

## MOVING FORWARD

The footsteps echoed against the pavement as Amancia and her Mama strolled hand in hand up the driveway to Maple Gym. Amancia had been to Maple Gym only a few times before, but only to practice basketball. This time, Amancia was going to play her first basketball game of the year there!

Amancia was determined to win, especially since Mama was there. Amancia hardly ever saw Mama, since her two older brothers, Adio and Abisai, were just accepted into college. Mama ran around making care packages for them whenever she could, so whenever Mama was off work, Amancia got an equivalent of an, “Oh, hi sweetie!” from her. But this time, Amancia would be the one being tended to, because Amancia had planned for weeks how she would win this game and prove herself to Mama.

“Are you excited?” Amancia questioned to lighten the mood. “I’m sure I am.”

Mama turned her head and smiled at Amancia with green, tired eyes that were so much like hers. “Yes,” Mama stated tenderly. “It’s exciting!”

Amancia had every reason to believe it, for Mama’s eyes seemed to glow against her dark skin as they do when she gets excited, much like Amancia’s did. After that was a blur, for these words made Amancia so happy, she hardly noticed she was already in the gym. Mama must’ve been in the bleachers already, since Amancia was standing by the edge of the court while the rest of the team was lined up for roll call while they waited for the coach to return. Amancia only saw about half of the team, Shelly, Katrina, Addie, Kiki, and Brooklyn. It didn’t take long for Amancia to realize that she was staring, so, slightly embarrassed, she scampered up to the roll call line next to Brooklyn.

“Where’s everyone else?” Amancia asked, slightly out of breath.

“Coach Bea told us,” Brooklyn replied. “Georgia got the flu and spread it. Luckily, we’re okay.” Amancia’s stomach twisted. 4 girls who played a key role in their game plan were missing. Their chance of winning was dropping slowly.

“Hey girls!” Coach Bea jogged into view. “I’m back, doing good?” Mixed cries of confirmation spread across the court. “Time for roll call, Shelly?”

“Present!”

“Brooklyn?”

“Here!”

That went on for a while until the last name was called. Coach Bea looked uncertainly at her clipboard.

“Well, six is better than zero,” Coach Bea muttered. “ I just-” Coach Bea was rudely cut off by the opposing team, loudly running into the gym.

“They ain’t called the Elephants for nothing,” Shelly grumbled. Amancia looked back up into the bleachers where Mama was with uncertainty.

“ ‘Kay girls!” Coach Bea yelled. “Who are we?!”

“*The Parrots!*” They yelled back.

“And what do we do?!”

“*FLY!*”

“That’s right! Now get out there and play some ball!”

The bell rang for the start of the game. Shelly, Addie, Katrina, Kiki, and Brooklyn were out there playing like crazy. Meanwhile, Coach Bea and Amancia were eagerly watching the game from the bench. Coach Bea yelled out to the team while Amancia just sat quietly. Now and then she sneaked a glance at Mama. This could be the moment she was waiting for, and Mama was watching.

The Parrots’ team colors of yellow and red made the basketball court look like a priceless painting, while the other team’s color, gray, made a smoky wildfire. A wildfire the Parrots were struggling to put out, no matter how many times they rushed to grab water.

A buzzer sounded, and the Elephants had scored a basket. Even louder cheers came from the Elephants’ bench, while the red and yellow fire came to a halt. On the wall behind Amancia and Coach Bea, a digital 1 came up on the scoreboard underneath “ELPHTS”, standing for Elephants. Even so, Amancia still believed they had a chance, for the girls on the Parrots still had three minutes until it was time to switch out players.

The teams scrambled back together and the timer buzzed once more, with Kiki having the ball first. As a forward, it was her job to keep moving and dribble the ball down. She started out fine, keeping it to herself, but as she neared the half court line, she got in a tiny pickle. The girl guarding her was really intense, so Kiki called Brooklyn over to become a defensive “Plank”. Brooklyn ran over and planted herself on the side of Kiki’s guard, granting her a safe passage around.

From there, it was a straight path to the basket. Kiki ran up close to the basket and immediately shot. Up, up, up it went as the ball traveled to the hoop. Then miraculously, to Amancia’s disbelief, it went in!

Amancia cheered, but Amancia wasn't the only one. Everyone on her team was cheering, including Mama! What a wonderful sight.

Just then, the buzzer went off for the end of the period. Things were looking up, especially since it was Amancia's turn to get in the game. She took a big gulp of water from her water bottle, stood up, then bolted into the court with determination in her eyes. They started with lining up with who they would guard and shaking hands, a nice gesture, but they never mean it.

Lined up beside her were Brooklyn, Katrina, Addie, and Shelly. Amancia was guarding a tall, pale, redheaded and freckled girl, maybe about 11 years old. "Shake hands! Then we'll start!" The referee called out.

So, they did. Amancia's partner's hand was sweaty, causing Amancia to cringe. "Evening." The girl said. Amancia just nodded and forced a smile.

"Everyone, get to your positions!" The referee yelled. Amancia and her partner positioned themselves near the Parrots' basket, with Amancia in front. The buzzer loudly shrieked once more, and a member of the Elephants started down the court. Amancia turned to face the girl and got into the zone. It was like Amancia was her shadow. Amancia focused all the attention on her. Then, Amancia heard something, and turned to see the perfect chance. The Elephant member was getting ready to shoot, and Amancia saw this as a perfect chance to steal the ball. Amancia quickly sprinted for the hoop. The ball was in midair when Amancia reached it, so she jumped. Amancia grabbed it and she felt like she was flying, but it wasn't long until she met the floor. Cold tile.

Knowing this would be called out as a carry, she passed it to Katrina, who was the nearest one open. Katrina stood there in shock, having caught it. But only for a second. Then, she bolted. Katrina may have been the fastest one there, for no one could catch up until she stopped. Amancia stayed at the other end, away from Katrina, as she watched her shoot beautifully. It was like watching a fall leaf floating in a windstorm -- it always hits the ground before anyone can take action. But today, it rolled away and hit the ground because it went through the basket!

Every Parrot cheered, and Amancia ran to Katrina. A digital 2 showed up on the scoreboard. "Katrina! That was amazing!" Amancia laughed.

"Thanks! I've been practicing."

With that there were five minutes left on the clock. Everyone got their heads back in the game and got into their positions. This time, Amancia and the other girl were near the Elephants' basket with Amancia in back.

3,2,1. The timer buzzed again and Amancia's opponent leapt into action. She was surprisingly good at guarding, so good that she backed Amancia into a corner. Nevertheless, Amancia was careful not to step out of bounds, but it was hard when she kept closing in. Abruptly, she looked over her guard's shoulder and saw it happening to everyone else as well. Then, she saw an Elephant take a shot and unfortunately, tie the game. Amancia heard quieter cheers from the Elephants, because apparently, they didn't think it was fair either.

Just then, a buzzer went off for the end of the period. All of the Parrots ran back to the bench, where Coach Bea sat looking mystified and furious at the same time. "What were they doing?! They can't just corner you like that!" Coach Bea hollered.

"Not much we can do about it now," Amancia sighed.

"Okay girls," Coach Bea bent down and put her hands on the shoulders of the girls who had formed a circle. "This won't be easy, but we can do this. Get pumped, we've got a long game ahead."

Nearly 20 minutes had passed since then, two periods, and the Parrots were losing 3 to 4. One minute was left on the clock. After that, the game would be over... unless the Parrots scored. Amancia was the forward, and had reached the half court line. Everyone was counting on her, but Redhead, her guard, was good.

"I need a plank..." Amancia thought as she struggled to block her from stealing the ball. "Addie!" Amancia yelled.

Addie scampered up to Amancia and became her plank. Amancia slipped to the side and ran for the basket. 15, 14, 13, 12. The Parrots kept them from interfering. 11, 10, 9, 8. Almost... 7, 6, 5, 4. Amancia shot! With the last three seconds, every Parrot eagerly watched at the flying ball. 3. Amancia held her breath. 2. Please work! 1.

Maybe?

BUZZ! Amancia was the first one to notice. Therefore, she was the first one to experience the heartbreak of losing. After so long, how had it come to this? Anger, sadness, and guilt welled up inside her. Mama... what about her?

Amancia ran out of the gym, with her sneakers hitting the floor as the only sound. Amancia just felt like she needed to get... away. Away from the disappointment she caused Mama, the cheering team and the sad one. So Amancia went to the only place where she could hide from these things. The restroom.

Abruptly, Amancia slammed open the door and hid in the corner of a handicapped stall. As she sat, thoughts swirled through her head. "Everyone on the team is disappointed and it's all my fault," and, "Mama will never appreciate me now." These thoughts seemed to weigh Amancia down on the tile even more. Suddenly, there came footsteps of someone entering the restroom.

"Hey Amancia." It was Mama's sweet voice. Amancia felt Mama lean up against the door.

"Mama," Amancia whispered. "I-I'm sorry." Her voice cracking.

"Why?"

"I just- I just wanted to win this so I could prove myself to you. You always pay so much attention to my brothers on your breaks, I don't get to spend as much time with you as I'd want. I lost... So I just wasted your break! It's all my fault, If I had shot better, I could've tied the game. So... I'm sorry for not being the child you want."

Mama didn't say anything at first. Then, "Oh honey, I never knew you felt like you had to prove yourself for me to love you. It doesn't matter who or what you are! You are a light in my life, don't be sorry about that. I tend to the boys so much because it is a big deal, college. Also, you know they get when they want attention. I'll try to spend more time with you, just know I am proud of you no matter what."

These words warmed Amancia up like a fireplace. "Yeah, but everyone on the team lost because of me, they're probably so mad." Amancia groaned.

"On the contrary," Mama replied. "They're worried sick and so proud of you for taking that shot. After you left, even the Elephants got worried and set out to look."

Amancia cracked a small smile. "I love you Mama." Amancia reached her hand underneath the door.

"Me too." And Mama grabbed it.