Ancients.*

*Myketine felt sorry for these Ancients. They must have lived so long in loneliness. Whatever had killed the Myk, hadn't been able to kill the tribe, but had left them so sad, lonely and helpless. Myketine knew from all the stories Mama had told her and her siblings, that the tribe and the Myk needed each other to survive.*

*The thought of her siblings made her sad. She realized that she would never see them again. She felt lonely and lost. Perhaps, I should have died at sea, she thought, as she sobbed. But Myketine wasn't*

*the type to brood for long. She sighed and remembered why she had landed on the dreaded island in the first place. She needed fresh water. So she hugged the soil and extracted water from it, the way her Mama had taught her.*

*After quenching her thirst, Myketine set to work. She knew she had no hope of seeing her siblings ever again, but she could still start a small family right here. The tribe and she could help each other, and maybe, together they could fight the monster off. Perhaps, last time the monster had taken the Myk by surprise. This time, with the tribe's help, the Myketine and her family could prepare themselves. She perked up.*



"Way to go Myketine!" Sonia cheered up. "But why were the Ancients lonely? Can they help Myketine? If the Ancients and the Myk need each other, then how did the Ancients survive so long without the Myk?" Tania raised her hand, to stem Sonia's torrent of questions.

"Only the stronger members of the tribe of Ancients had managed to survive without the Myk, but even they were very sad and lonely. One such lonely

member was a tall strapping Ancient named Bir. Myketine had happened to land just next to him."

"But what did you mean by Myketine set to work. What work did she do?" Sonia continued unable to suppress her curiosity.

"Myketine's Mama had taught her how to settle down in a forest. In fact, her siblings and she had been merely a day away from their Wind dropping them off at a forest, when Myketine had drifted off on The Forbidden. Her Mama had taught them all how to make friends with Ancients and help them talk to each other, so Myketine and her siblings would know what to do as soon as they reached their destination. She had taught them how to help the Ancients care for their little ones, and in return she had said, the Ancients would feed her. Myketine had been so excited at the prospect of community life in a new land, and now, in spite of everything that had gone wrong, she thought she might still have everything Mama had promised. Now, can I tell the story the way I planned?" Tania grumbled. Sonia nodded, so Tania resumed the story.

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*Myketine hugged the ground once again, this time to create a network to contact the Ancients. She worked*

*the elements just the way her Mama had taught her. Her siblings were not there to help, so it was hard work, and Myketine started feeling exhausted. She was about to pause for some rest, when she had the strangest feeling.*

*Her whole body tingled, and somehow she knew she had done it! She had made contact with an Ancient. She was so shocked at her success, that she almost fell over and lost contact. In fact, that's exactly what would have happened, if Bir hadn't held her steady.*

*But Myketine wasn't the only one who was shocked. Bir was simply astounded. For a few years after the Myk had died out, Bir had hoped new Myk would come from somewhere. The oppressive silence had driven him to the brink of insanity. When years passed by, and no Myk arrived, Bir adjusted to his solitary life. But the sadness never left him, and each new year brought fresh tragedies. Bir did not think he could possibly survive so much misery, but his strong body plodded on, forcing him to endure the torture he knew he deserved. Maybe, the fates had decided a hundred years of suffering was quite enough, Bir hoped, as his heart danced with joy at Myketine's magical touch.*

*Myketine was delighted to befriend an Ancient, and humbled that a tall strapping one such as Bir should*

*honor her so. Mama had told her and her siblings that they shouldn't expect much attention from the strong ones until they were older and better established, and that they should just be happy to find a little Ancient willing to take them in. Mama had said they would have to work their way up, but also they should forever remain loyal to their first Ancient. The lessons had been complicated, but Myketine was smart and remembered them all.*

*Myketine knew that being cut off from her siblings and all other Myk on this island would make life very difficult for her, because the Myk were very much a co-operative species working together in large groups to maximize their efficiency. But she also realized that the scary situation she found herself in, presented a unique opportunity.*

*She would be setting up her own family network in virgin territory, where she could establish strong ties with Ancients of her choice, whilst creating efficient networks to assist as many of them as quickly as possible. No other Myk she knew of, had ever had the chance to plan their occupation so meticulously. The typical Myk habitats were congested, and each Myk family cluster tried to grab whatever resources it could, and bond with whichever Ancient they could reach.*



"Wow, that is exciting, Tania. Myketine gets to plan an entire civilization!" Sonia did a little dance with Brownie, making Tania giggle.

"That's correct, Sonia. And now let's see what she does with this amazing opportunity."

"What happened to Bir? Did he become Myketine's friend?" Sonia asked.

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*Bir was simply thrilled. He couldn't believe an actual Myk had arrived in Vanstan. He greeted Myketine with a lump of sugar. Myketine was shocked. Even Mama had never heard of a lump so large, and no Myk she knew of had ever convinced an Ancient to part with a lump of sugar without doing them a good turn first. Hungry and tired, she feasted on half of the sugar, before she remembered Mama's lessons and stored the rest away.*

*Energized and happy, Myketine worked hard on building her network. Bir would sometimes make suggestions to help her improve her efficiency. He also seemed to enjoy pampering her. In a few days, she made contact with a little Ancient named Doug.*

*Doug, being short, was struggling to get all the nutrients he needed. So Myketine gave Doug the remaining half of her lump of sugar.*

*Doug who was miserably low on his food stores and therefore growing very slowly, was immensely relieved. He thanked Myketine profusely. But Myketine informed Doug that the sugar was from Bir. She was surprised to find out that Doug had no idea who Bir was. Mama had said that the Ancients, like the Myk, were community creatures too. They all knew each other and worked together to help their young.*

*Myketine informed Bir she had given most of the sugar to Doug as was appropriate. When Bir seemed pleased, she hesitated and added that actually she had been very hungry after a very long journey and eaten half of it all by herself. She was scared that Bir would be very angry, but he only laughed. "It's just sugar," he said. "Would you like some more?"*

*Initially, Myketine was puzzled by Bir's easy friendly attitude, but then she remembered that he had been lonely for a century. And Doug had never even known it was possible to talk to another Ancient. After all, hadn't Mama said that it was the Myk that made it possible for the Ancients to talk to each other and care for their young. With no Myk around,*

*Doug had been a helpless orphan. Poor Doug, Myketine thought, and made it a point to take food from Bir to Doug regularly. They were both thrilled with her, and in a few days they even learned to talk to each other. Myketine would carry their most intimate messages back and forth, and it made her deliriously happy. Doug was starting to adore Bir.*

*But Myketine wasn't just playing messenger girl. In the few days, she had already learned to be an efficient multitasker. She was extending her network rapidly in every direction. With her help, not only were Doug and Bir able to optimize their food resources, but they were also able to make better quality food with the rare ingredients that only Myketine and the rest of her burgeoning Myk family were capable of obtaining.*

*One day Myketine asked Bir how all the Myk in the island had died. She told him she was worried, that now that her family was growing, the monster might attack again at any moment. Bir had assured her that the monster no longer existed. 'But what kind monster was it?' Myketine had persisted with eager curiosity. Then she sensed terrible sadness in Bir, and decided not to bring up the subject again.*

*She did not want to cause Bir any pain, and if Bir assured her the monster no longer existed, then she*



*believed him. Besides, her work kept her very busy, and she loved every moment of it. There was no time to dwell on past tragedies, she decided, and got busy setting up the vast Myk/Ancient community she dreamed of.*

*Myketine couldn't be happier, when a few days later she was able to establish contact with a couple more Ancients. Their joy at her contact was just as intense as Bir's had been. They were just as eager to send Doug food too.*

*But their attitude to Bir puzzled her. She sensed reticence in the communications. Were they trying to hide something from her? And it wasn't just that. Their interactions seemed polite enough, but there was something forced about them. Maybe they had a history with Bir, Myketine guessed. She asked Bir, but he changed the subject, so she let it go.*

*By now, Myketine with the help of generous sugar donations had expanded her network over a threshold. The Ancients urged her to focus on network growth and offered as much sugar as she needed. In this matter, Bir and his rivals agreed. There were enough Myk to help Myketine and the network grew rapidly. Some Myk took on the work of disposing the dead Ancients. The network allowed for efficient transport of food, spices and messages.*

*Everyone should have been happy, but something was wrong, and Myketine couldn't figure it out.*

*While the young Ancients and her own Myk family simply adored Bir, the older Ancients seemed wary of him. No, more than that, they seemed to blame him for something. But every time Myketine asked Bir about it, he became evasive. She knew he was hiding something from her.*

*Sometimes, it bothered her. Why should Bir keep secrets from her, she wondered. Perhaps, he had done something mean to the other Ancients a long time ago, something he was ashamed of, Myketine thought and decided to drop it. Besides, hadn't Mama told her to be loyal to her first Ancient. She decided to trust Bir. But just a few days later, her trust would be tested.*

*The Myk network had now reached the vicinity of some of the oldest Ancients. Right in their center, lay the fallen body of the greatest one of their clan, still intact. Every clan of Ancients had an Old Mother, and this was their Old Mother. All the Myk bowed in reverence to her, before getting to work on her unnaturally pristine dead form. It was indecent, that she should be left this way for so many years.*

*As the Myk worked the sacred area of the old Ancients spreading their network, they were welcomed more warmly than ever before. But here, Myketine learned was a place of tragedy, which she understood. These were the closest friends and relatives of Old Mother, and their immense grief at her death was understandable.*

*But the discovery of Old Mother flooded her mind with questions. How was it, that Old Mother had died? Her body seemed strong and healthy. Then what had happened to her? When Myketine asked this, all the oldest Ancients howled and wept.*

*Inconsolable as they were, they would not answer Myketine. But one thing was clear, that when she mentioned Old Mother, their anger and hatred towards Bir intensified.*

*Myketine was shaken to her core by the forcefulness of their momentary hatred. Transient as it was, there was no mistaking it. The oldest Ancients tried to cover it up with jokes and laughter, whilst indulging Myketine with large lumps of sugar. But Myketine knew that in a moment of weakness, the oldest Ancients were on the verge of revealing some tightly guarded secret. She had caught a whiff of it, and now she had to know it.*

*She could not bear it anymore. So she rushed over to Bir and begged him to tell her. She wouldn't take no for an answer.*



"Me too!" Sonia exclaimed nodding vigorously. "I just have to know what is going on. Why do they hate Bir so much? And even if they do, why are they so secretive about it?" Even Brownie's ears perked up, Tania thought.

"Calm down, Sonia." Tania patted Sonia's head. "I'm getting there. Bir had a terrible secret. But he loved Myketine, and he knew he owed her the truth, even if it would destroy their relationship. He feared that, once Myketine had learned this secret, she would never speak to him again. So with a trembling voice, he told his tale. And that's the story I'm going to tell you next."

Sonia was impatient with curiosity, when Tania began her story of the century old tragedy of Vanstan.

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**Once Upon a Time in Vanstan**

*For many years, Vanstan had been occupied by several tall strapping creatures. These mighty creatures, who could make food from thin air, stood tall for centuries. One would imagine such self-sufficient creatures to be content. But they were not. In fact, they were miserable, indeed.*



"Why Tania? Didn't they like the food they made? Did they want candy?" Sonia interrupted.

"No! No one wants candy, except you."  
Tania snorted.

"You're so wrong." Sonia rolled her eyes, but Tania was abstracted. "What happened Tania?" Sonia snapped her fingers.

Tania's lips curved into a smile as she spoke. "Actually, Sonia, they did make candy of sorts, and you're right; telling is better than reading, because it makes you think." Her eyes twinkled.

"Told ya," Sonia shrugged. "So why did you change your mind about the candy?"

"You'll see," Tania winked.

"Wait, I know! The creatures are the Ancients, right? The ones that give Myketine lumps of sugar, which is sort of like candy."

"That's right, Sonia. You're smart." Sonia glowed with pride.

"Why were the Ancients sad?" she asked.

"They were miserable," Tania stressed, keen to ensure her story wasn't being hijacked, "because there was a gloomy curse upon them."

"A curse? What curse?" Sonia grimaced.

"Are you going to let me tell the story?" Tania gnashed her teeth.

"Oopsie, sorry." Sonia sat down meekly, and made puppy faces until Tania smiled and shook her head. With the story getting so tense, Sonia pulled Brownie close into a tight hug.

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*The creatures were cursed with long, sad, lonely lives, while they watched their young suffer and die. Everyday, they saw the dead withered trunk of the fallen Mother, but with the Myk gone, it wouldn't even rot away and disappear. The Mother's indecent*

*broken body was a disturbing reminder of their arrogance, that had led to their undoing.*

*Oh, if only the Myk would return, each of them wished and hoped every minute of everyday, but they couldn't even empathize with each other.*

*The mighty Old Mother had tried to make them understand, Bir remembered, but in his youth he had considered himself invincible, and had underestimated the misery of loneliness.*

*Bir recalled with bitterness the glorious revolution he had led. "We work hard to produce food, and then we give it away to the Myk. For what? Are we stupid? This foolishness has got to stop," he had pompously declared.*

*"They give us what we need in return," Old Mother had tried to explain.*

*"You're turning senile," Bir had sneered. "We can get that stuff ourselves. We only let the Myk get it for us. We need to become self sufficient. We are bigger, stronger and smarter. We don't need the Myk. Today, right now, I say, we stop appeasing those thieving parasites." The youth had cheered loudly, and Old Mother's wise objections had been drowned out by their blood thirsty war cries. "Down with the Myk!"*

*they had chanted, until the intoxicating idea had consumed them, leaving them incapable of a single other thought.*

*The proud creatures had withheld their usual donation of food to the Myk, who did not understand what was wrong, until they were too weak to do anything about it.*



"But Tania, how could the Myk not know?"  
Sonia interrupted. "Didn't they carry the messages between the Ancients?"

"They did. But those Myk and the Ancients did not share an intimate relationship, just a symbiotic one," Tania clarified. "In those long ago days, there was a very dense network of Myk and Ancients. The Myk did not know the contents of the messages they carried between Ancients, sort of like mailmen. Myketine shared a very special relationship with the Ancients of Vanstan because she was the first Myk there in a century. That's why they let her read their messages. Besides, as you know, Myketine was more curious than the average Myk."

"I see. That makes sense. Okay go on."  
Sonia listened with rapt attention.



## §§§

*Old Mother tried to help the Myk all on her own and a few of her oldest friends helped her, but the rest of her tribe boycotted her. In a last desperate attempt to save the Myk, for Old Mother could not bear to see the curse descend on her tribe, she gave every last bit of her food to the Myk, and with her last breath, she prayed that this gesture would earn their forgiveness. It might have worked, if not for ...*



"If not for what?" Sonia blurted out. "What's wrong with Bir? Why is he being so mean? He was so nice to Myketine." Sonia wailed. "I don't get it. Is Bir good like Cinderella, or evil like her step mother?"

"After you've heard the whole story, you can decide for yourself." Tania replied.

"It's your story. If you don't tell me, how should I know how to imagine him?" Sonia objected.

"Imagine him however he seems to you now. You can add details or make changes as the story progresses," Tania suggested.

"You mean like the computer game, where we dress up Mr. Potato Head?" Sonia asked.

"Yeah, exactly!" Tania nodded. "If something doesn't work, you can change it at anytime."

"Got it." Sonia nodded. "So why didn't Old Mother's sacrifice work?"

"As I was saying," Tania continued.

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*It might have worked, had it not been for another drastic step Bir had instigated the proud creatures to take. Angered by Old Mother's betrayal, for that is how Bir perceived her last noble gesture, he convinced almost all the rest she was a traitor, and they all confiscated her generous donations from the Myk. The creatures then watched gleefully as the Myk endured long slow agonizing deaths.*



"The candy making creatures massacred Myketine's people!" Sonia gasped, "And all so they could keep all the candy. How greedy of them! Bir is a nasty, awful fellow." Sonia shook her fists in anger.

*But the thrill of victory hadn't lasted long. As the last few Myk perished, a frightening, numbing silence had descended upon the tribe. That deafening heart wrenching silence had continued for over a century. It was the curse of the Myk.*

"Serves those greedy creatures right!" Sonia was still fuming. Tania ignored the interruption and continued.

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*Bir wanted to sob, but what was the point? None of his comrades could help, or even hear him without the Myk. By eradicating the Myk, Bir had doomed each of them to a life of utter and complete loneliness. Yes, they all had enough space and food, but no one to talk to. Over the years, Bir had understood the wisdom Old Mother had tried to convey.*

*The worst of it was watching the younglings struggling to survive and usually failing, but not being able to do anything about it. Bir had never bothered to find out what the Myk offered them in return for the food they were given. Now, he had learned the hard way, everything Old Mother had tried to tell them, but it was too late to do anything about it, he lamented.*

*The Myk had facilitated the transfer of food from the strongest members of the tribe to the most vulnerable members, the younglings and the ailing. Yes, they charged a commission, but their rates were not unreasonable. Bir had never realized how valuable their service was.*



"What? The baby Ancients died, because the older ones were stupid and greedy. That's not fair," Sonia screamed, enraged.

Tania shrugged. "That's just how the world is. Haven't you heard of climate change? Our generation is going to have to pay for the wasteful practices and greed of the previous generations."

Sonia looked thoughtful. She sounded unsure when she finally spoke. "Tania, I've actually heard a lot of that, but we take so much technology for granted. Yet, we don't really thank our previous generations for it. It's true that we will have to pay for their greed, but don't we also enjoy the benefits of their ingenuity? Shouldn't someone place those side by side, so we can use the tools they have left us, to clean up the mess they have left us, instead of simply whining about them?"

Tania stared at Sonia. "Wow! That's an awesome way of looking at it, Sonia. You're smart."

"Thanks," Sonia beamed at such praise from her older sister, and listened as Tania continued the story.



*The Myk also provided certain ingredients that enriched the flavor of the food the Ancients made. So now, the Ancients all had to make do with bland boring food, Bir assumed. Of course, there was no way he could know for sure. When the terrifying silence after the war had persisted, Bir had eventually figured out that it was the Myk that had made it possible for the members of his tribe to communicate. Without the Myk, they were completely disconnected from each other.*

*Bir and the other old ones had tried to restore communications, but their networking abilities were not up to the mark. Try, they did, pushing themselves to the limits of their capacities, still unable to achieve a tenth of what the Myk did so effortlessly. Frustrated, they had given up.*

*A hundred years had passed since that fateful day when the silence began. Along with Old Mother, fallen bodies of infants and children littered the*

*grounds. Over time, Bir had understood that the Myk worked on the dead to return them to the cycle of life. He begged for it all to end, but no one could hear anything he had to say. This, he reckoned was his punishment for his brash attack on the Myk and for defying Old Mother.*



"This is a very sad story, Tania. Not at all good for bedtime." Sonia shook her head, as a tear trickled down her left cheek. Her anger had faded, and she was overwhelmed by sadness.

"It is." Tania nodded. "And just like you, Myketine too was sad for her best friend Bir's suffering. But then she remembered that Bir had been a monster. He had provoked and instigated the creatures to murder all the Myk on the island. Yet, Mama had told her to be loyal to her first Ancient. Her head about to explode with confusion, anger and sadness, Myketine fled."

"Where to Tania?" Sonia asked, unable to stop herself.

"She ran around the forest on her vast network howling, and all the Myk could feel her pain. Because of the nature of their community, they also

had her knowledge. Her distress and agitation, and the knowledge of who had massacred their predecessors made them very angry. The Ancients too were enraged with Bir. How dare he divulge their secret and bring destruction on them once again! They would not have it."

"What do you mean? What did they do?"  
Sonia clasped her hands, hugging Brownie tighter than ever.

§§§

## **The Crisis**

*To appease the Myk, the Ancients directed a burst of toxins towards Bir. The Myk added their own and were only too happy to deliver the lethal dose. The jolt of venom was so strong in the Myk network, it shook Myketine out of her anguish. With all the strength she could muster, she ordered that all the toxins be dissipated in a way that would harm no one. So forceful was her demand that every Myk and Ancient stopped in their tracks. As their founder, Myketine commanded the respect of all the Myk, and she was the darling of the Ancients.*

*"What Bir did was monstrous!" Myketine declared, her strong voice reverberating through the deafening*

*silence that had descended over the entire island. "There is no excuse for it. But the rest of you Ancients, except for Old Mother did not stop him either. Most of you helped him. You all did something terrible." She paused to make the accusation stick, and she sensed shame from all the Ancients. "But you have also paid the price," she added. "I know what a hundred years of solitude is like for you, and I know you have all repented your impulsive actions. But you must remember what got you there in the first place. Anger and vengeance will drag us around in endless circles of misery." She paused to take a breath, waiting for all the Myk and Ancients to absorb what she had said.*

*"We all need each other." Myketine continued in a softer tone. "I almost died because of my own impulsiveness. Fate gave me a second chance. Fate has given you Ancients a second chance too. What you did in the past cannot be changed. But when I got here, you all welcomed me. We have thrived together. Look what we have achieved working together. All your communications are restored, your youglings happy and we Myk are thriving. What more could we all ask for? All we need to do now, is let go of the bitterness of the past and hold on to its lessons. Then we can move forward."*



*Myketine sensed the tension easing. The Myk and the Ancients were less angry. In fact, many couldn't understand why they had become so angry in the first place. They all realized that a second chance was a reason to celebrate. Myketine's well chosen words had saved them from doing things they would all regret.*

*As for Bir, he was overwhelmed. He kept thanking Myketine for her generosity of heart. "But what made you help me, Myketine?" he asked. "How did you trust me after knowing everything I had done?" His voice shook with shame.*

*"You may have hidden things from me Bir, but you never lied. I remembered when you told me the monster did not exist anymore, you did not hesitate, but told me with conviction. At that moment, when everyone attacked you, I suddenly knew what you had meant. You all existed, but the monster within you all had perished a long time ago." Myketine explained.*

*Bir told Myketine, that she was much wiser than him. Myketine could not believe it! What would Mama say of the mischievous little Myketine all grown up now, she wondered. She blew her Mama a kiss and hoped some Wind would carry it back to her.*



"Wow Tania! That was an amazing story." Sonia looked at her sister in awe and amazement. "You have such a wonderful imagination. How did you think up the Myk and the Ancients?"

## **The Inspiration**

"Actually, I based the idea of the Ancients on trees in forests." Tania admitted. "You know that trees make sugar from thin air by the process of photosynthesis."

"That's very clever, Tania. And what about the Myk?" Sonia asked.

"I got the idea for the Myk from something very interesting I learned recently. The trees in the forest are all interconnected by underground fungal networks called mycorrhizae. Mycorrhizae are very thin, thread-like fungi which are far better than tree roots at gathering and transporting water and nutrients through the forest. The trees and the mycorrhizae have a symbiotic relationship, whereby the trees give the mycorrhizae sugars, and the mycorrhizae help the trees communicate, transfer nutrients among themselves, and even procure some

rare minerals like phosphorus for the trees," Tania explained.

"Exactly like in your story!" Sonia's eyes lit up. "I'm going to go Google mycorrhizae and learn more about them. After all they are just like me." Sonia sang as she darted off to her computer.

Tania laughed, and pulled her back. "Not now, Sonia. It's bedtime, remember? You can Google it tomorrow. But since you brought up Google, I have one last interesting tidbit to share with you."

"What? What?" Sonia's eyes sparkled.

"The network of mycorrhizae is sometimes called 'The Woodwide Web', just like our internet is called 'The Worldwide Web'."

"That's really cool!" Sonia nodded.

As Sonia drifted off to sleep, Tania smiled. She was glad Sonia had liked her story so much. One day perhaps, she would be an author.