He stared at the screen with dry eyes, without even realizing that his mouth was half-open. What am I doing wrong?

The small 10-inch monitor fixed in the wall showed a surface filled with soil as red as blood. The atmosphere itself looked eerie. Hollow rocks stood still high above the ground amidst the black sky and a planet stared back at the surface from afar. The light was dim, hardly illuminating the view at all.

But that wasn’t important. He had stared at the screen for so long, the sight wasn’t even exciting any more. What was important was the small circular pad creeping out from the ground. It was almost as big as a lunch plate but there was nothing on it except for concentric circles etched into it.

Gokul looked at the watch on his hand: 14:55. It had been ten minutes since the last Switch (that was the word he used; teleportation was a horrible cliché.)
He grabbed the oxygen supply tank, strapped it over his back, put the mask on his face, stood on the pad and pressed the green button on his remote control – he could afford better equipment now, thanks to the Switch.

Failure … Failure … I am a failure …,” he was uttering in a tone of defeat. She had had enough of this.

“Mr. Ravi, please, calm down.” He breathed deeply and, after a few moments, stood up and sat on a small stool beside the pad.

“You are working for a failed physician, Radha. I suggest you quit,” Gokul said. His calm tone had returned.

“Sorry. I am not leaving until I find out the secret of the Switch. I know it can be done. I know you are the man for the discovery.” She walked toward his table and placed the cage on it.

Her attempt at flattery didn’t seem to work on Gokul.

“Not possible. The switch isn’t meant for me. It’s eluding me, Radha. I have gone horribly wrong somewhere. I just know it.”

He was regretting the moment he decided to spend all his family fortune in sending the goal-pad (the other half of the switch-pad) to Mars on Arjun-38, the rocket that carried Indian astronauts to Mars in 2021.

“Can I see the notes?” asked Radha. Gokul would rather die than let someone see his work’s secrets. He weighed the odds. She was definitely good, and who knows, she could solve the problem.

“O-okay.” He hesitated a little.

This was like finding the fabled gold pot for Radha. Co-founder of The Switch. Imagine the glory! Imagine the fame!

She picked up his notebook and admired it while holding it, like a young boy would when he got a new toy. She touched the cover, caressed it slowly and pulled the book closer to her nose. The smell, the sight, the opportunity … It was all a dream.

She had been waiting for this day for years. When Dr. Gokul Ravi had put out a word for an assistant for his work on quantum teleportation, she jumped with joy. She applied the very next day, and at the beginning, she thought of him as a modern-day God. All his ideas unvarnished beautifully on paper.

Even the best of geniuses make mistakes – Radha had remembered reading that line somewhere. Boy, was the waiter right. There was a mistake here, and Gokul was as brilliant a genius as they were made. Without knowing it, the man had been working on two-dimensional matter transport all along! The differential values, the framework, the quantum physics – all had minute errors. Completely wrong was fine but minute errors was the worst. The pad he was using now could have happily switched 2-D objects anywhere, except that there were no real two-dimensional projects.

She imagined the dozens of rats being squeezed to death. Eeew.

Five and half hours of discussion followed by ten hours of work had fixed it all. Gokul’s face lit up. Life felt good again. The 2016 issue of TIME called him a madman!

But now? The same magazine was begging him to be their ambassador. How life changes, she thought. She had faith in Gokul’s… Oh My God, I can see what’s wrong here.

“Mr. Ravi, there is a miscalculation.” She said absent-mindedly while turning the pages.

“Mr. Ravi?!” Radha shouted as she entered the laboratory. Her work had been cut out for her. The opened umbrella lay on her table, along with a note and an empty water bottle.

The note’s writing looked like that of a child. It read: “BRING MORE RATS. ALSO, FILL THE BOTTLE. FAST.”

This is what I earned a Master’s degree in Quantum Physics for, she thought. She closed the mouth of Dr. Ravi’s umbrella (it was wet, thanks to the rain outside) and put it away. Realizing she might as well get used to this, she made her way to the pharmacy.

When she returned with a cage filled with rats in one hand and the plastic bottle in another, she found Gokul on the floor, banging his hand and crying.

“Mr. Ravi! What the hell…” she said, rushing toward him. She struggled to pull him up but instead, his weight almost dragged her down as well.

Failure is not acceptable! Not at this point! It’s lost. Somewhere in the journey, the specimen got derailed.

There was no sign of the rat. Had everything gone right, its lifeless body would be hovering over the ground with its eyes out of its sockets and its tongue out of its mouth. But that wasn’t happening.

Somewhere in the time-space frame, it’s lost. Somewhere in the journey, the specimen got derailed.

He slammed the wall in blind fury. Failure is not acceptable! Not at this point!

He placed it on the metal surface and left the room. The rat-cage was filled with rats, and the cage was empty. He had decided to spend all his family fortune in trying to switch rats to Mars.

“Can I see the notes?” asked Radha. It was a mistake here, and Gokul was as brilliant a genius as they were made. Without knowing it, the man had been working on two-dimensional matter transport all along! The differential values, the framework, the quantum physics – all had minute errors. Completely wrong was fine but minute errors was the worst. The pad he was using now could have happily switched 2-D objects anywhere, except that there were no real two-dimensional projects.

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Five and half hours of discussion followed by ten hours of work had fixed it all. Gokul’s face lit up. Life felt good again. The Doctor tag looked promising again.

But this is my work. She just identified the mistake. Giving her credit for this would be like giving the money made by a movie to the critics.

And judging by the way in which things were going today, he might as well accept failure.

No. I have come too far to give up. Sacrifice is necessary for science.

He strolled toward the rat-cage, picked up a fat rat and walked back toward the home-pad, ignoring the fact that it was biting the glove on his right hand.

He placed it on the metal surface and began the process all over again. *****

“What does the combination do?” she asked. Gokul would rather die than let someone see his work’s secrets. He weighed the odds. She was definitely good, and who knows, she could solve the problem.

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Fiction

A yellow light wrapped around him. Within seconds, he opened his eyes and looked at the scene in front of him.

He wasn’t walking anymore…….

He touched the soil on the ground. It felt flaky. He couldn’t believe it…..

But not before all of this, she realized as she looked at her table. The same old open-mouthed umbrella and the empty water bottle, and a note – “GET SOME BREAKFAST, DON’T FORGET THE WATER.”

She pulled the umbrella’s runner down. Instead of sliding back, it stuck there, along with the ribs. Go in, dammit. Defeated, she decided to use her legs to push the ribs down. Holding the bell cap against her face, she stomped the cloth down repeatedly as if it were a cockroach walking beside her.

The runner suddenly moved. The ribs pushed back, the umbrella closed but from between the spine, a small white ball shot out and hit her chin. It cracked as soon as it hit the hard surface and a puff of white smoke came out.

Radha slumped to the ground, shivering. From the corner of the lab, two gloved hands pulled her away.

“What happened, doctor?” Gokul asked, acting as concerned as he could.

“It was Ricin poisoning,” he replied calmly. They were on either sides of Radha’s bed. The room was filled with a monotonic beep coming from the heart-rate monitor.

“What is that?” I need to act completely surprised.

“Ricin is a toxic salt found in castor oil seeds. A small dose is enough to kill a full-sized human.”

“How did it happen?”

“I can’t say. Could be the salt she used in her breakfast, could be something she ate a few days ago, she might have visited a field…. It could be anything.”

Kumar ran into the room, scared and confused. They had talked last night. She sounded so … alive. Taking the cue, Gokul decided he hadn’t actually used the goal-pad on Mars for so long. I should do it. I owe it to myself.

He grabbed the oxygen supply tank, strapped it over his back, put the mask on his face, stood on the pad and pressed the green button on his remote control – he could afford better equipment now, thanks to the Switch.

A yellow light wrapped around him. Within seconds, he opened his eyes and looked at the scene in front of him. He wasn’t walking anymore, he was floating. He touched the red soil on the ground. It felt flaky. He still couldn’t believe it: He was on Mars! He was where only a… A disturbance. Someone was tampering with his equipment.

He turned around to see his goal-pad vibrate. There was someone coming through, or something.

A small yellow note appeared on the pad. Gokul caught it before it could float away. The words “NICE WORK WITH THE UMBRELLA. GOODBYE - KUMAR” were written on it.

He didn’t even have to stand and see what was going to happen. He could imagine Kumar smashing his home-pad to pieces.

He used his remote control: It wasn’t working. The switch was my work. The goal-pad burst open wide, revealing the wires under it.

Gokul was on Mars. But he was never going back home. A sacrifice for science is necessary.

He checked his oxygen supply – It would last him an hour, maybe a little more. So this is how it feels when one is waiting to die, he thought as he hopped up from the ground, reminiscing his life.

Two days later, Radha died. The court couldn’t find a murderer because according to them, there never was one. A simple poisoning accident it was.

In the following months, life for Gokul changed. He had become an international sensation, not to mention the winner of “The Man of 2024” award. He could almost touch the Nobel Prize in his future. All he had to do now was calm down. Sitting in his lab one day, he decided he hadn’t actually used the goal-pad on Mars for so long. I should do it. I owe it to myself.

He grabbed the oxygen supply tank, strapped it over his back, put the mask on his face, stood on the pad and pressed the green button on his remote control – he could afford better equipment now, thanks to the Switch.

A yellow light wrapped around him. Within seconds, he opened his eyes and looked at the scene in front of him. He wasn’t walking anymore, he was floating. He touched the red soil on the ground. It felt flaky. He still couldn’t believe it: He was on Mars! He was where only a… A disturbance. Someone was tampering with his equipment.

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Shri Shashank Avvaru, 3-5-1040/T1, Shishira Avenue, Street no. 5, Narayanguda, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh-500029. India. Ph. No.: 91–8008604568; Email: shashank.avvaru@gmail.com