

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful meadow, surrounded by sparkling waterfalls that fell into shining ponds. In the meadow lived three brown-haired sisters: Hope, Ella, and Ray. Hope was the oldest, and Ray was the youngest. The three sisters loved their meadow, and they loved each other.

Every Wednesday they would go through a small gap in a waterfall and to Ninja school. Their master, Haru, would teach them to kick, and punch, and dodge.

One Wednesday, after Master Haru had excused them from a training session where they had perfected a back flip, kick in mid-air, and land, the three sisters saw a poster hanging on a tree:

DANCE PARTY

On the moon.

Thursday.

Everyone is invited!

The sisters looked at each other. Then they smiled.

The party was the night of the very next day. The only way to the moon was over the rainbow bridge.

When they got home, Ella ran through the gap in the waterfall, saying, "I'll get our throwing stars!" And came back 2 minutes later holding a chain, and two jet-black belts, full of dangerously sharp throwing stars. (She was wearing the third.) She handed out the belts, then said, "Who should wear the chain belt?"

"Ray should," said Hope. "She worked the hardest in class today."

Ray brightened. "Thanks," she said as she clasped the chain around her waist.

Then they set off, over hills and through forests, until, just as the sun was setting, they reached the foot of the rainbow bridge. Long, sparkling, and beautiful, the bridge curved up to the moon, like a multi-colored caterpillar.

Hope was the first to hop onto the bridge, then began to walk up. The others followed, hopping and skipping as they went. Then, suddenly, a great black figure appeared in the sky. Hope and Ella began to run, but Ray just stood there, transfixed with horror as a Manticore landed on the bridge.

"Hello, little human. My name's Ender, and I'm going to eat you," said the Manticore. He threw back his head and laughed.

Ray's muscles tensed as she watched him. Then she gathered all of her courage and jumped. She landed on Ender's head. His angry red eyes looked at her as he tried to throw her off. But

then Hope and Ella jumped on his back and began to attack him with their throwing stars. Ender threw all of them off, and they landed on the bridge.

Ender advanced on Ray and Ella, ready to strike. Hope looked at both sisters. "I love you guys," she said, and then, it seemed to happen in slow motion, Hope jumped. She threw all of her weight at Ender, holding together his wings, and they both fell off the bridge. Then Ender, and Hope, were both gone.

"NO!" yelled Ray. She raced to the edge of the bridge, but could only see darkness. She wanted to run, to hide, to fling herself off the bridge after her sister. But she could not do any of this, because Ella was restraining her. Then the calamity settled over her, that she could never again speak to her sister, never again could she see her. Hope, their oldest sister, was gone from the world. She was dead.

Tears fell thick and fast over Ray's freckled cheeks, and she stopped trying to fight Ella. They both fell down and sobbed.

After a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, Ella said, "It's time for us to go tell the village." Ray didn't say anything, but she allowed Ella to lead her up the bridge. Finally, after what seemed like years, they reached the moon. People were dancing and laughing. But they stopped when they saw Ella and Ray. Ella opened her mouth and began to speak.

"Hope is dead. She died protecting us." The finality with which Ella said it somehow made everything seem worse to Ray. "If we had all been killed, then you guys would have come down that bridge and all perished," finished Ella.

Everyone gasped.

The rest of the night seemed to pass in a blur. They all said words of thanks, and goodbye. Then they danced in sorrow. They all danced in memory of Hope.

When only Ella and Ray remained on the moon, Ray said, "You know, this means that we have to appreciate the time that we have with each other even more." Then they hugged and retreated back down the bridge.

When they got home, they buried Hope's belt—which had flown off while she jumped—stuck a wooden cross in the soil, and draped it in marigolds. They sat there until the sun rose.

Looking at the beautiful colors, it seemed so unfair that Hope had to miss them. Ray felt like she was living in a whole other life, one without Hope. Although she could never get over losing Hope, she still had Ella, and she knew they would learn to cope with their sister's death, to carry her memory with them. Together, they would be happy again.

The End