The Soup — Quincy A. Rock

Jules jolted awake with a start. Though her sheets were warm, chills coursed down her spine and made her hands and feet tingle. Heavy rain hammered against the metal roof and pattered against the high-set windows. She couldn't think straight through all the noise.

A flash brighter than anything she'd ever seen outshone her comforting nightlight and cast the corners of her room into stark relief. Before Jules could react, the flash was gone, and a booming roar shook the whole house. Jules shrieked, hugging the blankets to herself as her heart attempted to pound its way out of her chest.

Mommy. She needed Mommy. Or even Daddy. They'd know what to do. They'd feed her the soup they always made, sing her a song, and then everything would be okay.

Numb terror of necessity more than any kind of courage brought her out from under her cozy blankets and onto the cool floor. Her bare feet scarcely made a sound as she padded to her door and buzzed it open. The door slid aside with a soft hiss.

Mommy and Daddy would be just down the hall. The very, very dark hall.

Only little girls easily scare, she told herself, but she remained frozen in her doorframe long enough for the door to beep a complaint to get out of the way.

Another flash threw her hesitant shadow against the hallway wall, and the great roar followed even faster and louder than before. Jules shrieked again and scuttled away into the darkness, half-blinded from the flash.

"Mommy!" she cried at the top of her lungs, but her voice was faint from too many fast and panicked breaths. She reached their bedroom door and pounded on it a few times, then tried to buzz in. The door blatted a denial and blinked red.

"Jules?"

Jules spun around to find her big sister Jess peering out from her bedroom, eyes wide. Jules suddenly became aware that she'd been crying, tears and snot smeared all over her, and a hot surge of shame bloomed in her cheeks. She turned away, scrubbing at her face, but only succeeded in coating her hands with disgustingly warm snot.

"I tried that already," Jess said, now close behind Jules. "Mommy and Daddy locked their door."

"But why?" Jules whined. She gave up trying to clean her face and wiped her hands on her pajamas.

"I don't know, I heard them say something about—" Jess started, but she was cut off by yet another flash that carved through the hallway's darkness. The accompanying roar seemed to crush Jules' ears and rattle the entire house. Jules screamed and threw her arms around her sister without thinking, burying her head in Jess's shoulder.

It took Jules a moment after regaining some of her wits to feel Jess trembling against her, her muscles quivering and vibrating like a deer ready to flee. She—both of them, really—needed to *do* something. A glimmer of purpose pushed the fear out of Jules bit by bit, and she whispered, "We should make the soup."

"We're not allowed to touch the stove," Jess whispered, barely audible over the rain. She was still shaking. Jules rubbed her back, half to comfort her sister and half to wipe the snot off her hands.

"Lots of things are allowed in *emergencies*," Jules said, parroting the word she'd heard Mommy use before when talking about serious things. She slipped out of Jess's tight embrace and took her hand. "Come on," she said, tugging gently at first, then more firmly.

Jess let herself be led across the hall and down the stairs to the kitchen nook in short, shuffling steps.

"Do you know what's happening?" Jules asked, more to make conversation than anything else. She let go of Jess's hand to flick the light switch, and the ceiling bathed the kitchen in a homely orange-toned light.

Jess stirred from her trance. "It's a thunderstorm," she replied, stumbling a bit over the unfamiliar word. "Daddy said it happens sometimes when it rains. The light is lightning, and the noise is thunder. He said it means the terraforming is working really well if it can make thunderstorms all on its own."

Jules dug around in one of the lower cabinets, looking for a big pot they could use. "What's that mean?" she asked, the echo of the words sounding strange from bouncing around in the small space. Terraforming was a concept she didn't really understand, but Daddy seemed to know a lot about it.

"I don't know," Jess replied unhelpfully as Jules hefted a large pot and set it down with a *plunk* on the stove. "Are you sure we should be doing this?"

"Come on, help me find the ingredients," Jules said, clambering onto the countertop to begin searching the higher cabinets. She didn't recognize most of the cans, so she tossed those onto the floor so she could see the rest better.

"Fine, but when Mommy catches us, it was your idea," Jess said. Jules heard the fridge open. "There's onion in it, right?"

"Yeah," Jules responded. It took some careful concentration, but she managed to read the labels on the spices and find red pepper and garlic powder. She was concentrating so hard that she barely noticed the flash of lightning, and only glanced up at the peal of thunder that came after. Jess inhaled sharply at the rumbling thunder, but otherwise said nothing.

In short order, they had all the ingredients they could remember laid out on the kitchen island. It wasn't as much as Jules had expected.

"Can I use the knife?" Jules asked, trying to disguise her excitement and failing miserably: she was bouncing up and down on her toes.

"What if I say no?" Jess replied, a slight smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"Then I take it and cut up the onion anyway because it's an emergency." Jules grinned at her.

Jess giggled and gave her a gentle shove. "Fine, just don't cut yourself. I don't think Mommy puts blood in the soup."

Twenty minutes and a few minor cuts later, they'd dumped all the ingredients in the pot, and it was time to turn on the stove. The lightning and thunder gave the moment more weight by flashing and booming when Jules tried to touch a knob.

Jules let out a cry of surprise and not a little fear, but Jess reached out and squeezed her shoulder. Jules put her arm around her big sister and squeezed back.

"I don't know how to turn it on, actually," Jules admitted, a flush of embarrassment suffusing her. "But it can't be that hard, right?"

Jess sighed. "I'll do it." She messed around with one of the knobs, and gouts of blue flame sprang out of a burner, but not the one the pot was on. "Oops." It took some more fiddling, but soon the burner under the pot was burning merrily, and a sickly sweet smell filled the air.

"And now we wait," Jess said, hauling herself up to sit on the kitchen island. Fragments of onion lay strewn all over its surface, along with a fine dusting of spices. Empty cans littered the space beside the cutting board, some remnants of their contents spilling out and onto the floor.

Jess offered a hand up, and Jules took it, wiping away some of the gunk that would've stained her pajama bottoms. It was just like a school project, only more fun—partly because they weren't supposed to do it. *And* they could eat it.

Lightning lit up the kitchen in brilliant white light, and they had enough time to start in fear before the thunder roared loud enough to make the house quake again. Jules whimpered and pressed against Jess, who wrapped her arms around her. They sat together in silence for a while, listening to the rain battering upon the roof and the burble of the soup bubbling on the stove.

"Claira told me a funny joke at school yesterday," Jess murmured against Jules' hair.

"What was it?" Jules asked. Jess's warmth was starting to make her sleepy, and she had to stifle a yawn.

"What did one wall say to the other wall?"

"Let's gang up on the ceiling?" Jules guessed.

Jess snorted, and Jules could hear the smile in her voice. "I'll meet you at the corner."

Jules started laughing hard enough she almost fell off of the kitchen island, only Jess's steady hands keeping her from a nasty bruise. As she regained her composure, several flashes carved white streaks through her vision. The thunder became a continuous bellow that drowned out all other sounds in its fury.

When it subsided, Jules could feel Jess shaking again. Or maybe it was just Jules' heart throbbing so fast that it made her chest shudder with every beat and breath.

"Can—" Jess started, then cut herself off and tried again. "Can you sing the song Mommy sings to us?"

The request broke through the terror that kept Jules' mind in a rigid deadlock. "Yeah," she replied, settling more comfortably against Jess. Softly at first, then with more confidence, she began to sing:

Baby mine, close your eyes

Time to sleep, sun will rise;
Have no fear, for I am here
Drawing you near,
Baby of mine.

She continued on for a few more verses, and only when her voice faded into the din of the rain did she realize that Jess had been singing along with her, a duet against the storm. The smell of the soup permeated the entire kitchen, now rich and fragrant.

"Soup time?" Jules asked. Her stomach gurgled—it certainly had an opinion on the matter.

"Soup time," Jess agreed.

Jules busied herself with gathering bowls and spoons while Jess grabbed a ladle and triple-checked to make sure she'd turned the stove off.

"Order up!" Jess said as she filled up a bowl.

"What?" Jules asked, bemused, taking the proffered bowl and setting it on the nearby dining table.

Jess shrugged. "Dunno; it's something I heard them say at Carlo's." Lightning and thunder interrupted her while she dished out her own bowl, and she flinched, spilling some of the soup on her spaceship pajamas and the counter. She muttered something that Jules didn't quite hear, but came over to the table and sat down.

Grinning at each other, they each took a big spoonful of soup and devoured it. Jules instantly regretted it: the soup was somehow extremely spicy, bitter, and salty all at the same time. Jules spewed the vile liquid onto the table in front of her, choking and retching. She was dimly aware of Jess doing the same, pushing the bowl away from her and coughing.

Through the burning sensation in her mouth and throat, Jules caught Jess's eye. They both managed to keep a straight face for a second, maybe two, and then they collapsed to the floor in hysterics. Tears ran down Jess's face as she clutched her sides to gasp for breath. Jules was giggling so hard her sides hurt.

The searing lightning flashed and the booming thunder roared, but their laughter in the kitchen drove away the storm.