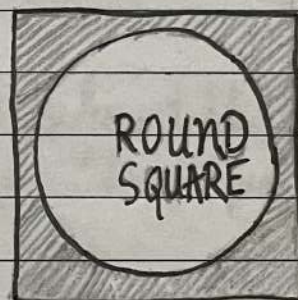


Courageous Collette



"Courage isn't about never being afraid — it's about
facing your fears and doing it anyway.
The only battle you truly need to win is the one against your own doubts."

The Shadow Within

Collette had always been the bravest person in school. She climbed the tallest trees, spoke up when others were silent, and never backed down from a challenge. But there was one thing she feared most — Failure.

The Inter-School Debate Championship was just a few days away, and Collette had been chosen to represent. She should have been thrilled. Instead, her stomach twisted into knots everytime she thought about standing at the podium, facing a crowd.

What if I freeze? What if I forget my arguments? What if I make a fool of myself?

Her sidekick, Echo, a tiny hummingbird with iridescent blue feathers, hovered beside her. "You're overthinking again," he chirped, his voice carrying a hint of amusement.

Collette groaned, flopping onto her bed. "Easy for you to say. You don't have to stand in front of hundreds of people and get destroyed by the opposing team."

Echo landed lightly on her shoulder. "The real battle isn't against them, Collette. It's against the voice in your head telling you that you can't do it."

Before she could respond, a strange force pulled at her. The air

shimmered, and suddenly — everything changed.

The walls of her bedroom melted away, replaced by an eerie darkness stretching infinitely in all directions. A single, massive mirror stood before her. But something was off. Her reflection wasn't mimicking her movements.

Instead, it smirked.

"You're not ready," the reflection said, stepping out of the glass.

"You're going to embarrass yourself," Collette staggered back.

"What is this?"

A debate podium materialized between them. A deep, booming voice echoed through the void:

"Topic: (Collette) Does Collette Have What It Takes?"

The reflection leaned forward, its eyes glinting. "I'll go first."

"Collette acts brave, but the moment something truly challenging comes up, she panics. If she were really fearless, why is she so scared of failing?"

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The voice repeats....

Collette swallowed hard. The words hit deep.

Echo fluttered beside her, nudging her gently. "Your turn, Collette. What do you believe?"

Taking a shaky breath, she stepped forward. "Courage isn't about never being afraid," she said slowly. "It's about acting despite the fear. I've faced challenges before — standing up to a bully, trying out for the volleyball team, speaking up when something was wrong. Everytime, I was scared. But I did it anyway."

The reflection wavered, but its smirk remained.

"Oh really?" it sneered. "Then why are you terrified of this debate? If you're so brave, why do you keep doubting yourself?"

Collette clenched her fists. The truth was, part of her did doubt herself.

But then it hit her — fear wasn't the enemy. Letting fear control her was.

Straightening her shoulders, she met her reflection's gaze. "Because I care. I want to do well. That doesn't make me weak — it makes human. But fear doesn't get to make my choices for me."

The mirror cracked.

Echo let out an excited chirp. "You're winning, Collette. Finish it!"

Collette took a deep breath. "I am courageous Collette, and I won't let fear decide who I am!"

With those words, the reflection let out a final shriek before

shattering into a million tiny pieces. The void dissolved, and in the blink of an eye — Collette was back in her bedroom.

The debate was still days away. But now, she was ready...

Fast forwarded to the Competition Day.

Competition Day: Facing the Real Battle

Collette stood backstage, gripping her speech notes so tightly her knuckles turned white. The murmur of the crowd buzzed in her ears. The moment had come.

Echo fluttered next to her. "It's time."

She stepped onto the stage. The bright light blinded her for a second, and her heart pounded. This was it. The real test.

The moderator's voice boomed: "Topic: Does technology do more harm than good?"

Collette's opponent, a sharp-looking boy from another school, confidently stepped forward and delivered his opening argument. He was good.

What if I mess up? What if—

No!

She caught sight of her reflection in the polished floor. But this time, it didn't smirk. It nodded.

Collette inhaled deeply. Fear was still there, but she wouldn't let it win.

She stepped forward, lifted her chin, and began. "Technology is neither good nor bad. It depends on how we use it..."

As she spoke, her voice grew stronger. Words flowed with confidence. The nervous murmurs in her mind faded.

She saw it in the audience's eyes. They were listening. Really listening.

By the time she finished, the hall erupted into applause.

She had done it. She had won — not just the debate, but against the fear inside her.

Echo chirped happily. "Told you so."

Collette smiled. Fear didn't disappear, but now she knew something important: she was stronger than it.

~ Iwisha Kshetrimayam
(VIII 'R')