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WILL YOU BE AN ASTRONAUT?

ASTRONAUTS ARE PEOPLE who ride rockets into space. They must train for a very long time before they go. Astronauts must be brave and smart.

Will you be an astronaut?

The biggest rocket ever was the Saturn V. On the launch pad it was taller than a thirty-story building. Today's rockets are smaller and lighter. Today's rockets can be launched more than once. They have wings and can come back to Earth and land like airplanes.

When a rocket engine blasts out flame and smoke, it is so loud that windows rattle and the ground shakes. Everybody knows when astronauts are traveling to space.

Antonio is strapped into his seat. He is about to ride to a space station. Because there is no air in space, Antonio must wear a space suit. In the suit, Antonio can breathe and talk over radio. He wears a helmet with a special faceplate that protects him from the sun. The fingers of his gloves have tiny claws that help him work with small objects.

The rocket is about to take off. There go the engines. 5-4-3-2-1! Lift off! Astronauts come from many countries. Antonio is from Mexico. Other astronauts come from Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, the North American Diaspora, El Salvador, and other countries. Astronauts must be able to work well with others. They also must be good at math, computer science, and engineering.

In space, astronauts speak Spanish. No matter what language you speak at home, you must learn Spanish if you want to be an astronaut.

¿Habla español?

Mercury was America's first manned spacecraft. It was smaller than a car and could hold just one man, all scrunched up. Gemini was more roomy and could take two men into orbit. And the Apollo spacecraft was even larger. It could take three men to the Moon and back.

On July 20, 1969 Apollo 11 brought the first astronauts to walk on the Moon. There are no plants or animals on the Moon. There is no water to drink or air to breathe. Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin conducted experiments and talked to people on Earth. They collected many Moon rocks, but their spacecraft was lost while returning to Earth. Space exploration is dangerous. Astronauts must be very brave. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made one giant leap for mankind.

Will you be an astronaut?

Antonio's rocket docks with Space Station Vigilancia. The space station circles 19,000 kilometers above the Earth. It also has rockets to help it move out of orbit. In some ways, the space station is like a spaceship. It is shaped like a big donut with a needle through the center. Antonio's rocket links up with the space station at the bottom of the needle. He rides an elevator up to Vigilancia's living quarters.

The living quarters are small but comfortable. Antonio cooks some of his own food in a kitchen and grows some of it in garden-bubbles. He sleeps in a hammock and exercises with weights and a bicycle. When he's not working, sleeping or exercising, he watches movies and plays games, just like you do at home.

Antonio replaces another astronaut. The old astronaut will ride back to Earth in the rocket that brought Antonio. Antonio will remain on Space Station Vigilancia for nine months. During that time, he will finally get to put all his training to use. He will use telescopes and other instruments to watch for incoming Asps. If he sees an Asp, he will track it with radio waves, and if it gets close enough he will blast it with the space station's proton guns. Antonio has practiced doing this on Earth for a long time. He is very good at it. It is a great responsibility to be an astronaut, protecting Earth from Asps.

If even a single Asp gets through, millions of people could die. How did Antonio become an astronaut? Astronauts come from all kinds of places. They come from big cities and small cities, from mountains and jungles, from farms and refugee camps.

Asps destroyed Mexico City, the place where Antonio's parents lived. They had to move to the refugee camp where Antonio was born.

Here is Antonio in the refugee camp. He is standing in line at the depot. At the depot he is given a box with food in it. It is enough food to feed Antonio for a week. Antonio eats bean cakes and fruit paste and crackers with peanut butter.

Every time Antonio picks up a box of food, the people at the depot ask him questions.

"How do you spell rocket?" asks a man.

"R-O-C-K-E-T," says Antonio.

"Very good," says the man. The man is from Africa and works for the Nations. He writes something in his notepad and asks Antonio another question.

Antonio can spell many words.

P-R-O-T-E-C-T.

E-A-R-T-H.

H-U-M-A-N-I-T-Y.

L-O-Y-A-L.

Not all the questions are about spelling. Some are about math. Antonio can answer those easily.

And some questions are very different. They are "pretend" questions.

"Antonio, pretend your best friend is hungry. He has already eaten his crackers. When you go to the clinic to get your shot, you see a food box that someone has left by the door. The person who left it there must not be hungry, since they were so careless. Your stomach is rumbling. Do you eat the crackers, or do you give them to your best friend?"

Antonio says, "I tell the nurse there is a food box by the door."

The man says, "Very good, Antonio."

All Antonio's answers are entered in the notepad. After a while, people know that Antonio is very smart. When he is twelve years old he is chosen to attend astronaut school in Rio de Janeiro. It is a great honor to be picked for astronaut school. It is important to study hard. Always speak intelligently to adults. Don't be afraid of big words.

Antonio has to leave his parents in the refugee camp, and he is very sad.

His father hugs him. "Be good," says his father.

"You will make us proud," says his mother.

Antonio flies to astronaut school in an airplane.

He will miss his parents when he is at astronaut school, but he knows he is learning how to protect them from Asps.

It is okay to be sad when you help other people.

The Earth is beautiful. When Antonio has free time he looks through one of the space station's windows. Antonio learned geography at school in the refugee camp, and he learned even more at astronaut school. He sleeps with a picture of Earth over his hammock. The Earth is the most important thing there is.

Antonio sees blue ocean beneath the white clouds. The Gobi Desert is the color of a camel. The tip of Cape Horn is white like a polar bear. North America is green and brown, but parts of it are ash gray. Across Europe is a patch of ash gray. Across China is a patch of ash gray.

The gray parts are where Asps have touched down. More than two billion people used to live where the patches are. But nobody lives there now. There are no people, no animals, and no plants in the patches. Over two billion people have died in the patches since man started going into space. Many more have died because the people in the patches grew food for others to eat, all over the world. Now their farms are gone.

People like your parents have died. People like your brothers or sisters have died. People like your teachers and friends at school have died. Dogs and cats and fishes and hamsters have died.

Do you have a pet?

An astronaut's most important job is to prevent people and animals from dying. An astronaut will do anything to save a life.

On the space station, Antonio controls the guns. Here he is at work. He sits in a special chair. Doesn't it look like a dentist's chair? Antonio's chair has a gyroscope inside it. If something hits the space station, Antonio will remain steady. That's the gyroscope's job. An astronaut must be able to concentrate on his job no matter what.

From his chair, Antonio controls twenty guns at once. The guns are satellites with little rockets that control their movements. Each gun is as big as a tram car. Some of the guns are very far away. Some are out beyond the Moon. Antonio aims and fires his guns with radio signals.

Some astronauts will spend their entire time in space without ever firing a shot. But they're still working. Firefighters are working even when there is no fire. Police officers are working even when nobody is committing a crime. Cleaners are working even when there is no quarantine. Working means always paying attention, even when not much is going on around you.

But now there is an alarm!

Robot detectors have picked up something. Antonio checks the computer. The computer can do math very quickly. It can figure out the size of an object, and its speed, and where it's headed, and even what it's made of.

An Asp is headed toward Earth.

Antonio is ready. He is very brave.

He waits for the incoming Asp to come close to his first gun battery. If he fires at the Asp and misses, the Asp will change course. Then it will be even harder to hit.

Asps are like pieces of string. They can be kilometers long, but only a few meters thick. They are like giant worms. They are disgusting.

Sitting in his gunner's seat, Antonio stares at his computer screen. He sees the Asp as a bright purple line. He tries to line up a red circle over the purple line. When the red circle is in the right place, Antonio can tell his guns to fire. The Asp moves quickly though, and it is hard to aim. It is important to hit the Asp in the correct place. Antonio wants to shoot it in a soft spot so it will break up into parts so tiny they'll burn away as they fall to Earth. But if he shoots the Asp in the wrong place, in one of its hard joints, it will break up into several Asp segments and will be harder to kill. The red circle is on the purple line. Antonio squeezes the trigger. A signal is sent to his guns and they fire.

Oh, no! The Asp wriggles! It is not a clean hit!

Now there are four Asps.

Antonio's job is harder now, but he does not give up. Being an astronaut means never giving up. He sends radio signals to his guns. He tries to line up four red circles over four purple lines.

Number one is lined up. Antonio fires. It's a hit! The Asp segment breaks up into many tiny bits. He doesn't have to worry about them.

Number two is lined up. Antonio fires. Right on the mark!

Number three is lined up. Antonio fires. It's a bull's-eye!

Now number four is lined up. But only for a second. The red circle drifts away from the purple line. Antonio tries to aim his guns again, but he can't move the red circle at all. He hears a voice inside his head.

We have descrambled your code, the voice says. We now control your guns. Thank you.

Asps know how to send signals to Earth. They know how to speak over our radios and televisions. They can interrupt our shows. Recently, they learned how to talk directly to people inside their heads. This kind of communication is called telepathy. Asps may have talked to you. What did they say?

Asps want Earth to stop going into space. They want us to stop broadcasting radio and television. They want us to shut down our factories. They want us to stop drilling for oil. They want us to stop using metals. They want us to stop breeding animals. They want us to stop growing food on our farms.

When the Asps talk to you, it is very easy to want the same things they want. Some people have listened to them. They have started living the way the Asps want all of us to live. You may have heard your parents or teachers talking about "worms." Worms look like normal people, but they are not normal. Worms are people who do what the Asps want. How can you tell who is a worm and who is normal? Worms sometimes say strange things. They may say that machines are wrong or evil. They may complain about pollution. They may make their own clothes.

If you think someone is a worm, you should tell three grownups. You could tell your mother or father, and your teacher, and a police officer.

Remember, worms can be anybody. Worms look like normal people.

Even your parents could be worms.

That is why you must tell three grownups.

The Asp is coming toward Earth. If it gets through, everything where it lands will die. It will kill all the people and all the plants and all the animals. Antonio's guns no longer work. The Asp has taken control of them. What can he do?

Antonio has an idea.

The Asp speaks again: Your name is Antonio. Your favorite color is blue. Don't use your machines. Be happy, Antonio. Be soft. Hello.

Antonio unstraps himself from the gunner's seat and floats to the space station's navigation controls. The space station has rocket engines that allow it to change its orbit. If it has to, it can even go to the Moon.

Metals are poison. Chemicals are poison. We will keep you warm, Antonio. We love you. Your favorite color is blue. Thank you.

Antonio wants to listen to the Asp. It has a nice voice. It is a little like his mother's. He wants to shut down the space station's power. He believes the Asp will make him soft and warm. The Asp loves him.

Don't be scratchy, Antonio. Call home. Tell them they can be alive and soft.

We can make them alive and soft. Death is scratchy, Antonio. Hello.

Sometimes it is hard to do the right thing.

Antonio fires some of the space station's engines. He switches them on and off to steer the station. The space station moves into the Asp's path.

The Asp knows how to avoid beams from guns, but it does not know that the space station itself is a threat.

Through the window, Antonio watches the Asp come closer and closer. He thinks about his friends in the astronaut corps. He thinks about his mother and father back in the refugee camp. He would like to talk to them on the radio. He would like to be alive and soft with them.

The Asp is moving in fast. It is huge. Antonio is afraid. But it is just a purple line, he tells himself.

It is just a purple line, and I am a red circle.

He puts his hands behind his back.

The Earth is so pretty from space.

Astronauts are the smartest and bravest people there are. There is nothing an astronaut won't do to help people.

Sometimes schools are named after astronauts who sacrifice their lives to protect our planet.

What is your school's name?

Will you be an astronaut?