

# 2021 *Short Story Contest*





*The Future.  
Starts Now.*

**Produced by Innisfil ideaLAB & Library  
December 2021**

# Seepe Walters

more inside



Seepe Walters was a well-respected and dedicated member of the Innisfil community until her death in 1995.

She was involved in many different facets of Innisfil life: the Historical Society, 4-H, the Women's Institute, her Church, her family and various political arenas.

It was her love of writing and all things literary which led her to journalism at the University of Toronto. She then worked as a freelance correspondent with the *Daily Construction News*, taught English to immigrant children, and worked with the Barrie Literacy Council, before helping to found the Innisfil Friends of the Library.

Seepe Walters' commitment to her community and specifically her legacy to the Library, which is supported by the Friends of the Library, is being remembered through the Seepe Walter's Award.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library would like to congratulate all the students who entered the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest. Since 2002, we have received hundreds of unique stories, celebrated dozens of aspiring local authors, and been overwhelmed by the talent in our community. On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this contest, we celebrate the power of writing and the value of these young voices.

The contributions of many have made this contest and this publication a reality. The Innisfil ideaLAB & Library would like to thank the Friends of the Library for their ongoing sponsorship; the Ferraro family for their years of involvement; Judge and Canadian children's author Nadia L. Hohn for her time and thoughtfulness in reading the entries; and finally, the efforts of all the wonderful young writers. Although there is only one name on the Seepe Walters Award, you are all winners for having the courage to pursue your writing dreams.

Many thanks to all those involved. And to everyone else, we hope you enjoy the stories submitted to the 2021 edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

Amy Eastwood  
Children's Librarian  
Innisfil ideaLAB & Library

### DISCLAIMER

The viewpoints and opinions expressed in these stories are those of the individuals themselves and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and opinions of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library or its staff. Some content may not be appropriate for all audiences. Parental discretion is advised.

# Table of Contents

*more* inside

## **2021 Seepe Walters Award Winner**

The Swedish Grandmothers Secret Baking Society by Emily James (Gr. 6)	
.....	7

## **Junior Division Winners Grades 3-6**

Mr. Derm's Big Idea by Gabriel Fowler (Gr. 5)	11
Maniac Mushrooms by Jayme Galardo (Gr. 6)	14
The Horrifying Haunted House by Catherine Yuen (Gr. 5)	19
The First Time an Owl said 'WHOO' by Rebecca Jeffery (Gr. 6)	23

## **Intermediate Division Winners Grades 7-8**

Look Out the Window by Sanoja Srikanthan (Gr. 8)	26
The Llandovery Castle by Alina Kotchetkov (Gr. 8)	34
Beat The Bomb by Gabriella Szypula (Gr. 7)	40
A Bunny's Journey by Gregory Yuen (Gr. 7)	48
What Lies Beneath by Megan Le Sueur (Gr. 7)	56
The Master of Death by Emily Jaenicke (Gr. 7)	64
Escape by Hanna Wang (Gr. 8)	77

## **Senior Division Winners Grades 9-12**

At The Bottom of the Ocean by Camden Cryderman (Gr. 9)	86
--	----

Of Whom Came the Cherry Blossoms? by William Wang (Gr 11).....	90
Blue Magic by Laura Forgrave (Gr. 8) .....	99
The Great Squirrel War by Daniel James (Gr. 9).....	110
Words of a Stranger by Riley Ma (Gr. 10) .....	117

# 2021 Seepe Walters Short Story Winner

The Swedish Grandmothers Secret Baking Society  
By: Emily James (Gr. 6)

*more* inside

Arnfridh sat furiously typing at her rickety typewriter. Her chubby fingers moved at lightning speed as she put the finishing touches on the *äppelkaka* recipe she and the ladies had perfected. Helja whirled into the room with flour in her silver hair and batter on her apron. Her face was twisted with frustration but softened into a blank stare.

“Can I help you?” Arnfridh blurted.

“I... came to get... I forget!” Helja delicately sat on the floral couch and stared out the window trying to remember what she needed.

“Helja! You left the element on! Your *vaniljsås* is burning!” Soffi tapped her fuzzy slipper on the hardwood. “We can’t afford more mistakes,” she mumbled, fiddling with a film canister. Through the door Gilla yelled,

“This is the worst thing I have ever tasted!” She shuffled, hunched, into the room wagging a spoon, splashing custard everywhere, and locked eyes on Helja. “What did you forget now?”

Helja perked up, “Eggs!”

“Legs?” strained Gilla.

Soffi sighed and crumpled onto the couch beside Helja. “It’s happened. We’re old.”

“I can’t hear you over there!” Gilla croaked, still holding the dripping spoon.

“We need help,” Helja said quietly.

The grandmothers drooped around the room.

The front door shut and Bo's long black hair swung around the corner. "How are you ladies doing?" she asked, dropping her school bag on the floor. Arnfridh's eyes met Soffi's. A smile broke on Helja's face. Gilla nodded approvingly.

"Bo," Arnfridh started, "do you have baking experience?"

Bo lit up and her pretty curved eyes sparkled. "When we lived in Huaxiang my mother and I baked often. Bo showed them some special dishes on her phone.

"Can you keep a secret?" Soffi asked, her eyes magnified through thick glasses. Bo leaned closer.

"Have you heard of Viktor Persson?" Arnfridh asked.

"We watch him on TV all the time! My mom has his limited edition apron," Bo replied. Gilla rolled her eyes.

"Well, Viktor Persson isn't all he appears to be. Years ago, we had made quite a name for ourselves. Our pastries were famous and won competition after competition. One day we auditioned for a cooking show. The producers loved our recipes, but we didn't get the job. Instead, they went with Viktor - a sneaky sweet-talker who could sell just about anything to anyone. The producers thought the audience wouldn't want a bunch of wrinkly ladies. Later we got a call asking if we would create the recipes for Viktor to use on the show, and at the end of the series there would be a cookbook. They were offering more money than we had ever seen, and we accepted."

"But that's not fair!" cried Bo.

Helja said hopefully, "The book's almost finished, and we'll finally get some credit, but we can't do it on our own." They looked expectantly at Bo.



Bo's face was scrunched as she thought. She didn't like the way her friends were treated, but their optimism encouraged her. "Will this still count as volunteer hours?" she joked.

"These are our treasured recipes." Arnfridh handed a tattered box to Bo. "Let's head to the kitchen."

Bo observed the museum in front of her. There were scraps of handwritten recipes taped all over the cupboards and a chunky plastic camera on the counter.

"First things first. We need to deal with these!" Bo gestured to the paper covering the drawers like scales. She reached into her backpack for her tablet and handed it to Arnfridh. "There's an app that can organize all these recipes in one place."

Arnfridh held the tablet like it might explode. She pushed a button and gasped. "Where are the letters?"

Bo gave her phone to Soffi. "Your desserts will look better with this camera." Soffi moved the phone around the room. "Where's this pink worm coming from?"

Bo plucked a recipe out of the box. "Let's start with this one." The *hetvägg* was a fluffy bun stuffed with swirls of almond cream, but Bo's mind overflowed with spiralling spices and tastes from China. She reached for candied ginger. She folded the golden flakes into the smooth filling and piped it into the pastry. Bo pulled out the recipe for *kanelbullar* - cinnamon roll - and knew just what to add. After kneading the dough, she sprinkled on five spice and popped it in the oven. Scrumptious smells filled the kitchen.

Helja selected a bun. "This is delightful," she said with a cream moustache. "It tastes different from mine. It must be because I always forget things." Helja teared up.

"Don't be dramatic, Helja!" Gilla hobbled over.

"It tastes different because I added something new."

"You better not have," honked Gilla as she took a bite of *kanelbullar*.

"What's in here?" she asked, enjoying her mouthful.

"Five spice," answered Bo.

"Live mice!" Gilla cried and spat onto the floor.

Two weeks later, everyone crowded onto the couch for Viktor's cooking show.

"Welcome back my pretties. It's time for the reveal of my masterpiece." Viktor pulled the curtain and revealed his cookbook as he said, "I've worked tirelessly perfecting these recipes, and have infused them with unexpected Asian flare."

Gilla threw Soffi's slipper at the television. Soffi threw the other one.

Arnfridh froze, staring at the television, as Viktor described his new cookie in extreme detail - the one she invented. "I can't believe it," she whispered.

Bo paced, steaming, then grabbed her phone. "This has gone too far." She opened the camera.

"It's time for the truth."

...

Arnfridh sat skillfully updating the blog with their latest creations on Bo's laptop. Helja twirled into the room to share a taste of her revised *vaniljsås* recipe. "Everything's in there this time!" Soffi carefully set up the tripod, getting everything ready for their next livestream. Gilla stood proudly organizing her own limited edition set of kitchen utensils. "Take that Viktor," she hummed. Bo ran around the corner and squealed, "The Swedish Grandmothers Baking Society just hit 100,000 subscribers!"

"Not so secret anymore," winked Helja.

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### Mr. Derm's Big Idea By: Gabriel Fowler (Gr. 5)

*more* inside

The elephant flapped his ears indignantly. He had arrived a half hour early for the meeting, only to be seated in the waiting room outside.

That was an hour ago.

He was smoothing out his powder blue shirt and yellow striped tie for the sixth or seventh time when the secretary stuck her head through the doorway.

"Mr. Derm? They are ready to see you now."

He stood to his full height, took a deep breath, and checked his shirt one last time before he grabbed his briefcase.

Entering the conference room, he was met by five sets of beady eyes. All belonging to squirrels who were seated at the table.

The one with the streak of white through his tail made a gesture for him to sit down.

He pulled the papers off the desk and squinted at them through the spectacles that rested on his nose. "Mr. Pack. A. Derm, Is it?"

"Yes sir."

"It says here you have worked for us for six years now, rising quickly through the ranks of our sales department. You are currently heading our multinational legume division."

Another nod, "Yes sir."

He squinted once more at the papers before him and laid them on the table. "So, what can we do for you today Mr. Derm?"

Pack unfolded his hands and pulled out some papers from his briefcase, "So far your company's business has relied on grocery stores for most of its profits, with the remaining percentage coming from stadium sales and other sporting events.

"I have a new idea. We take the product directly to the people. No more lining shelves with canned goods, we open stores in downtown locations. Deal directly with the public.

"You want peanuts? Aisle four. Cashews? Aisle six. Macadamia nuts? We have them in the back, sir, fresh this morning from Hawaii."

The squirrel at the head of the table looked at Pack, "What would you name such a store?"

The fact that he had asked excited him to no end. "That is the best part! We give it an original name, The Nuthouse! And the slogan, 'We guarantee you'll find nuttin' better.'"

The old squirrel never blinked.

"We have survived so long, Mr. Derm by not putting all of our expectations into one aspect of our business. Could you imagine what would happen if we left all of our nuts in one tree? What you bring to the table is interesting but would take too much of our stock to attempt on a grand scale."

Pack anticipated that answer and had prepared his response last night, "I have checked out the cost of opening three Nuthouses in major cities, sir. If we take half of what we make in one month from sporting events, we could run the stores for six months." He pulled a chart from his briefcase and handed it over for the others to inspect.

As the paper was passed around a few small eyebrows stood up when they saw how cheaply it could be done.

One of the other squirrels faced Pack, "And you think this could work?"

“No sir, I know it will work. All I ask is a little faith my Nuthouse. If it doesn't work, we lose very little, but if it makes a profit...” he left the words hanging.

He could tell they were intrigued by the way they inspected the papers he had brought them. He knew it could go either way now.

After a long silence and a great amount of looks to the head squirrel, they all spoke in their own tongue. Pack didn't have a clue what they were saying, he never learned to speak squirrel.

Finally, they nodded in agreement and all turned to face him. The oldest squirrel cleared his throat and spoke, “Your idea is sound, Mr. Derm. But we will not have you open three stores for us.”

Pack hung his head low, disappointed. “Oh.”

The squirrel smiled slyly, “You misunderstand, Mr. Derm. We want you to open ten stores for us. You will prepare a plan of action and give us a full presentation in three weeks' time. As of this point you are in charge of the operation.”

Pack was stunned. “Yes sir. I do not wish to be rude sir, but what sold you on the idea?”

He smiled. “Your numbers make sense to us. We have built this company from the roots up Mr. Derm. We know a good idea when we see one. Now go and make us some profit.”

Pack was almost to the door when his thoughts were interrupted.

“One last thing Mr. Derm?”

Pack looked back to the conference table.

The old squirrel took off his spectacles and smiled, “Remember to make it in business you do not have to be crazy, but it helps if you are nuts.”

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### Maniac Mushrooms By: Jayme Galardo (Gr. 6)

*more* inside

On a cold, frosty afternoon, Gray was impatiently waiting for nighttime. It was the afternoon of Halloween, and Gray could not wait. This was the first year their mom was letting them go trick-or-treating by themselves.

They had the perfect costume planned out. They were going to be a toadstool. Gray loved all things fantasy. They had made a mushroom hat out of coloured cloth and lace. For the outfit, they had put together a white off the shoulder, long sleeved cropped shirt, and red tights.

Gray had their route all planned out for the night. It was almost seven o'clock, and Gray was practically jumping out of their tights. They had their costume on, and their pillowcase ready to be filled with candy!

"Alright honey! It's seven o'clock!" Gray's mother rolled herself out of the door in her wheelchair. "Make sure to be safe and stay on the route."

"Yes, I know, Mom. I'll be back by nine! Love you, Mom!"

"Love you, too, sweetheart!"

Gray started to walk down the road to go to the first house. Gray started walking up the porch stairs of the house. It was not decorated, but they still decided to go knock on the door.

Gray knocked on the door, "Trick-or-Treat!" they yelled. The door opened slowly. A hand gripped the side of the door. The door flung open, and Gray jumped back, but no one was there.

"Hello?!" Gray muttered anxiously. "Is anyone there?"

Out of nowhere, someone jumped out at them and put their hand over Gray's mouth.

"Sh! You can't let them hear you!" the person whispered.

The person rushed Gray inside and locked the door.

"Okay, we're safe now," the person sighed.

"What do you mean?! Safe from what?!" Gray was yelling in terror and confusion.

"You don't know what comes out on Halloween night?" the person questioned Gray.

"No! What comes out on Halloween?!"

"Well, it sounds kind of crazy, but you have to believe me!" the person cried.

"I'll believe you, but first you need to tell me your name."

"My name is Nex and I'm 14 years old." He was just two years older than Gray. "But beside the point, the monsters." Nex took a deep breath. "They are these mushrooms that walk around with their tiny legs. They can't see, but they have an incredible sense of smell and hearing. They remember all of their victims."

"That's crazy..." Gray said in disbelief.

After a few minutes of talking, they heard a bang on the door.

"What was that?" Gray asked.

"I don't know!" Nex was incredibly scared.

More banging was heard. The banging was coming from everywhere, the window, the walls, the floor, and the cabinets!

"What's in here?" Gray shrieked.

"Oh no..." Nex knew what was happening. "THEY ARE HERE!"

Gray knew exactly what was happening.

“Follow me. There’s a secret exit in the basement.”

Gray followed Nex into the basement. Gray helped lift the boards covering the exit.

When it opened, they both flung back. The mushrooms were waiting!

“RUN!” Nex screamed.

They both ran upstairs to the front door. The mushrooms were chasing them all the way upstairs. They got to the door, and Nex yanked it open. There was another swarm of mushrooms! Nex and Gray got cornered in the living room. There had to be at least fifty of them! Gray looked beside him and saw a window. There were no mushrooms outside! Gray looked at Nex, and it looked like he had the same idea. Gray turned around, opened the window, and jumped out. Nex followed behind. They both ran into the woods.

“We made it out!” Gray cried.

“Yeah, we did!” Nex cheered.

A short while later, they heard a tree branch break.

“Oh no, they’re back!” Gray panicked.

Nex grabbed Gray’s hand and they ran as fast as they could. The mushrooms were right behind them. The mushrooms were surprisingly fast!

Nex and Gray started to get tired, but the mushrooms seemed to get faster!

“I don’t think we’re going to make it!” Gray said, exhausted.

“We’ll make it, just go as fast as you can!”

Gray could start to feel the adrenaline rushing through their body. Gray sped up and Nex followed closely behind.

“Gray! Wait up, I’m too tired!” Nex screamed.



Gray turned around and saw the mushrooms right behind him! Gray ran right at Nex and the mushrooms. The mushrooms tried to bite Nex!

“AH! HELP ME!” Nex yelled.

Gray was so close to Nex. Gray got there and pushed Nex out of the way with full force.

“GRAY!” Nex yelled.

Gray blacked out.

Gray woke up yawning.

“Where am I?” Gray thought to himself.

Their vision finally focused. Gray saw a very fancy bedroom. They were in a king-sized bed!

“Hello? Where am I?!”

They looked down and they were still in their Halloween costume.

“Our leader had awakened!” a high-pitched cheery voice yelled.

Gray saw three little mushrooms walk in.

“Why are they calling me leader?” Gray whispered.

“Leader! We need to get you ready,” the mushroom from before said with a smile.

“Huh? Ready for wha-!” in the middle of their sentence, they got pulled out of bed and onto a platform.

The mushrooms got knee high, black boots, and the mushrooms buckled them up with their mouths. Gray was just watching the mushrooms get things and come back to dress them. The mushrooms came back inside with a very long, red velvet cape. The mushrooms put the cape on Gray. The cape trailed at least a meter behind them. Gray turned around to look at themselves in the mirror. Gray gasped. They looked wonderful!

They went out with the mushrooms and saw Nex in a mushroom costume as well. He smiled at Gray. The mushrooms brought Gray to the golden throne. Gray sat down on the throne. Nex came up and stood next to Gray. Gray looked up and smiled.

“Guess this Halloween wasn’t so bad after all!”

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### The Horrifying Haunted House By: Catherine Yuen (Gr. 5)

*more* inside

It was Halloween. My best friend, Ella, my little sister, Stella, and I were enjoying the night trick-or-treating. We arrived in front of a majestic yet menacing looking mansion, with a cemetery beside it.

"Well, let's ring the doorbell!" Stella jumped around excitedly, like we were going to an amusement park "Do you think they will give us candies?" Ella murmured.

"I hope they will, I guess," I answered as I rang the doorbell.

"SCREEEEEEEEEECH!" The doorbell croaked like a dying crow! Shivers shot down my spine. The door slightly opened.

"Hellooooo," a mysterious voice cackled. Little did I know what was coming up. We looked to see who was inside. There was what looked like an elderly couple.

"Welcome! I am Mrs. Grumplepuff, and this is my husband," the elderly woman wheezed.

They both offered for us to go in, but I, of course, rejected the invite. My sister, on the other hand, had very different ideas. She stubbornly pulled me and my friend inside, who was too shocked to resist.

"Look around," Mr. Grumplepuff bellowed creepily. I knew this was not going well.

"I think we should just go home," I sighed. "This isn't a good idea."

"Yeah!" Ella agreed.

"I'll stay," my sister blurted out as she danced around.

I tried to open the front door to leave, but it would not budge. It was locked! I tried again, but suddenly, a hand grabbed me and I fell to the floor. I looked up, but no one was there! I gasped in horror, thinking it was a ghost. I decided to pretend it didn't happen. I guessed it was just my imagination.

“Hey sis!” Stella yelled. She went up the stairs.

“What now?” I thought, unwilling to follow.

As I approached her, I saw her standing in front of a mysterious, broken door next to the stairs of the house. Ella darted over too, curious to see what it was.

“I found a door!” Stella exclaimed.

“Don’t you think it is strange that we are investigating some strangers’ creepy house?” Ella shivered.

I nodded in agreement.

“Nope! We were invited!” Stella giggled, and with that, she opened the door, and bolted into the darkness.

We had to follow her. We didn’t have a choice. As we entered, the first thing I saw was a black cat jumping out from the darkness. It hit my face and I was extremely surprised. With that I accidentally fell backwards, and tumbled down a few steps of the stairs. Suddenly, everything went black.

When I came to, I looked up and found that we were all inside the room with the broken door.

Mr. and Mrs. Grumplepuff cackled, “Have fun! Hehehehe!” They slammed the door and I couldn’t see anything. Three pairs of red eyes shot out at me.

“Stella? Ella?!” I cried.

“We’re here,” two shaky voices chorused, coming from my left.

I could feel them coming closer. We hugged each other tightly. To my surprise, a large bumpy hand grabbed onto my shoulder. A pair of glowing eyes were staring right at me! I suddenly saw the shape of a zombie. The other two pairs were from a gigantic ogre and a dusty skeleton. I tried to scream, but no sound came out. I heard a series of laughter, feeling absolutely terrified.

“Wh-What’s happening?” Stella peeped.

No one answered. Ella grabbed onto us tightly. I did not let go of the two, and I tried to shake the zombie’s hand off, but it would not budge. I grabbed onto it very tightly, and yanked it towards the ground. I was glad that I was able to take its hand off of me. I shut my eyes tightly and hugged my sister and Ella as hard as I could, like the world might end. As I heard more laughter, I decided to get up and try to escape. As I fumbled around, I felt a window blind touching my back, which was a perfect way to get out. I pulled at the window, but it was firmly shut! Ella and Stella joined me, pulling with all their might and I heard a squeak. The more we pulled, the more the window squeaked. It finally opened! A cold, chilling breeze went through my whole body! But by then, I saw that there were many uglier creatures that were surrounding us! A familiar voice called,

“Get them!!” It was Mr. Grumplepuff! I screamed, instructing my sister to escape. Suddenly, I saw in horror as one of the ogres picked up Ella and squeezed her!

“Run...,” she sighed, weakly. Would I lose her and run? I ran up to the ogre, which was the size of four of me, and kicked it hard in the shin with all my might. It let go of my friend and we scrambled hurriedly out the window. I ran and ran, and finally collapsed on the grass, breathing heavily.

“Lily! Lily!” I heard a voice calling my name. I slowly opened my eyes. I was in my room!

“W-What happened?” I stammered. I quickly sat up, looked around, and saw my sister staring at me. “Oh my gosh!” I gasped. “Stella, are you okay?” I was worried about whether she escaped the haunted mansion.

“As fine as can be!” she danced around. “Did you have another nightmare?”

“I suppose!” I muttered, feeling stunned and annoyed that I had been having so many nightmares lately.

“Well, wake up! It’s Halloween! We have to decorate!” she squealed excitedly. She skipped out of the room in great spirit. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was just a nightmare after all. I thought I had better help with decorating to unwind from this scary nightmare.

Just as we got busy downstairs with the decorations, I noticed in the box of Halloween supplies there was a hand that looked oddly familiar...

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### The First Time an Owl said “WHOO” By: Rebecca Jeffery (Gr. 6)

*more* inside

Once upon a time there was a lion, his name was Leo. He lived in a village on the edge of the jungle and he was very friendly. He loved to greet the villagers, but they always got scared. This is the reason why Leo did NOT like being a lion. This is where our story starts.

Leo wanted to find a way to be able to communicate to the villagers and not scare them, but he did not know how. Little did he know that on the other side of the jungle, there lived an woman, who was believed to have magical powers. The people called this woman, The Witch of the West.

Leo's friends, Don and Milly knew about the witch, so they told Leo about her. 'Go to the other end of the jungle, you'll find a witch who may be able to help you. It may not work though; she might not even exist!' Leo decided to try and find out if the witch was real, so he packed some dried meat (his favourite).

He knew it was going to be a 2-day walk to the other end of the jungle, so Leo headed off immediately. He did not know exactly where the witch lived but he imagined it in his head, a little hut on the edge of the jungle. The witch has a wart on her nose and has a raspy voice. They would have a cauldron in the middle of the hut, they would have a wall with stuffed animal heads and voodoo dolls.



At nightfall Leo decided to go to sleep, he curled up, found a comfortable position and went to sleep. Meanwhile, the Witch knew he was coming and plotted on how to deal with him. They decided to visit Leo in his dreams.

'Leo, Leo, LEO' Leo heard a voice and did not know what to do except answer.

'Yes... w-where are you, who-who are you?'

'Leoooo, the witchhhh. You seem to be walking a long distance, what would you like me to do, send you back or send you here.'

'Ummmm, HERE'

'Ok, just remember, you can only come once!'

Leo woke up to cackling, he looked around and saw a hut exactly like the one he imagined. He walked into the hut scared and alone, he had 'met' the witch in his dreams but he still did not know the witch.

He walked in slowly and said, 'Hello? Hello?' Nobody was there so he walked out of the hut.

Then, he heard a voice, 'Come in, COME IN!!!' He listened, but he was scared, he walked into the hut and the witch was in there, she started talking immediately. She was not ugly, she looked about 25 and had beautiful long black hair.

'Hi, sorry my door was locked,' she looked at me and continued, 'An owl would work, a human would work... no.'

Leo did not know what to say so he said 'Ummmm, wait what!?'

'You want to change your animal right?'

'Ummm, sure.'

'Ok, say these words, Ogga, Booga, ladiadida, YA.'

'Umm, Ogga, Booga, ladiadida, YA.'

'Oh, no, it did not work, BYE!' Then there was a gust of wind and then everything went black.





Leo woke up in the same place he first dreamt of the witch. He thought that it actually happened so he walked home. He stopped half way though, to go to sleep. He had not transformed yet, so he thought the spell was fake, but he did not care; he was too tired.

He had another dream that night. He dreamt of flying, he looked around, but when he did he looked around and he saw all 360 degrees. He rotated his head all around, then Leo woke up. He woke up in a tree at night. It was weird, normally he could not fit in a tree. He jumped down just before he realized he was at least 20 feet in the air. He closed his eyes and prepared to hit the ground, instead he started to fly.

Then he remembered what the witch had said 'Would an owl do?' HE WAS AN OWL!!!!!!  
'Now, the humans won't be scared of me anymore,' he thought!

He flew to the village and was excited to see and talk to the humans. He was almost there and he was SO excited! He got to the village and waited for the people to come out of their huts. They never came out though, Leo waited there for hours and eventually fell asleep. When he woke up the people were still gone, and it was dark. He thought about going to the witch's hut again but then he remembered another thing the witch said 'You can only come once.'

So, Leo flew away and eventually forgot who everyone was. Occasionally he would see a human when they went hunting at night. When that happened, Leo recognized the humans but did not know who they were, so all he said was,

"Whoooooooo???"

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### Look Out The Window By: Sanoja Srikanthan (Gr. 8)

*more* inside

#### Part One: The End

OLIVER

Here I sat, underneath a dark, cloudless night sky, on a cold, wet road, in front of the lovely estate in which I had lived. However, what was in front of me now could no longer be called so. What was in front of me now was the burnt up remains of the place I once called home.

Here I cried, freezing, frustrated, and frightened. In her lap, my wife, Catherine, cradled our ten-year old daughter. Margot's tears were now frozen from when they'd gradually cascaded down her rosy face, also touched by the frigid winter air. The surrounding snow attempted to encase us in its frosty pursuit for our warmth.

Here I watched as less than a dozen firefighters entered the debris, in an effort to rescue the one not here with us. My son.

The night sky insulted us with its starry beauty. I would've smiled, marveled by its magnificence, but all I could do now was blankly stare. We stopped physically grieving for the despair that had come over us tonight, silently waiting hopeless and helpless for the dawn.

Minutes passed as hours as we silently bore here until the firefighters who had entered began to leave our ruined estate, heading towards us. The one at the front of the group appeared to be carrying a small object. But as their figures grew clearer, we realized that it wasn't an object, but a child. Our son.

We ran through a wave of people: police officers, paramedics, and more firefighters alike. Some close neighbors had also arrived to comfort us, and I assumed one of them was who'd contacted first responders, even as their homes wouldn't be affected by the dreadful flame. We immediately crowded around the woman who'd saved Levi, desperately hoping he'd survived. But the toddler was unconscious. And he wouldn't wake up.

\* \* \*

Here I was, along with my family, my whole family, in this compact ambulance. I couldn't listen to Catherine's silence—her soundless screams—any longer. I needed to stay strong, the thought that kept me going. For them. I stared at this blanket I was wrapped in. A deep blue, like the sky now. *The sky*. I looked out the window, taking in the beauty of the world. Or, I tried too. But I couldn't, watching as we left the place I once called home.

### CATHERINE

I woke up with a jolt. I was feeling. . . hot, an unusual sensation for a winter night. I took a look at the alarm clock. 5:21 am. It was the third that Friday.

Thirsty, I got up out of bed to grab some water from the kitchen. The warmth began to swell, its heat beginning to feel like fire. It was then I realized that it wasn't my body that was hot. So my pace quickened, and in no time I was right outside the kitchen. Waiting on the island was a fresh, fabulous bottle of water that seemed to have been *just* waiting for me to take a drink from it. Afterwards, I would check the temperature. But before I could even take a step, I finally discovered the source of the heat.

I froze for a moment, watching as the flames engulfed my kitchen.

But then, I was jolted back into sense, and I immediately started running upstairs to save my family. As I made my way briskly up the steps I caught a glimpse of the water bottle, resting there divine and unaware. If only I could grab it, but my parched throat would have to wait. My heart pounded as I went as fast as I could to my room, where my husband, Oliver, lay asleep. He was sprawled across the bed so oddly I would've laughed, but my mind was focused elsewhere.

Orange and yellow lights danced along the floor, the stunning spectacle illuminating the room in a way I never would've imagined. I paused and marveled at its beauty. It was then I noticed it was coming from the window. I noticed that it wasn't just some forgotten set of Christmas lights. I noticed that half the manor was aflame.

I stood here—again, frozen in shock—as I watched my home burn amongst the flames. But I couldn't move for another reason. My son, my baby, my lovely little boy: he was in there.

I woke up Oliver. I ran to Margot, my eldest. I can't—I don't want to—remember the events that occurred as we escaped our burning home, through thick smoke, fire, and debris. Clawing at us. Wanting us. To take our breath, our bodies, our lives. Just the three of us, though. Firefighters and the other first responders prohibited us from going back in. But we wanted to search for Levi, too. We weren't going to be waiting around doing nothing. But, as they wouldn't let us, instead we sat on the wet, snow ridden pavement, far from the fire, embracing one another exhaustedly, waiting for hope.

I never got that water.

*MARGOT*

Breakfast was dull again. A breakfast of eggs and bacon with a cup of English Breakfast Tea from a box picked up on sale at the local NoFrills. Aunt Ellis tried as best as she could to shop for what we're used to. Her sons, Lucas and Nathan, attempted to catch glimpses of us—meaning Ma, Pa, and me—as we ate the meal; it was starting to get pretty annoying. Insulting, even. Pa was trying to start a conversation up, which he wasn't doing so well with. I knew why though. I knew why everyone was being so quiet. I knew that they were afraid to talk to us. I knew it was because of the fire. They thought we were fragile. Unstable. That we would melt like snow hitting pavement if they mentioned that night. Or Levi.

But we weren't like that. We weren't weak. We were going to survive. All of us. I would prove to everyone that we were strong. That we weren't what they thought we were. I could do that. I was not a baby. I was not the clueless, weak child they believed I was.

We'd been staying at my aunt's—Pa's oldest sister's—house for the weekend. The last two days had been excruciating for me; no less for Ma and Pa. Among other things, Lucas and Nathan were constantly near me. Watching. Listening. Staring. But I wouldn't tell them anything. They didn't deserve it. They could stay ignorant. Plus, I liked to forget those events. But today happened to be Monday.

Yippee! Hooray! Woo-hoo!

School. People. Questions. Lots of questions.

It's not that I didn't like school, in fact I loved it, but at the moment, I wasn't in the mood for being around people. Look at how intrusive the twins were being! I did *not* want to deal with people like that today. I just wanted some peace and quiet.

Instead of taking the bus to school, like I used to, I walked. After all, Aunt Ellis lived in the suburbs by my school. I gave myself a pep-talk, trying to boost my confidence.

As I walked through the school hallways, I kept my head down, despite the urge to look up. I could feel the stares. They were piercing, but silent. The distinct thought that followed them carried through every single look: *That's the girl whose house burned down*. Anger boiled from within. I tried so hard to compose myself as I made my way to class. I wanted to stare right back at their faces. I repeated the same words in my head. *Remember. We are strong. We will show them. Remember. We are strong. We will show them. For Ma. For Pa. For Levi. . .*

Images flashed through my mind in an emotional frenzy. Heat. Ma. Cold, falling snow. The ambulance. The hospital. Tall yellow and orange corridors, attempting to boost morale. A look through the window of the patient's room. Levi. *Lack of Oxygen. Coma*, they said.

*Lack of oxygen.*

*Coma.*

And suddenly I gave up on my goal and fell to the floor, tumbling into a void of darkness and night.

## Part Two: The Beginning

The dreams—or rather flashbacks—were so painful that when I wake up in Ma's lap I'm relieved. I lie there for a while, thinking about how I got here, back at Aunt Ellis' in her tiny guest room. And then my mind goes to the last image that popped into my head. *Oh*. I assess myself. I'm feeling a jumble of emotions. Sadness. Hopelessness. Embarrassment. Anger. *Anger?* I disappoint myself with my frailness. I allowed my emotions to get the best of me. I could've done something, but stupid me wasted precious time. Looking out the window, it's evening. Ma was supposed to have been at the hospital with Dad.

I look up at her face. Immediate guilt washes over me. She's crying. But those aren't the upset tears of worry. They're tears of *remorse*.

*Excuse me?* Did Ma seriously think that I had fainted because of her? Because of what had happened last Friday? Because of the fire? I could read her thoughts as if they were printed in bold italic across her face. She thinks that I was scarred? *Who is she to think I'm weak?* Fury like hot fire engulfs me and I begin to think things I know I shouldn't. It wasn't my fault I was weak. It was *theirs*. Their cowardice had reached me. I had wanted to do so much for them. For us. And they had ruined it.

"IT'S YOUR FAULT!" I shriek at the top of my lungs before realizing that I said that out loud. I scramble out of Ma's arms and stare at her, in a mix of my lingering bitterness and a new shock, as well as shame. Ma's tears have stopped. I can see only alarm in her wide-eyed expression. But I do not want to apologize. I am going to knock some sense into her, and let her know what I think. Taking a deep breath and cautious step back-

"It's your fault," I repeat, but my voice is but a whisper. I stand up on the hardwood floor. Ma continues in her silent manner, so I continue. I pour out my thoughts, feelings, everything now. I tell her how we should be strong. Not how they think. That we need to get back up and show them that we can do this. My anger rises to counter misery, and tears begin to spill out. I start yelling. I start telling her how she's a coward. How Pa's a coward. Each thing I tell her stings, but I continue. I tell her it's her fault. I tell her why. I tell her what they think and I tell her what she thinks but can't say. By this point I'm on the hardwood floor, sobbing so hard, barely able to grasp a breath, words thick. Ma just sits there on the bed. I see a small, glistening tear stream down the cheek of her now-pale face.

Silence. The house phone rings downstairs. We continue to hold our teary gazes at each other. I hear the front door open with a creak. I recognize the sound of Aunt Ellis' boots as she enters the house. I hear the silence of her pause as she takes in the sound of the ringing phone. She sighs. She picks up the phone. I can almost hear the change in her breathing.

"Catherine?" She calls, her voice shaky.

"It's. . . It's Levi. He's awake."

A second tear glazes Ma's cheek. We smile as one.

### CATHERINE

Joy is all that can be felt as we drive. We're relieved. Levi sits in his car seat, which I am so glad to see no longer empty, in absolute confusion. I smile at his obliviousness. It's better that way. When we get back to Ellis', I ignore everyone and everything and carry my son to the living room and sit there, on the sofa, cradling him in my arms. His round face, framed with his shiny black hair, nestles against my chest as he drifts into sleep. *No, wait. I just got you back. Don't go.* Memories of his previous slumber flood into my head as tears overwhelm my senses.

Soft yet cold tears drift down my face as I try to shake the idea of losing my son again. More tears. Heavy. Their frigid touch reminds me of that Friday morning. Constant tears leave my eyes as I begin to gasp for air. My grasp on the sleeping child becomes tighter. I would never let such a terrible thing happen to him ever again. My children have gone through too much. They were too young already. Levi even more so than Margot-

*Margot. . .*



She wasn't in the room. I looked out the window into the backyard from where I sat and met her gaze as she stood staring at me, fingers clenched in a confused fist, with an unfathomable expression.

It was then I realized what I had to do.

## *OLIVER*

Here we sit, on a warm rug before a fireplace in the living room of the place we now call home. It has been a year of struggle, but we are okay.

Here we laugh, as we sing on the night of the second of February for our daughter on her birthday. Her grand smile shines and makes us forget all of our worries.

Together we celebrate, as she blows out the candles of her cake. She opens her present excitedly. Her joy envelops the room.

We are all content here.

Midnight. As we send the kids off to bed, Catherine leaves as well, tired. She grabs a water bottle and brings it with her as she heads off, leaving me alone here. I sit on the couch and reflect. No, this isn't a mansion. It isn't luxurious. But it is ours, and ours alone.

I look out the window and to a new day.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### The Llandoverly Castle By: Alina Kotchetkov (Gr. 8)

*more* inside

A wooden rowboat slowly drifts along the rippling ocean waters, occasionally, bumping into a piece of driftwood or a pale, misty-eyed corpse. A little mouse lies down in the small wooden boat, and the humans who share this small vessel are all exhausted, and some of them are shivering. They all remained in this condition for about thirty-six hours, slowly gliding through the wreckage of the once magnificent hospital ship, the Llandoverly Castle. As the wooden rowboat sails aimlessly along the turquoise waters, a large black figure slowly emerges from the ocean mist.

The twenty-five survivors all stare in amazement at the large vessel slowly gliding towards them. Their spirits lifted. They were saved! Everything else went by in a blur. Climbing up the rope ladder, taken into the ship for food and warmth, and reciting the events of the massacre that ended up killing 234 recovering soldiers and medical personnel. The little mouse is the only one who is not busy drinking warm coffee or wrapping himself in a fuzzy blanket. He goes off to explore his rescuers' warship. As he wanders through the endless hallways, he spots another small, grey rodent scampering across the floor towards a narrow crevice in the wooden wall. The mouse follows and finds himself inside a hollowed-out chunk of wood in which several small young mice are tackling and playing with each other. Several of them turn to face the newcomer, quite curious about his wet, matted fur and the traumatized expression in his eyes. After settling him down with a small patch of fabric torn from the old clothes of a ship worker for warmth, and a small portion of green grapes, the mouse begins to tell his tale of the outrageous destruction of the Llandoverly Castle.

*Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 26, 1918*

Everything started when I spotted something large in the corner of my eye. I stared at an enormous metal boat that was coloured red and white, and there were many circular holes that had tall people looking out of them. The vessel had two red crosses at the beginning and the end of the boat, and a colossal black tube with large puffs of smoke billowing out the top. This was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen in my whole life. I wanted to go look at it from the inside, so I followed a person who was carrying a helmet and wearing a camo-coloured suit as he walked up a large ramp leading to the boat entrance. As I walked inside, I noticed other people who were wearing similar outfits, and some ladies who were dressed in white gowns, bearing a red cross symbol on their backs.

I decided to explore a little bit more. I walked into a few rooms before I saw some people in the same camouflaged suits lying motionless in beds. Two of the ladies in white gowns were standing next to them, talking to each other about “wonderful recoveries,” “medicine,” and “the terrible war.” I waited under a bedside cabinet for the ladies to leave. I wondered,

“Why are there so many people just lying there?” I climbed up the handles to look at a man who was still on his bed. He looked terrifying - his entire right arm was charred, and he had a large pink coloured wound along his cheek.

I realized that this must have been a ship that was used to carry wounded people who got hurt while fighting in this “war” everyone was talking about. Oh NO! It wasn't a good idea for me to be here. If I stayed while the boat left the land, I would have been brought to another country. I sprinted back to the ship's entrance, but it was nowhere to be seen. I struggled to climb up a moderately large box, and I went to one of the holes that people were looking out of. My last hope was to jump out of that hole and swim back to shore. When I attempted to

jump however, I slammed very hard into the see-through glass. With a heavy heart and pain in my head, I watched the shore grow smaller as all hope of me returning to my homeland dissolved. NO! I was stuck on this boat! I didn't even know if it was coming back to land at all. I was dragged onto this ship by my curiosity, and I was trapped like a rat.

There was no hope of me going back unless the boat turned around, so I decided to try and explore the ship to see what kind of place this really was. I wandered through the clanky metal tunnels, but I quickly got lost. Everything looked the same. How did the humans ever find their way around the place? After sauntering aimlessly for what felt like hours, I saw a little dark hole in the side of the tunnel. I could hear voices talking. Maybe I could find out what's going on here if I got closer and understood what the humans were talking about.

While I walked through the dark tunnel, I could hear the voices growing louder and clearer as my banging footsteps echoed through the passage. Finally, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. When I reached the end, I saw that the tunnel was blocked off by metal bars. I glanced at the room and viewed the scene below from the vent I was in. I was high above a large group of humans beneath me who were watching a man talking in front of them. This man was wearing a strange outfit, completed with a white coat and a hat with a tiny anchor on it.

"... We are all on board the Llandoverly Castle, the hospital ship tasked to bring the two hundred injured soldiers on board from Halifax, Canada to Liverpool, England. Since we are not a warship, according to the international war laws, we are protected from enemy fire. So do not worry, we are all safe. You are doctors and nurses with professional medical expertise and therefore, you are responsible to take care of the wounded and injured. Our job is to make sure everyone reaches their destination safely...." The man continued talking, but I

stopped paying attention. Two hundred injured men? I thought that only one was already bad enough. So, this was what happened during the war? People killing and hurting each other? I never realized how heartless these humans could really be.

It was getting late, nevertheless there was one more thing I wanted to find out before I went to find shelter for the night. I followed a person through the metal hallways, and he led me to the outside deck of the boat. The moment I stepped through the swaying door, I felt a powerful gust of wind whoosh through my caramel-coloured fur, brushing aside my overgrown whiskers and ears. I looked around at the humans who were just sitting there, waiting for something to begin while the stars gradually emerged from hiding. The stars twinkled in the dark, inky sky, and the salty air sailed throughout the arctic blue mist drifting around the boat. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, taking everything in. Once I opened my eyes, I saw that the giant red crosses had illuminated, and they were bathing the night sky and the boat in crimson and scarlet light. At this point in time, it felt like the calmest, most beautiful night in the world. Little did I know, that was the last peaceful time I spent aboard this ship. It was also the last night for many passengers on this boat.

I woke up the next morning and travelled to the viewpoint of the sea. I watched the mesmerizing waves crash against each other repeatedly. It was then I noticed a dark figure approaching beneath the rippling waters. I looked at it for a while, wondering what it was and what it was doing there when a high-speed object was launched from the dark figure towards our ship.

Suddenly, I heard a booming explosion, and the ship shook violently underneath my paws. It didn't take long for the passengers onboard to react. People rushed outside, screaming in terror. I heard humans yelling,

“Oh no! We’re under attack!” Someone else shouted, “Lower the lifeboats!” and people hastily rushed to the wooden boats strapped to the side of the vessel. I weaved my way around the stampeding humans to avoid getting stomped on, and I watched as several wooden row boats were slowly lowered into the water by ropes securing them to the sides of the ship. Another high-speed explosive object zoomed towards the ship and the passengers quickly rushed into lifeboats to escape the sinking boat to survive. Explosives continued to crash into the ship’s hull, making a thundering bang and creaking violently. I got onto one of the lifeboats in order to escape and the sound of splintering wood echoed around my head. I turned around in time to watch the boat slowly snap in half. Many passengers were still on the shattering deck. The powerful suction of the submerging watercraft pulled the lifeboat I was in very quickly into the whirlpool of sinking debris. Everyone was thrown off the lonely boat and I plummeted into the frigid sea. I thrashed at the salty ocean waters, trying desperately to resurface and breathe.

I managed to grab hold of a piece of driftwood from under the water, and I hoisted myself aboard, gasping for breath. I watched as the dark figure surfaced, which revealed to be a smaller metal boat that could submerge beneath the water. A man in a navy-blue suit and hat stepped into view from the top of his vessel. He yelled in an unknown language towards his crew, pulled out his gun and shot one of the white gowned women floating in the water. Blood was pouring out of her body. Other men in navy blue uniforms emerged and started to shoot other survivors who did not drown or die from the explosions. These were innocent people! Instead of saving or helping them, they were killing them! How could these attackers be so cold-blooded to do something so horrible?

I climbed aboard the wooden boat as the small metal watercraft glided through the wreckage, shooting any survivors they saw. I looked around and saw several humans clinging to pieces of driftwood to avoid being seen. Some lucky ones survived after all. The attackers didn't manage to kill everyone, thankfully. After what seemed like hours, the metal boat went back underwater, clearly satisfied with their "job well done." The survivors of the sinking climbed back aboard the small wooden boat with great effort and erupted in extreme rage.

"SHOOTING DOWN HOSPITAL SHIPS IS A TERRIBLE WAR CRIME! THOSE GERMANS JUST KILLED EVERYONE EXCEPT US. THOSE WERE SOLDIERS WHO WERE FIGHTING FOR OUR COUNTRY AND WERE SEVERELY INJURED! THEY DESERVED TO LIVE, NOT TO BE MURDERED." Now I understood what had happened. The war really was ugly and terrible!

I scanned the waves for any sign of life. Surely there had to be someone still out there, but all I could see were pieces of driftwood, and dead bodies floating on the water, blood spilling slowly from their pale corpses.

I looked around at the twenty-four survivors in the lifeboat, and we all quieted down to wait silently for someone or something to come rescue us. While I shifted into a more comfortable position, I speculated about the injustice of the massacre that took place today. It was an incredibly immoral and cruel crime, and the fact that they realized we were all harmless, yet they continued to kill made the whole situation entirely cold-blooded and pure evil.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### Beat the Bomb By: Gabriella Szypula (Gr. 7)

*more* inside

I've been missing for two hours. Well maybe not *missing*, missing, but if I were anybody else, I'd consider myself missing. Nobody knows where I am but Indigo, Devon, and Skye, who are with me presently.

Currently, it's nearly midnight on Halloween, and the candy collectors are catching some z's. That leaves the few annoying teens "borrowing" their dad's trucks and ordering pizza. We're those annoying teen nuisances. Right now, we're headed to this newly opened escape room place. We're in Indigo's dad's truck this time, which reeks of cigarettes and wet boots. Devon was the one to insist on going to this escape room. I don't think he would've taken no for an answer. I think he would've blown our heads off if we refused.

However, I wasn't sure about the whole thing. The website has no photos at all, and is located at the dead part of town. Red flags. I guess that just adds to the Halloween spirit, though, right? Right. I'm just being paranoid.

Skye, who is fiddling with her rings, senses my discomfort.

"You've nothing to worry about, Romana." She smiles reassuringly.

I never liked my name until I met Skye. She makes it sound so beautiful with her Australian tongue.

"We're here," Indigo's voice calls out from the front.

My stomach is performing somersaults. I'm thinking of pretending to be sick after all that pizza I had so I could get out of this, but it's too late, we're already inside the building.



I can't help judging the state of the place. The walls are crumbling, the floor is sticky, and the stench is unbearable. Why would someone open a place if it still needs renovation? Skye squeezes my hands, turning my knuckles a sickly bone white.

“Ayo! We’re here to play *Beat the Bomb!*” Devon shouts obnoxiously.

“Come with me,” a man says, revealing himself from the shadows. His eyes light up like a wildfire.

Following the man down a hallway, we cross a door with a heavy barricade laying over it. He gestures for us to go in. Devon enters first, (of course), and then the others with caution. Just as I was about to go in, the man catches my arm. His touch sends shivers down my spine.

“No cellphones in the room,” he demands.

The others left their phones in the car – how did he know I had mine? He couldn't've seen it; it's stashed away in the bottom of my bag.

“Cellphones can interfere with the... props,” he continues, stuttering on the word props.

I obviously don't want to give him my phone, but I give it anyway because I don't want to ruin the game for the others. With no more fussing, he allows me to go in. He lingers at the door for a moment, then slams the heavy thing shut. The room seems pitch black without the hallway's dim lighting. I could hear everyone breathing and shuffling their feet.

“I guess our first puzzle is turning on the lights,” Indigo cheers.

He glides his hands along the floors trying to find something useful, whereas Devon takes up the walls, and Skye and I search the ceiling. Abruptly, the room flashes into a cool-toned white light.

“I did it!” Devon chortles.

We turn heads to see that beside Devon is a light switch. We all groan, then laugh. I don't think I've had that good of a laugh in a while.

The privilege of light reveals some wires, some advanced technology, and a huge bomb sitting smack dab in the centre of the room. The timer on the bomb reads 57:12, I guess that's how much time we have left here. I think our mission here is to disassemble this bomb before it blows everything up. Figuratively.

Indigo heads to the technology, while the rest of us look around the room for helpful tools.

Nothing.

There is nothing here.

No obscure numbers, no unusual props, nothing. The website never had given a difficulty rating for this room, but we all knew that Indigo would carry us on his back in it.

Indigo scans his eyes around the room.

"The candles!" His hand shoots across the room, pointing to the three candles in the corner.

"Has anybody checked the candles?" Indigo inquires.

"There's nothing on the candles," Skye reports.

"Not *on* the candles, *in* the candles!" Indigo says, irritated.

"We need something to light these," he mumbles as he gets a feel around the candles.

I don't believe anyone has any lighters or matches here. Skye, though, wears glasses. It's a dumb idea, but I've seen a movie once where a character took a piece of glass and creates a fire with it, maybe we could do that with Skye's glasses!

I remove her glasses from her nose and carry them to Indigo.

“Sorry,” I apologize to Skye, hoping she's not *that* visually impaired.

“Can you work with these?” I ask Indigo optimistically.

He doesn't answer. Hands quivering, he takes the glasses and grabs a nearby flashlight, and proceeds to attempt my exact idea. Sooner than expected, the intoxicating smell of smoke invades our nostrils. He's done it! Indigo holds the burning paper up to the candles and lights the wicks. I watch as they turn black and ashy.

Now we wait. Could there really be something in the candles? There's gotta be. We've searched every inch of this room only to find nothing.

Still working away on the candles, Indigo heads over to the bomb and observes it intensely.

“Hey- hey guys? Guys!” He pleads out for attention.

“Everybody shut up!” Devon snaps. The noise in the room abruptly stops.

“I-I-... I don't think this bomb is...” Indigo trails off.

“God, Indigo! Spit it out!” Devon hisses.

“I don't think this bomb is fake!” he cries out.

We act confused, but know we know what he means, or at least / know what he means.

“What're you saying...?” Skye whispers, approaching him.

“I'm saying that this is a real bomb with a real timer and we're all *real* screwed if we don't leave here!” Indigo stammers, the fear in his voice rising.

“But how do you know? it doesn't even make any sense-” Skye attempts to argue, but Indigo cuts her off.

“We don't have *time* to make sense! We gotta go!” He falters.

My eyes dart to the vent in the ceiling. It must be the only other opening here.

"The vent!" I exclaim.

"Nobody is able to fit in that vent except..." Devon studies each of us. "Except Romana..." He continues more softly.

I tense at the sound of my name. *Me?* I can't do this. I've never been a hero, and that's not something you learn to be overnight.

"I've never even-" I spit out before Skye interrupts.

Hands on my shoulders, she says "You have to do this, Romana. Who knows if Indigo is right, but is it worth risking our lives?" *Of course he's right, he's always right.* I think.

"I'll help you up." And being the jock he is, Devon gives me a boost into the stuffy vent.

I forgot how claustrophobic I was. The suffocating tightness of the vent nauseates me and I think I'm going to vomit. I pull through though; I just think of how much worse this situation would be if all I could smell was tossed pizza. Before I left, the clock on the bomb read 16:48. That's over 16 minutes to get everyone out of the room and away from this damned place so nobody gets blown to bits.

Still crawling through the vent, it begins getting brighter. It must be another vent to another room. When I reach the opening, I don't hesitate to push through the metal grate and fall seven feet onto the tiles that lay beneath me. I feel the wind being knocked straight out of me and struggle to catch my breath. The moment I recover, I stand up so fast I see stars and sprint towards the other side of the room. Alarmingly, an arm catches mine and sends me back. This feels too familiar.

It's the man. Not just any man, *the* man. The man who would've *actually* made me gone missing.

"You've failed!" He exclaims sinisterly.

Before I could even open my mouth, he starts explaining.

“For 20 years, my kind has been studying earth, and we’ve come to realize that you guys are pretty dumb,” he begins in confidence.

“What did I fail?” I cut him off.

“Let me tell my story.”

“What did I fail?” I repeat.

“Shut it. Now as I was saying, you guys are pretty stupid, so when we searched the galaxy for new slaves, we figured humans would be the easiest to brainwash.”

“You’re saying you’re an alien now?” I chuckle fearfully. “You expect me to believe that? That this wasn’t some pathetic murder attempt?” I can feel the clock ticking away under my skin like my own heartbeat.

He ignores my questions.

“We came to earth to test which ones were eligible to be brainwashed by setting up this room, and you... failed!”

“So why is it a bad thing that I’m not going to be brainwashed?” *Is this guy for real?* My inner voice ponders.

“Those who aren’t brainwashed are to be killed,” he says casually, as if asking about the weather.

5 minutes. There must be about 5 minutes left on that damned bomb now. I have to get out of here. *We* have to get out of here. I take off for the door, it’s locked. Here’s another trick I’ve learned from the movies: use a bobby pin to pick a lock. Fortunately, I always wear bobby pins in my hair.

Within about 10 seconds I'm through. I don't know where I am. I try to remember what turns I had to take in the vent, but the events of the last hour are getting jumbled up in my memory.

About 2 minutes left.

I sprint up the hall while this alien guy chases after me. It takes multiple doors before I find the right one. I lift the barricade forcefully and swing the door open with panic.

1 minute.

I beckon to the group and lead the way praying to find an escape. This place is a maze.

30 seconds.

"Guys come on!" I plead them to run faster.

There it is. The exit. The *only* exit. We all leap towards it like a bunch of buffoons and slam into the door.

*It's a pull door*, I stupidly think. We stumble outside and start for the truck. Will we be able to drive far enough? Indigo in the driver's seat, he slams his foot on the gas pedal.

10 seconds

Skye is praying and Devon is crying – that's the first time I've seen him cry – and Indigo is whispering to himself. There's nothing we can do to increase our chances of living. There's no telling whether we'll live to see the next minute of our lives. We just have to wait and see like a game of peek-a-boo.

5...

4...

3...

2...

1...

Protecting my head with my arms, the sound of a shotgun, only 40 times louder, pierces my ears. I'm not courageous enough to look back at the explosion, but Devon and Skye can't keep their eyes off of it.

I can't believe it! Are we alive? Is this Heaven? Surely not. We're alive, right? It's not until I feel a tug on my shoulder when I get out from my protective position.

"It's okay! We did it!" Skye celebrates.

My body is still tense. The explosion is distant now.

Man, I should've believed my mama when she said to never trust strangers. There's no telling what comes after this, or what would've happened before this if we didn't go to that cursed place, there is just now. Let's focus on that.

Oh, let's also focus on not getting bombed again.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### A Bunny's Journey By: Gregory Yuen (Gr. 7)

*more* inside

#### Chapter 1: Enslaved

I shook in my fur. The temperature was cold. I did not know what happened and how I got here, but what I knew was that I was being mistreated by my so-called owner. I knew I did not deserve this. So I began musing about an escape plan. Suddenly, a shrill and nasty voice broke into my thoughts.

“WHY AREN'T YOU DOING YOUR TRICKS, MISTER!!? YOU BETTER BE OR YOU'LL BECOME MEAT FOR DINNER!!!”

I shuddered but gritted my teeth. I HATED that name. I HATE being called ‘Mister’. Why not something else? Bella, Fluffy, Coco, anything but Mister!

My owner was using me for profit. I knew how to do rabbit tricks like binkying, jumping over high walls, and escaping through custom-made mazes. But I knew if I didn't do what she said, I would get slaughtered lickety-split!

Ever since my owner discovered my ability to do tricks, all she did was to force me to practice for shows without even thinking about my needs. She was wringing money out of my abilities. How cruel!

#### Chapter 2: Pelletscape

One night, my owner shoved me into an old unsanitary cage with a rusty metal latch on it. She locked the cage and snapped,



“You better do your tricks tomorrow, you stupid rabbit, or else!” She whirled around and left without another word.

I cried. Guess I’m destined to live like this for life.

I looked around to see how I could unlock the latch of the cage from the outside. I found a stick in the cage and used my teeth to lift it and poked the latch with it. It worked! The cage door opened with a soft creak. Thankfully, my owner was sound asleep!

I explored around the house. It smelled of my owner’s favourite perfume. What a stench! I spotted a gap between the patio door and the doorframe, so I squeezed through the gap to the outside. I was free! I looked around in awe of the Florida urban landscape.

Just then, I sniffed something delicious. Pellets! My favourite food! I had never eaten them since my ‘owner’ adopted me. I sniffed my way to the source of the smell. There was a low fence in front of me. Prior to my adoption, I learned how to jump over different obstacles by a bunny instructor. I concentrated, gathered all my strength, and hopped over. It was the first time I had ever made a high jump without my instructor.

### **Chapter 3: Petnapped**

I found an overturned luggage bag. Could this be? Are those actually pellets? I nibbled on a pellet. It was real! Pellet heaven! I was ravenous, so I went inside the bag of pellets and began devouring these gems.

Just when I was enjoying freedom and a treat, something slammed. The whole world got dark. I went from being overjoyed to being devastated. *Great*, I thought to myself, *I should’ve known it was a trap. I guess I was not astute enough.* I heard the zipper closing around me. I felt desperate. My heart was beating out of my chest. I tried to make an opening by digging

through the fabric. It was thick. I tried gnawing through it. It again didn't work. Finally, I tried to kick the fabric with my paws as hard as I could. It didn't even budge. I gave up hope of escaping.

I rummaged through things that might help me get out. But then I felt someone picking up the luggage.

"Hey did you hear something?" a teenager's voice asked from the outside.

"Nope," said a voice that sounded like his father's. "By the way, have you packed your bags? We're flying off early tomorrow to Ontario to visit your grandparents."

#### **Chapter 4: Bunni-mories**

Ontario?! All of the sudden, a wave of memories flashed back at me. I remembered I was born inside an animal shelter in Ontario a year ago. I yearned to get adopted. Otherwise, I would eventually get put down. I did not know what that really meant but it sounded terrible. The only thing I loved being there was the instructor who taught me bunny tricks.

Nobody was here to adopt me. I found out later that I was going to be put down in 2 days. Somehow, I escaped just in time from the shelter and became a stray. I believe that was when I was captured by the mean owner, who brought me to different places for shows.

#### **Chapter 5: Hit The Road to Ontario**

The luggage started rolling like thunder and my ears were hurting. I felt the bag getting loaded into the trunk of a car. I tried to sleep, but it was hard when you were getting bumped, tossed and turned every which way. Eventually I was so tired that I was out cold and could not care about anything in the world.

## **Chapter 6: Stowaway Rabbit**

“We’re here!” the father declared. My ears shot up at the speed of a bullet. Through the background I heard that I was in the Florida airport. I ate more pellets from the bag.

That was when I heard the teenage boy ask,

“You sure we didn’t forget anything in the car? Something feels odd.”

“Dunno. Best we check our bags before we head to the plane,” the father responded.

I froze with fear. I knew it. I knew for sure I was going to get discovered by humans in their luggage bag.

So I prepared myself, waiting for the right time to make a run for it. I heard the zipper being unzipped and the lid opened.

"Since when were there pellets in our luggage?" the father muttered.

“Jimmy must have dropped those in my stuff when I slept over the other day to play with his pet!” the boy recalled.

The second they saw me under the lid, I jumped out and ran, hoping to get away.

The boy shrieked. The father was speechless. Lots of screams and gasps came from tourists and travellers, and many fingers were pointing at me. The travel agents and the flight attendants were shouting,

“RABBIT ON THE LOOSE!!! RABBIT ON THE LOOSE!!!”

## **Chapter 7: Rabbit on the Run**

The next thing I knew I was being chased by animal control. I ran for my life. I knew that I would have to hide from those nuisances. I spotted an escape route.

I turned a left, then a right, then another right. The animal control was still on my tail in hot pursuit. So I ran through Gate #13 and into an airplane. There was a cart with luggage and a box on it with the lid ajar. I sneaked into the box, and stayed very still.

"Darn, we lost it. It was so fast!" a raspy voice said.

"Yeah, but now I could really use a break. It's been 30 minutes and we still cannot find it," a woman complained.

After I was sure animal control was long gone, I tried to get out of the box. But now the lid was sealed shut. I felt the box being picked up and stored into what I thought was the cargo part of the plane. I immediately started gnawing on the box to escape. But it was so tough. Just when I managed to make a tiny hole, the plane's engines started roaring. I felt the plane taking off. I felt like a fugitive rabbit unwittingly. Why did I have to be constantly running and hiding to escape from humans? Resigned and exhausted, I drifted into sleep. What else could I do?

## **Chapter 8: Plane-trified**

Just as I was dreaming about a field of dandelions, I awoke to sudden loud noises. Red lights were blaring. There were some jerky movements and then all the luggage slid to one side of the cargo trunk. I almost got squashed into a piece of pancake. But the good thing was that my box was squished open!

The pilot announced on the intercom, "Attention all passengers, a flock of seagulls accidentally flew into one of our engines. Please stay calm and prepare for an emergency evacuation."

Shortly afterwards, the door of the cargo trunk swung open! Did someone open the wrong door? I felt myself free falling with a lot of luggage bags. I heard screams. I was completely petrified, or possibly 'plane-trified'.

Looking down, I saw the middle of a lake! Surely, I will drown this time. I wanted to scream, but I tried to keep calm like what the pilot said, and noticed the luggage was making a formation in the air. Using the skills I learned from the animal shelter, I jumped from one luggage to another. I kept doing that until I got close to the ground.

I finally jumped onto a luggage floating on the water as other luggage bags splashed into the lake. Fortunately, mine drifted to the shore. I took a long drink from the lake as I looked around. Lots of people in life vests fell into the lake with big splashes. Everyone was soaked. As for the plane, it spun out of control over the trees and sealed its fate with a loud KABOOM!!!

## **Chapter 9: Past and Present United**

As the humans dealt with their problems, I hopped away. I explored the area around me. Where am I? I looked around and saw a trail. Hoping it could lead me to somewhere wonderful, I followed the trail when suddenly I spotted trilliums. Yes! Trilliums! I'm in Ontario again! Delighted, I ran while following the path, until I reached a clearing. I looked around and saw a grey building with a delivery van nearby. Something was oddly familiar about this place.

Curiosity had me go to the front of the building and the van. I studied this place when a wave of memories hit me.

It was my birthplace! I was tingling with nostalgic excitement to be back but someone was approaching me! My instinct was to flee and hide. I hopped into the open van. Just when I thought the coast was clear, the van door shut! Not again!

I was stuck in there for a long time so I found my way into another box. As the van travelled, I recalled my first escape from my shelter home and the time I had with my mean owner. I felt shivers running down my spine.

## **Chapter 10: The Journey Ends**

The GPS in the van announced,

“Going to 23 Vanguard Rd. The destination is 20 minutes away.”

After a while of travelling, the box I hid in was hauled onto a mat of a front door. Soon enough the lid opened. I nervously looked around, and an adorable face was staring at me.

“Look Mummy! A bunny! A bunny!” a child shouted.

“Huh? A bunny?!” the mother questioned as she walked over. “How did you get in here?”

I was hugged and petted in a way I never felt before. I felt so loved, after a long lonely journey on the run. Suddenly, it felt like home, a home sweet home.

I was gently carried to a corner, where I met another one of my kind!

“Wanna meet my bunny, Boba?” the child invited.

I was brought to see Boba. She nudged me gently with her nose!

“Can we keep this bunny, please, pretty please, mummy? It came to us, it was meant to be!” the child pleaded with her mom.

“Sure. It’s a lovely one. It seems to want to stay. It seems to be a good company for Boba,” she replied.

I was offered some fresh hay and water. My heart was skipping with pure joy! I already felt that I belonged here. I would not have to run away anymore! I have found a loving home and even a bunny friend, and that was better than having any pellets in the whole wide world.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### What Lies Beneath By: Megan Le Sueur (Gr. 7)

*more* inside

#### Chapter One

The smell of sizzling eggs and freshly fried bacon coaxed Michael's growling stomach out of bed. If he had known what would happen to him that day, he would never have gotten up. Michael was a fourteen-year-old boy. He had brown wavy hair that curled up at both sides of his head, and green upturned eyes. His face was diamond in shape, and he had two dimples on his cheeks. His family moved into this house just a few days ago for the new school year.

He walked out of his room, into the hall, and down the new wooden stairs, to find three bowls of mandarin oranges, three plates of eggs benedict, bacon, home fries, and three mugs filled with hazelnut coffee on the dining room table. His mother, Agnes, and his father, Paul, were already sitting at the table.

"Wow!" said Michael in surprise. "The food looks so good!"

"Thank your mother," said Paul, smiling.

"Thanks mom!" said Michael. Then Michael remembered that today was the first day of school. He practically inhaled the food on his plate. Food that his mother had put a lot of effort into making.

"It's 7:50 right now, when does school start?" asked Agnes.

"What!!! School starts at 8:00!" exclaimed Michael.

"Alright let's leave right now, come on, get your things," said Agnes.



Michael was wearing a blue T-shirt, a grey sweater and a black jacket over a pair of grey track pants. They got into their white Nissan Juke, and drove off. When Michael and his mother arrived at the parking lot of James Moore Secondary School, Michael was amazed. He hadn't seen any school like this before.

It was five stories high, with vines that spilled down from each corner of the building. Plastic flowers in many colors, hung from the walls. They seemed to be strategically placed to mask the general disrepair of the school. When Michael walked inside, this thought was confirmed. The tiles on the floor were pale and green. They were unkempt. Dirt and sand were ingrained in them. The light blue paint on every wall was peeling, revealing a rusty brown. Michael could see more of the brown than the blue paint.

He walked over to his narrow blue locker, and put his black backpack inside. He looked at his watch anxiously, knowing he was already late for his very first class.

"Hi!" said a female voice beside him.

Michael quickly shut his locker door. She had blonde curly hair, deep blue eyes, and lots of freckles on her nose. She was wearing a purple sweater, and black leggings.

"Hi..." he said as he tried to move past her.

Then she asked, "What grade are you in?"

Awkward silence filled the air.

"I really don't have time. I'm going to miss class."

Suddenly, she pulled a rainbow gun out of one of her pants pockets, and pointed it towards Michael. "What was that?" she said in a soft voice.

Now, Michael felt the definite need to get away from this psychotic being. "Okay! Jeez!" said Michael. "I'm in grade nine this year. My name is Micha-" **BANG!** Michael froze in terror.

The gunshot was so loud his ears were ringing. He didn't look to see what was happening around him. He was frightened, and in shock. Thousands of screaming voices and footsteps filled the corridors, followed by even more gunshots. **BANG! BANG!** He caught a quick glance of the girl's face.

She had a look of worry, as she grabbed his arm and ran out one of the exits, towards the big yard at the back of the school. Michael was more than confused. They stood outside of the school, facing each other.

"What are you doing?!" he asked in a loud voice.

"Shhh! We can't get caught. We should go through the forest over there." She pointed at a large forest. It had lots of weeping willow trees, and on the ground, there were little streams and puddles of water from the recent rain.

"What! No! You can't bring me into this! You just shot me! And a bunch of other people!" He exclaimed as he pointed towards the school. Michael really thought this girl had just shot him. He figured he was in so much shock that he couldn't feel any pain. He looked all over himself, searching for the bullet wound, which he could not find. He realized he hadn't been shot. **BANG!** They heard more gunshots inside, as there were fewer people screaming.

"I'm going to the forest. You don't have to come if you don't want to," said the girl, running towards the forest.

Michael followed her, but he didn't know that he wasn't allowed to go in that particular forest. It was a school rule. This forest has many tall thin trees with very long thin branches sticking out, making it hard to run through without getting scraped by the branches.

"You haven't told me your name yet," said Michael, struggling to even walk through the poking branches.

"It's Mary," she said.

"Why did you point a gun at me, Mary?" Michael asked as they continued to walk while blocking their faces each time a branch came close.

"It was a joke!" Mary said laughing. "It's a plastic rainbow gun. Not real! I thought you would know." She took the gun out of her pocket to show Michael, then placed the fake gun back into her pocket.

"We have to hurry. We can get out of this forest at the other end, and find someone to borrow their phone. We'll call the police and tell them about the shooting. We need to save as many people as we can," said Mary.

"Wouldn't the school already call the police?" asked Michael.

"Most of the school is probably dead!" said Mary.

"Sounds like a great plan, but it's going to be a bit hard to hurry through these annoying trees," said Michael.

Mary had an idea. "Look!" she said. "We can run in this shallow river. There are no trees in the river to slow us down! It will be fine."

Michael looked at it, questioning whether he should. The river was wide, but only about two inches deep. "Okay," said Michael.

They both ran along in the long river, Mary in front of Michael, both laughing as the cold water droplets splashed everywhere. BANG! A gun had been shot from within the forest.

"Someone is close, I think they heard us. We have to run faster," whispered Michael.

Mary and Michael ran super fast, hoping they wouldn't get found by the shooters! They were running through the shallow part of the river. Before they realized that the water had suddenly become way deeper, they plunged headfirst into the water with a great splash!

### Below

Under the water, Michael landed on top of Mary, which pushed her down to the bottom of the river. Michael's eyes widened as he saw what happened next. When her hands touched the river bottom, the bottom gave way, and she fell right through a kind of portal. She fell through about four feet of air and landed on some gravel!

She moved out of the way as the water from the river came pouring down onto the gravel, along with Michael. He quickly scrambled to his feet as the cold water kept tumbling down on him. They were in some sort of tunnel under the river. The part they fell into was a dead end.

"What is this place?" asked Michael.

"I have no clue," said Mary. There were white crystals between the walls and floor that glowed with a soft white light.

They looked around, and saw a tall red stick creature scowling at them in the distance. It appeared out of nowhere! Its body was like a stickman made of red bones, with no head. It had to hunch over to fit in the low tunnel, because of how tall it was. Immediately, it sprinted towards them, growling wildly.

Mary looked fearfully at Michael hoping he would know what to do. Michael looked back at her, feeling a chill run down his spine. He could feel the hairs on his cold arms and neck stand up.

“Let’s go back up to the forest now. This place is freaking me out!” said Mary in a quavering voice.

Michael looked up, searching for the hole they had come through, but it had disappeared! They had nowhere to go. The crystals began to darken. Everything was pitch black. It went silent.

“Mary?” Michael said with his hands out in front of him, not being able to see anything. There was no answer. The creature had merged itself into Mary’s body. “Mary!” he yelled again. He felt an achy pain all over his body, then fell to the ground.

He woke up in a cage made with the same kind of red bone from the stick creature. The bones wrapped around each other forming the walls and ceiling. Michael felt tired and hungry. He didn’t know where he was. He was imprisoned. He was startled to see Mary above him. She was laying on top of the cage, staring at him with a fixed gaze.

“Mary! What happened? Where were you when the lights went out?” he asked. Mary didn’t move. She kept staring at him. The creature controlling Mary had never seen a human before. Michael started to feel dizzy. He had no idea what was happening. He shut his eyes and forced himself to sleep. Anything to escape this hell he was trapped in. He woke up again, feeling like days had passed.

Mary was battling the creature in her mind. *No! Stop! You can’t do this to me!* The red creature had never preyed on a human before. None of its other meals had a sense of self. The creature felt weak. It wasn’t easy controlling Mary. Mary used all of her strength to put herself into the red creature’s body. “AAAARG!!!!”, she yelled. She took over the creature, and *she* was now in *its* mind and forced their two bodies to separate. She was controlling the

creature. She forced the creature's body to go to the cage that Michael was in, and made an opening for him to get out.

"Mary, is that you? Clap twice if it's you," said Michael. The stick creature clapped twice with its sticks. "Stand up straight and use your arms to dig a hole, so we can get out of here!", said Michael.

Above

They climbed out of the hole, loving the fresh air. They were back in the forest. *BANG!* There was another gunshot from inside the school.

"The shooting is still happening!" said Michael. Michael climbed onto the stick creature's back, they ran through the forest, and found their way to the back of the school. The stick creature ran to one of the doors of the school, and went inside. It saw one of the shooters shoot the ground repeatedly. It walked up to the shooter, growling. The shooter dropped his gun onto the grubby floor, knelt, and put his hands in the air, surrendering. He was so scared.

The creature lowered its two stick arms and put them against the shooter's hands. The shooter tried to resist, but he couldn't. He wasn't able to move anything. The shooter's arms began to glow a light red color. Then his torso, and his legs, and head also started to glow.

"AHHHH!" he shrieked in pain. The shooter's body glowed bright red, and the shooter exploded! **BOOM!** Blood and bits of his insides flung everywhere, all over the walls, floor and ceiling. The rest of the school shooters came to see what had happened. There were four of them.

Their faces were confused to see this red creature standing in the hallway. It pointed its stick arms towards the shooters, and blew them all up. **BOOM!** Michael heard all of these

explosions from outside. He stood there waiting outside for a few seconds, then he saw Mary walk out the door.

“MARY!!!!!!!!!!” Michael yelled in excitement. She had transferred back into her own body. She ran over to Michael with her arms out, ready to give him a hug. She got up close, and **BOOM!** Mary had touched Michael and he exploded!

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### **The Master of Death** **By: Emily Jaenicke (Gr. 7)**

*more* inside

#### Prologue

Margaret, a young girl the age of five, had just returned from her grandmother's funeral. She had loved her so much. Although she had only known her for a little while she would remember her for the rest of her life.

Margaret looked into her Mother's eyes and said "Oh Mama, I wish someone could bring those we love back." She then jumped into her Mother's arms.

Her Mother caught her and whispered in her ear, "Be careful what you wish for ... Margaret."

#### Chapter 1

If rabbits could fly, would they flap with their ears like wings? Violet puzzled over the question. She had originally been doing her math homework on a rainy Saturday afternoon when a question on her homework had referenced one of the new and popular television series. Which of course had made her recount a particularly funny episode involving a rather smart printer, a global plague, and cheese doodles. Cheese doodles had then made her think of her favorite yellow sweater and how she feared she might outgrow it. That had mysteriously made her remember the time on the beach she saw a large hermit crab with an absolutely miniscule shell. This brought her on to the subject of animals which made her think of the



rabbit she had seen on the way home from school but how using ears to fly got incorporated into this mess nobody would ever really know.

“Viv, I’m home,” Violet’s Father called out to her from across the room. She quickly got up and carefully placed her homework on the kitchen table to be forgotten. She raced across the room to greet her Father.

“How was your day?” she asked. Her Father worked at the local port and usually came home sopping wet and tired.

“Fine, Jamie’s wife Marie has been taken from him.”

Violet shuddered at the fact, it was a terrible thing to happen to someone. She vividly remembered her Father explaining what “taken from” meant shortly after her mother and sister Avery had been taken.

“Now Violet, I’m gonna tell you something very scary. Once people get old, their body shuts down and they die and you never see them again. But some people, most people, want them back. So, they ask the man at the top of the mountain to bring them back. The man agrees, but he takes someone else out in their place. That’s the part that’s not fair. You could save an eighty-year old and take a baby. It’s wrong. People still do it though, and it creates an endless ripple effect. Your loved ones are taken from you, so you take them back, and then someone else’s loved ones are taken, and it’s endless.”

She remembered asking her father question upon question that he could not answer: “Why does it not stop?” “How does it work?” “Where do they go?” She then realized she was still talking to her Father. It was a bad time to get lost in her thoughts.

“That’s terrible,” Violet said. “Is he gonna get her back?”

"I don't know," her Father said before making his way up the stairs to change and have a shower to get rid of the smell of rotten fish. Violet's Father had refused to take back her Sister or her Mother even though he loved them, he couldn't contribute to the endless sadness. She respected his decision, though she still longed for a big family.

The image of her family sitting around the dinner table laughing and talking appeared in her mind. Avery and Her both looked gorgeous, their black hair tied back in a beautiful bun with flowers poking out. They wore lavender coloured dresses and brown boots.

Their Mother sat in a long wavy skirt and she smiled a beautiful smile. Their Father was laughing. He wore a collared white shirt and jeans and the sad glint in his eyes had vanished. As quickly as the image had come, it vanished. A sudden pang of longing hit her. Then an idea popped into her head: she would get her Mother and Sister back. It would be wonderful, it would be fabulous. They would be a big happy family.... it.... it ... She suddenly felt guilty. How could she think of such an idea? Betray her father like that! She would not do it, not ever, she would forget all about the idea and continue on with life. Even as she promised herself she still had hope in the very pit of her stomach.

Violet kept her promise for weeks, months even. It was snowing profusely on the way home from school. She trudged through the snow pulling up her scarf she had carefully wrapped around herself before leaving. She squinted her eyes. The snow was coming at her in all directions. Violet curled up her hands seeing if she could extract any warmth from the other one. She was freezing. She didn't mind the cold, it was just cold. She thought of it in a way that was rather inviting. If you're never cold, you can never be warm. She would sacrifice the circulation in her hands just to be warm.

Violet was having a fine day. School had been fine. The weather was fine as it was late December in her little town it was completely normal to have a snowstorm every day.

A little old lady came around the corner. She was wearing so many sweaters she proved incapable of moving her arms.

“Good day,” Violet said politely. The woman nodded as she attempted to lift her hand in a small wave but could not fight against all the material she was wearing. Violet smiled and continued walking when the lady's eyes opened in surprise. Violet looked around and there was nothing strange or peculiar about anything.

The small houses and shops were covered in snow. They looked like the photo on the front of a Christmas card. She returned her gaze to the lady who just stood there looking at Violet. Violet, still confused, looked around again and saw nothing. But that was the thing, she had seen nothing! Her feet were not there, she looked down nor were her legs and the rest of her body. She was being taken!

## Chapter 2

Violet was walking down a corridor at her school, she slipped and fell. A crack appeared in the floor she fell right through and suddenly she was falling down. She cried, tears getting caught in her eyes, and she yelled out for help.

Suddenly she was lying flat on the ground, blood pooling around her. But she felt fine, she looked around it wasn't her blood, it was Avery's.

Avery sat there staring into Violets eyes. Avery cried out, “Save me, save me, save me!”

Violet just stood there until her sister died. She was breathing fast and then it just stopped. Violet dropped to her knees and cried out in pain.

She woke up gasping for breath, tears stinging her eyes drenched in sweat, partly because of her dream, but also the warmth that surrounded her. She got up looking around. She was in a grassy field, and she could see nothing in the distance. She looked up, the sky above was a light blue.

She shed down to pants and the long sleeve she was wearing under her sweater and jacket. She unraveled her scarf and put it on the growing pile of clothing below her. She just sat there for a while picking at her nails and piling dead grass at her feet wondering what to do. She then decided to look for something beyond the field when a black crow flew towards her. She decided to get as close as possible before it flew away. She slowly inched closer until it was just a few feet away. This was a very fearless crow. She then looked up and saw more crows fly towards her appearing out of nowhere.

One crow walked towards her and pecked her foot a little, then all the crows flew at her at once. Startled, she stepped back a couple steps. The crows dived at her pecking her everywhere. She expected terrible, bleeding, gory pain but instead she felt a different type of agony. She was filled with sadness, longing, terrible sadness as though she had lost someone she loved. She curled into a ball and cried. The crows did not stop pecking her. Violet stayed that way for a while until she had a terrible headache from crying so hard, the crows would ease off a little then totally torment her, pecking wildly.

Then the pain faded, the crows were gone, the field was gone. She felt strange as though she was traveling on a somewhat steep roller coaster. She couldn't see anything and her eyes would not open.

She was frightened, so much so she thought she liked the field of the crows better, even though it wasn't true. Violet then stopped trying to open her eyes, and just gave up. All of sudden she got super cold. She shivered and suddenly opened her eyes.

She was back in her town except it was night. Violet was standing where she had been taken. Her jacket lay on the ground, she pulled it on rather slowly. Trying to put it on faster had resulted in being so much slower. She wrapped her scarf around herself and pulled on her boots. She grabbed her sweater that she had forgotten to put on and ran all the way back to her little wooden house.

Millions of questions collided her mind on the way back. Was she just taken? Is she back and safe now? Who had saved her? Was it her father? Would he betray her and himself like that?

Violet arrived home soaking wet and tired. She took off her boots and went to bed. Her father had not yet returned from wherever he was. She lay in her bed trying to fall asleep. She let her mind wander. But then ended up paying too much attention to the stuff she was thinking about then trying to fall asleep.

She tried to slow thoughts in her head but her mind would not stop thinking. She then tried to not think but started thinking about not thinking and that led down a rabbit hole about thinking about thinking about thinking about thinking about thinking about not thinking about thinking. Finally, very tired and confused Violet fell asleep.

Violet awoke to the sound of a very loud mixer. Slowly she got up and pulled her blankets off and stood up. Violet pulled on her yellow sweater that now was very small but she didn't care. She put on a pair of black leggings and walked out of her room, and towards the kitchen.

Her father stood at the stove clumsily flipping pancakes. She sat down and stared at the wall waiting for her father to say something, he didn't. Her father moved to grab two plates. He put two pancakes on each and some cut up bananas. Violet's father rarely made pancakes; they were reserved for special occasions only.

He put two rather chipped plates on the table. Violet stared at him as she chewed an overly large piece of pancake with difficulty. He was not speaking to her, she ate her pancake angrily.

She couldn't stand him, "WHY aren't you talking to me?" Violet burst out rudely.

"Oh, if you wanted me to talk," he said calmly, "all you had to do was ask."

Violet was startled, she thought he would have more of a reaction.

"Well I'm sad to say even the best of us can't stop ourselves from saving those we love most...I got home to the news that you had been taken. I was filled with so much grief and sadness I couldn't stand it. I hiked up the mountain and asked for you back. I am not proud of myself nor am I ashamed. I am sorry to betray you like this but I can't lose my wife and both of my daughters I just... just can't!" Her Father's voice went from calm to shaky with sadness. He looked at Violet with hurt in his eyes and burst into tears. Though Violet was sad she understood, one can only lose so much.

Violet comforted her father, his wide shoulders shaking with sadness. His black gray beard soaking up his tears. She started boiling water to make tea. She grabbed tissues and handed them to him. He blew his nose loudly if you were to compare the noise he made to the sound an elephant made they would probably be very similar.

"I just can't lose my only daughter, I can't!" For such a big man his voice at the moment was very, very high pitched.

Violet gave him tea and held him until he calmed down. Her father stood up and returned to his tough self. "Now Vivi, I'm going to work, see you when I get back," he said as he made his way up the stairs to change into his fishing gear.

Violet collected their plates and brought them to the sink. She took the sponge on the side of the sink and carefully scrubbed each plate clean. When she was done she gracefully made her way outside throwing on her coat and her boots. She needed to go on a walk.

The snowstorm had cleared up in the time she had been gone. Now there was just a soft layer of snow on the ground. Violet walked towards the ocean leaving footprints in the snow. When she reached the ocean, she sensed the change in the air; it was saltier.

She walked across the sand taking off her boots to feel it between her toes. As the tide came in her feet were drenched with the ice-cold ocean water. Violet walked to the end of the beach she then put her boots back on.

She did not know what to do now so she sat on the last bit of sand before the beach gave way to large mountain-like rocks. She traced her hand through the sand. She suddenly realized something. The crows that had pecked her had actually been the sadness her father felt upon losing her. When they pecked her, she felt his pain. The image of her family sitting around a dinner table popped into her mind this time it left faster. She didn't even get to take a good look at everybody. Violet longed for it to stay longer to stay forever. She made up her mind and set off.

The track took Violet through the mountains was well trodden. So many people in the past had taken it there wasn't even a tree root to trip over. Nevertheless, it was still very tiring. It went up and down then back up again it went on the side of the mountain.

Violet was so tired and was prepared to give up, but she imagined her mother and sister and continued on. She shimmied across the edge, below the ocean broke against the side of the mountain sending a salty spray in her direction. Filled with fear she barely made it across.

Why had someone not made a better way to get there? Violet thought as she ran down a small hill leading away from the ledge. She looked up at the top of the hill, where a small house sat with smoke billowing out of the little chimney that sat crookedly on top of the house. She didn't know what to say when she met them, or what to do. Fighting back her fear she ran up the hill and knocked on the door of the house.

"Come in," said an old man's voice from the other side of the door.

Violet slowly turned the doorknob and pushed the door in. It was a pull door, slightly embarrassed she pulled it and entered. Inside the house there was a wood fireplace and a door leading to what Violet suspected was his bedroom. The kitchen was open and visible from where Violet stood.

"Now who would you like to save?" the man asked.

### Chapter 3

"I do not wish to save someone, I wish to save them all!" Violet said with confidence. "I simply want to ask, why you do such terrible things. Taking the lives of innocent children to save some old person who probably only has a year to live, and how do you have such powers?"

The man looked at Violet wondering where to start. "You have good intentions young girl, but you do not understand there's a bigger picture," yhe man said.



“Well I want to understand,” Violet said “My mother, sister and I were taken for this stupid cause I wanna know how.”

“Well it's a long story,” the man said, trying to convince Violet to stop asking questions.

“And I have a lot of time,” Violet said stubbornly.

“Alright, a long time ago when I was just a young man. Hoping to get out of this small town and become a successful businessman in the big city, my wife fell ill. She began to get tired and lose her appetite. Then one day I came home from an important meeting and she was dead. I was so sad I could not bring myself to go to work, or even eat. I was filled with such grief and loss. I felt guilty for not being there when she died.

“One night I remember imagining my wife with sadness. I concentrated so much on her that she came back and someone else left. I don't know how it worked. I think that somehow, I took all my sadness, guilt, longing grief, and love and transformed it into what I remembered of her. When I told her, what had happened she got so mad at me, she ran away. I slowly grew old thinking I had only imagined her. I began to forget.

“Then one day, a sad woman came along. She had lost her only child and she did not know what to do. I had felt what she felt. I was weak, I am weak. I took her sadness and the memories she had of the child and transformed it into a life form. But you can't just add a person to this earth and expect it to go unnoticed. I had to take someone else away to keep the world balanced, and she was willing to make the sacrifice, so I gave her child back to her. She returned to the village and news spread.”

The man paused for a moment then continued, “People came rushing to my door asking me to give their loved ones back. I accepted them all. I brought people back and took them away. I was known as the Master of Death, though I am not, but in a way I am. But what

I had done changed the world. It created an endless cycle I took away and added more.

Before I knew it people that had their loved ones disappear on them came up and asked for them back, and I answered their wishes. I am too weak to resist their pleas. But the world is not meant to be this way." There was silence.

Violet was very curious so she broke the silence, "How can you stop it, there has to be a way."

"Well I can give my gift away but nobody would be strong enough to not give in to the gift," the man said sadly.

Violet had an idea, "Well give it to me. I have felt the sadness, though I have never come before. I... I can move away before my father dies," Violet swiped at her eyes she could not imagine such sadness. "If I stay I will be forced to bring him back. I won't ever save someone I'm strong enough I promise." Violet could not contain herself she wept.

The man handed her a tissue. "Well I have waited for someone strong enough that will be able to resist and I believe I have found that person." The man stood up and walked towards Violet. "Now take my hand and I will give you my gift."

Violet took his hand and felt a tingly sensation as she looked down the veins on her hand had turned white. The white made its way up and settled in her heart before disappearing. White is the color of death.

The man staggered to the couch, and lay down dead. Violet left the house. She knew her duty and what she had to do someday, but she was ready for it. She began to walk down the trail, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts barely noticing how her feet ached and her head hurt. Before Violet knew it her feet had carried her down the mountain and to her door.

Violet told her father everything that night. About the man, his story and her duty. She was prepared and knew how hard it would be.

## Epilogue

Four years later Violet turned eighteen. She packed her bag. She only had room for clothing but she stuffed in a small wooden doll her father had given her for her birthday when she was only six.

Violet got up from her bed and did a small survey of her room to make sure she had not forgotten anything she wanted to bring. She walked to the door, paused, looked at her room for one last time before moving on.

Her father waited for her at the table. He had his jacket in his hand and his boots tied. His once black hair had gone gray with age. Violet grabbed her light blue pea coat and put it on. Her father and her made their way to the door. She walked down the steps taking one last look at the place she had lived her entire life where her memories had been made. Violet let a tear roll down her cheek, not bothering to wipe it away.

Her father ushered her to come on; she hurried and caught up to him. They walked to the train station in silence. When they reached the grand building they entered. It was bustling with people coming and going all rather tired, stressfully trying to get somewhere. Only to come back. But where violet was going, she would not come back.

Violet heard the loud whistle of the arriving train headed for London. She picked up her bag and hugged her father one last time.

“Goodbye Papa,” she said “I will never ever forget you.”

“I know Vivi,” Her father whispered.

Violet ran towards her now leaving the train she hopped on as the door closed. She walked down the aisle and sat in a vacant seat. Violet looked out the window and her father smiled a sad smile and waved. She waved back and she knew she would never see him again. This was their last goodbye. She could never come back because after all she was the Master of Death.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

**Escape**  
**By: Hanna Wang (Grade 8)**

*more* inside

I opened my eyes and everyone was gone.

I couldn't remember that well what happened before, Bruce and I were in Hugh's old lab, waiting for the rest of the team.

The door creaked open, Garret snuck in with Julian.

"Hey Nova," Garret said as he smiled at me. "Bruce!"

"Is the serum here?" Julian whispered, staring at the old, dirty walls of Hugh's lab.

"Yes," I said, grinning. "We did it."

It had been 2 months since Hugh and Mercury had been killed by Yakov. Yakov Helman, my fists balled up with anger by the thought of him. Hugh who was a brilliant scientist and who didn't even get to see his victory. His serum was the key to saving humanity from Yakov's mind control, it was all we had left.

"So if Hugh was right," Bruce started, "this serum should free the victim from Yakov's mind control right?"

"Yes," I said sternly, my eyes fixed on the tiny vial in Bruce's hands.

"How many of these do we have left?" Julian asked, peering at the safe behind Bruce.

"About 300 vials, we can't afford to waste anything since-" Bruce looked down, everybody was silent.

"Anyways," I said, breaking the awkwardness, "is there any way we could make more? Like with what we have, could we replicate it?"

“We could,” said Bruce. “But by the time we figured that out Yakov would’ve probably made everyone on this planet his puppets.”

Suddenly, the ground started to tremble, I peered out the window to see a jet, a huge one, with a symbol, one I knew- I gasped in shock, I turned around to look at Bruce, Garret and Julian, all looking at me puzzled.

“They found us,” I whispered.

The last thing I could remember before the whole lab was blown up was my blurred vision trying to see what was happening with the entire ceiling crushing me underneath. Yakov’s puppets, or the Dark Assassins as he called it, were dragging Julian and Garret into the jet, and Bruce was nowhere to be seen.

Then, it all went black.

I opened my eyes, I groaned as I tried pulling myself out of the rubble.

“Bruce?” I called weakly as I tried pulling free from the huge chunk of cement that was crushing my poor leg.

“Garret? Julian? Where are you guys?”

I finally got myself unstuck and spotted Bruce under a pile of what used to be the walls of the lab.

“Bruce!” I cried as I limped toward him, he was unconscious as I freed him from the rubble.

He slowly opened his eyes,

“W-what happened? Where's the serum?! Where are Garret and Julian?!” Bruce said as he quickly scrambled to get up, we both had cuts and bruises all over.

“The serum,” I whispered. “T-they blew it all up.”

My eyes started to tear up, Bruce was shaking his head in disbelief.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, NO!” he yelled. “T-this can’t be happening, THAT WAS HIS LIFE’S WORK! HOW- WE’RE ALL DOOMED, YAKOV HAS WON.”

Bruce stumbled as he sat down,

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have yelled, it’s not your fault Nova.”

I stared at the ground,

“T-they also took Julian and Garret...”

Bruce moved beside me, and we stared at the ruins of Hugh’s lab.

“We were so close,” Bruce whispered. “Now what the hell do we do.”

We sat there for a good half an hour and then suddenly we heard footsteps. Bruce and I jerked up in shock. The footsteps were getting closer and closer. Bruce stood in front of me as the shadowed figure walked closer.

The figure took off its hood, it was Mer.

“M-Mercury?!” I gasped softly. “Is that you?!”

“You’re alive!” Bruce cried. “I thought-”

Mercury pointed her gun at us.

“Mer?” I said, confused.

“My name isn’t Mer,” she hissed. “Where is the rest of the serum?”

“There is no more!” Bruce spat. “Yakov is controlling you isn’t he? He sent you to kill us, well go tell him there’s no more since you blew it all up!”

“I don’t believe you.” She shot Bruce in the leg, he cried out in pain.

I threw a brick at her, it knocked her out.

“C’mon Bruce, I’m calling James.”

After 5 minutes, James came with his SwiftJet.

“Ohhh that looks bad-” James said as he looked at Bruce's leg.

“I’m fine,” Bruce mumbled as I helped him onto the jet.

“Veronica, help him with that leg,” James said as he turned on autopilot.

“On it, sir,” a robotic voice replied, suddenly two robotic arms came out of the ceiling and started treating Bruce’s leg.

“So, what happened? Did you guys get the serum?”

Bruce just stared out the window.

“Yakov, he blew up the lab,” I sighed. “Mer- she’s under Yakov’s control, she mentioned there was more than what was in the lab?”

James and Bruce both looked at me.

“Bruce, remember when Hugh used to talk about building an underground lab in Palau?”

Bruce’s eyes lit up, and he grinned.

“Veronica, change the destination to Palau,” James said with a smile.

“On it, sir,” the robotic voice replied.

“How is he doing this?” James suddenly said, “I mean, how is he controlling all these people?”

Bruce sighed, “With this stuff.” He pulled out a bag with a syringe in it, inside was a red liquid.

“What is that?” I gasped, as I stared at the bag.

“This stuff, he injects it into his victims, I found it in Mer’s pocket when you knocked her out,” Bruce said. “It’s how he controls them, it’s some really complicated stuff.”



“So the serum-”

“It’s the only counteragent we have against this stuff,” Bruce finished.

After what felt like hours, the jet finally landed in an empty field in Palau.

“So this is it,” James said, as we walked out of the aircraft.

“I guess so,” I said, looking around. What used to be luxury resorts were now piles of rubble and garbage, everything had been destroyed.

“What happened here?” Bruce said as he looked around in disbelief. “This is not how I remember Palau.”

“Yakov,” James said. “He came here with his little puppets, made more puppets and destroyed the place while doing so.”

“So, how do we plan on finding the serum?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“Well,” James said as he went into full scientist mode, “the serum is made up of something called platonite, I have a specially made device that can detect platonite.”

He went back in the jet and came out with a big round disk with four little propellers around it. James pressed the power button, it turned on and hovered about a foot off the ground.

“Veronica, scan the grounds for any sign of platonite,” James said, looking proud of his creation.

“On it, sir.”

After about 30 seconds, the robotic voice spoke again.

“Platonite detected, GPS location sent to your smartwatch.”

Bruce’s eyes lit up, “What are we waiting for?”

We walked for about 5 minutes until we got to where the platonite detector was sitting.

“This is it,” James said, beaming proudly. “Everybody stand back, Veronica, activate excavate protocol.”

We all stepped back as the little detector suddenly started to whirr, then it blew a hole in the ground.

After all the dust cleared, we all slowly approached the hole in the ground. There it was, a hidden lab – Hugh’s Lab! We did it! It was filled with tiny vials of the serum, which Hugh had nicknamed ‘The Freeing Solution.’

“We did it!” Bruce gasped, as we all jumped into the lab.

“Veronica, how many vials of this stuff are in here?”

“About 2000, sir.”

“We need a dispersal device,” I said. “None of this can go to waste, it’s all we got left.”

“I know a way I can turn this stuff into gas bombs, it’ll be more convenient and we won’t have to use as much,” James said.

We took the vials into the jet as James and Bruce worked on the dispersal devices. After about an hour, we were all set and ready.

“Do we have a plan?” I asked.

“Free everybody under Yakov’s control, kill Yakov, destroy the last of his mind controlling serum.”

We all looked at each other, this was going to be a challenge.

“Yakov’s lair, it’s in Monaco, I bet that’s where he’s controlling everybody,” I said. “But it’s heavily protected, he’s got the military under his control.”

“Then I guess that’s the first place we’re going to drop these bombs,” Bruce said. “Nova, you go to Monaco, free everybody there and kill Yakov, James can go with you to destroy his serum.”

I nodded.

“I’ll go and free everybody else,” Bruce said, we all put on our suits and were ready to fight.

“Stay safe,” I smiled at Bruce as I jumped out of the jet. James followed right behind me.

“Veronica, activate protection protocol on Suits 1 and 2,” I said as James threw one of our smoke bombs down as Yakov’s Dark Assassins fired at us.

As soon as the smoke spread among the people, they were free from Yakov’s control. They saw us and immediately knew what happened.

We smiled at them as we ran into the building.

“James, go find the serum, I’ll go free the others,” I said, James winked at me and left.

I walked down corridors after corridors, but there was no one. Suddenly, someone lunged at me from behind, pushing me down to the ground and choking me. I threw one of the smoke bombs as I gasped for air. They let go as soon as the serum hit them, I rolled over to see – it was Mercury.

“W-What,” she stuttered as she realized. “Oh god, please tell me I didn’t hurt anyone.”

I crawled over and hugged her, “It’s ok, Mer, you’re free,” I said as happy tears streamed down our faces.

After a long hug, I helped Mer up.

“Listen Mer, I need you to tell me where everybody else is, where Yakov is.”

She nodded, “Come with me.”

She led me up a dark hallway, and into a room. She pressed a few buttons on the wall and suddenly, the room started moving up, like an elevator.

The door opened, and there he was. Yakov Helman, sitting at his desk.

"I've been waiting for you," Yakov said with an evil grin on his face. "How's Hugh?"

My face turned red with anger, "Yakov you've lost, we won now give up."

"Or have I?" he said. "Garret, Julian, your next mission is here."

I gasped in shock as Garret and Julian walked out, I quickly threw a smoke bomb at them.

Yakov looked at me in shock, "There's more?! I thought I destroyed it all!" He said, his plump hands banging on his desk.

"You thought," I snickered. "Garret, Julian, tie him up."

They smiled and Mer and I walked around to Yakov's control room.

There was a big screen with all the coordinates and locations of his puppets on a map. I called Bruce.

"Hey, got into Yakov's tracking systems, I just sent you the coordinates of every single one of his puppets, now go free them," I said. "And also, we've got Yakov under control, so don't worry."

"Great work Nova," Bruce said over the phone. "I'll have them all freed in no time."

We went back down to meet with James.

"Did you do it?" I asked.

"Blew it all up, nothing left," said James with a smirk.

"So I guess our work is done here," I said, as Bruce helped me up onto the jet.

"Is the place cleared?" Bruce asked.

“Yep, everyone is off except Yakov,” Julian replied.

“Veronica, blow this place up,” James said, we took off as the place went up in flames.

“This was fun,” I said as James cranked up the music. We all smiled at each other.

Finally, the end of Yakov Helman.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

**At the Bottom of the Ocean**  
**By: Camden Cryderman (Gr. 8)**

*more* inside

The sound of the waves crashing against the side of the ship deafened the terrified crew. As each one hit, the ship seemed to sink lower and lower; it was just a matter of time before they were all done for. As the crew huddled on the deck, screams echoed through the night. Everyone knew it was just a bit of time until the storm put them six feet under. But one of the men did not shout, or yell, or cry, or pray, for he was much too tired for that.

The man's name was Bjørn Larsen, and he was the youngest man on the ship at only 18 years old. He had always been the outcast in the crew, never quite fitting the norm. His dazzling silver hair, his bony face, his skinny body, and his determination for greatness wasn't accepted by the burly and strong Norwegian men. Most days, the crew members would take away Bjørn's food from the dining hall, because he was too small, and needed to offer it to the ones who "needed it more." Almost a week passed, and Bjørn had not had a single thing to eat; Bjørn was dying.

So as he laid there, weak and fragile, he accepted the fate of his death. He closed his ice-blue eyes and prayed that the afterlife in Valhalla would offer him more life than this one did. One loud crash and the ship was knocked over. All Bjørn could remember was watching the people he had been bullied by his whole life getting crushed by the waves and debris from the boat. He smiled as his ragdolled body fell from the deck, and was submerged into the freezing water.

When Bjørn's consciousness was regained, he found himself lying in rough sand. His whole body was aching from the violent churning and constant moving of the tide he was under. The moment he tried to lift his body from the ground below, unbearable pain shot up his spine, and through his whole body. He tried to scream, but all that came out was a muffled grunt. He laid back down on the damp shore of the land.

Bjørn swiftly sat up, realizing that he was on unknown land. He looked at his surroundings. Where was he? He tried to get up, but the pain was too intense. When he finally accepted that he couldn't walk around, he decided to search for any clues of where he could be. As he looked around, there was no sign of debris from the ship or the lifeless bodies of the men who ascended to the afterlife that day. How far was he from the spot where the incident happened?

As he tried to piece together what could've happened and where he was, he was reminded that he hadn't eaten in weeks. He knew that he had to find food whether or not he could walk. He mentally prepared himself for the pain he was about to face. Luckily, he found a large piece of wood beside him. He quickly identified the wood as palm. This confused him even more. How could he have possibly gone from the northern waters of the Atlantic Ocean, to somewhere with palm trees? He suddenly realized that the climate here was significantly warmer than anything he had ever experienced before in his homeland; the small village in northern Norway didn't necessarily have the warmest summers ever.

While Bjørn was thinking about home, creatures slowly crept out from behind the rocks dividing him from the large trees on the unknown island. The ones who were walking had some sort of a limp, and some of them floated as if a consistent stream of air was being pushed out from underneath them. These creatures were very bright and vivid colours;

around half of them were glistening light blue, and the other half a bright neon purple. It almost seemed like the sides of them dissolved into the thick and humid air around them. There's no other way Bjørn could describe their appearance, for he was starving and was under the influence of his mind battling itself.

The world slowly slipped from reality as colours around Bjørn became lighter and lighter. He was lifted off the ground by an invisible force that he could not feel. As Bjørn looked around through the light pink and purple clouds above him, he saw more of these creatures. They were all lined up, and seemed to be pulling on something; maybe a rope. The faster they pulled, the faster Bjørn's body was raised into the sky. Bjørn didn't realize that they were controlling his levitation until it was too late.

A word was shouted by a strong deep voice in a language that was unknown to Bjørn, but these hazy cloud creatures seemed to understand. They abruptly let go of the unseeable string, and Bjørn fell. He lost complete control as his body was jolted and shaken from the vigorous force of gravity. His body spun, shook, and soared through the evening sky. As the ground got closer and closer, the world seemed to turn back to reality. The colours became dark, the creatures disappeared, and the feeling of falling was lost in the endless valleys of Bjørn's hallucinations. He quickly became hot all over, as the world continued to darken. Bjørn looked at the world for the last time before tumbling into an unconscious state. His unresponsive body continued to fall, as the silver of his hair shone in the sky. It looked as though a star was lost in the atmosphere of the Earth, and plummeted towards its core. The star began to lose its light, and when the star met land, it died.

Bjørn didn't die that day; he was dead much before that. He died in the freezing waters the night of the crash. As he advanced to the mighty depths of Valhalla, the afterlife gave him



a test, and he failed. The man that we thought was the victim of the horrible doings of others was the very man who killed them, as he was the man responsible for sinking the boat. He had always dreamed of getting revenge on the very people who lie at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, even if it meant sacrificing his own life to do it. His starvation played games in his mind. As Bjørn's body slowly began to eat itself away, all of the kindness and emotion in his body left first. So at the bottom of the ocean lies someone who died half the man he could've become.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### Of Whom Came the Cherry Blossoms? By: William Wang (Gr. 11)

*more* inside

*The ruins have given us yet another treasure. Our expeditions found what appears to be a transcription of a sermon, presumably by the shrine maidens who once operated there. It was accompanied by what we assume to be a kitsune shrine maiden's mask – perhaps this is one of their stories? But I ultimately I am not the expert, so make of it what you will.*

*Yours,*

*K.*

*P.S. Is the script not so incredibly elegant? I am awestruck at its flow...*

No longer can we remember the times when the cherry blossom did not bloom; when they took root neither in the soil, nor in our thoughts and dreams. But even now, who has let its story give rise in their mind? Who can recall not of the cherry blossoms, but of why the cherry blossoms came to be? Who can recall she who graced us with its presence, and shortly thereafter left us? Or he who stood in their place before the blossoms?

My own reminiscences of this tale linger vividly, and I hope it will take hold to you as well. For that is what Komi, no matter where she might reside, wishes of us. Yet I cannot tell the tale as she would have. If she herself were asked to recount it, she would spout only the praises of the man who set it into motion. It would be but a mockery to not follow suit, even if my efforts would be in vain.

The tale of Manko, woven in a world of the same threads as ours, is but far from the joyous tales of our youth. No... it was the furthest from such. The gods which shaped it were not the epitomes of grace we honor today – they lived not for those of the world, but for the

world itself. Their eternity cursed them, though as content amongst themselves as they could have been. Cold-hearted they were. Yes... that was undoubtedly how the world of Manko saw our gods.

And perhaps the coldest was she who ruled with a heart forged in the Earth's iron, and a gavel of an even greater hardness: Komi. The goddess of justice stood for all that was right in the world, and brought only punishment down upon that which was not. It was a cruel justice. But it was not unfair. Least unfair of it all were her judgements unto those she oversaw. The village of Imari was simply one of many who fell from grace under her decrees. Designated the final resting place of criminals and their families, resentment became but a pervasive serpent, slithering its way amongst its peoples. And none there could bring themselves to honor the goddess of justice.

Justice. What a peculiar word it must have been to them all – except for Manko. Who else could it be to think otherwise? Only Manko, after all, could be the one to come to terms with the true nature of justice. For his parents lamented not the misfortune of their son's upbringing, but the misfortune of themselves. His friends sought not the bonds which Manko so dearly craved, but the entertainment he could bring to them, by his own will or at their hands. Justice itself had not once befallen him, yet amongst its failures had Manko found hope. A naïve hope, perhaps, but a hope unwavering. Hope for that which always plagued him to be compensated. Justice was, he knew, eternal and absolute – that which would be victorious, but not cold. For the greatest justice, Manko was certain, was not that which felled the most horrible foes or quelled the fiercest arguments. It was that which both soothed the anger-wrought soul and blew over the quietest peace.

And it was with these thoughts that Manko approached the Temple of Komi that one prophetic day. Still caked in the dirt and bitterness of neglect, he thought the temple an injustice to justice itself. A sigh barely slipped past his lips, realizing that it was only he who could remedy it. And after just three arduous hours, it was complete. Although far from perfect, Manko formed a tiny smile. If not this, then what sign of faith could possibly bring Komi back to the village of Imari? So he let his eyes fall shut, his hands clasp together, and his soul take control. It sang to the heavens. A song of repent and hope rang out, ringing even the heart of iron. It could only but listen to its melody. And Komi was drawn closer. Closer with every note. Manko himself became lost in its lamenting tune.

“You must have the mental fortitude or one of the gods themselves to request my presence here, of all places.” Manko’s eyes shot open, lying upon the graceful outline who now stood before him. She was all Manko had thought Komi to look, but beautiful as well. The goddess of justice was the most beautiful justice unto herself. That was all he could describe her as. And her beautiful eyes stared, not at Manko’s barely unwavering figure, but at his soul which lay within. There she found a soul with true intent to meet her. It surprised her, but she maintained her composure. Most men would be frightened beyond their wits to confront her, eye-to-eye. Those who were anything but had no reason to.

Yet Manko was different. “I have neither courage nor foolhardiness, and still I stand here before you. For you and I, Komi, are not so different.”

“You dare address me as an equal?” She pursed her lips ever so slightly. “You and I are far from it. A goddess and the son of criminals can hardly be compared, no? I advise you to care for the wellness of your tongue, lest I lash out and tear it from you.”

“But all is the same under the name of justice, is it not? Neither the mortal man nor the ever-gazing god may escape its reach. Yet I am certain you are already aware of such a fact.”

Startled by his sheer audacity, Komi reeled, if only for a second. She passed her hand through her hair, flicking it back in a motion of dominance. “You fool. I am justice itself.”

Silence ensued. “I am ashamed. I had hoped that one with as much conviction as you would have something to say in response.” Komi turned to leave.

“Please, wait.” Desperation seeped into his voice. And that desperation carved a break in time for him to take a breath. “Justice... why is justice only that which creates a balance? Where is the justice in vengeance for equality’s sake? Is that the justice which is best?”

But it was too late. The goddess of justice had already left the temple.

A singular tear welled up in his left eye, but he blinked it back, forbidding it to fall. What he had worked towards had dissipated in a matter of moments. One wrong utterance and Komi had disregarded all he had to say. What more could possibly have not fallen his way? Another injustice, he knew it was. Yet he stood up once more, as only could be done.

Manko was not, however, the only to leave the temple dissatisfied. His final words chased Komi back to her realm of thought. They were haunting. They came from a place deep within the soul of that mortal, she knew, but she knew not what they meant. The vengeance for equality’s sake... But was justice, she exclaimed, not that which kept the order of the universe? After all, there was only it to cling the fabric of society of together – the stitches holding each and every patch on the quilt of life in its place.

So what could he have meant? What did it mean at all? For Komi knew more than any that desperation brought men back to where they began – with the truth. Only in desperation did men caught in the tangle of lies finally admit the truth, where they were more often than

not the primal bellows of their soul, calling out truths to gain but a shred of control in a contorted situation. For three days and three nights Komi thought on this. But there was nothing; no reasoning she could give rise to.

So there was, she realized, only one thing to be done. But she did not like the prospect of admitting defeat. Yet was it not, she thought, the right thing to do? A conflict raged inside her head, pulling her mind in opposite directions, making her wholly unprepared for the summons which came, quite early in the morn. Komi, unfocused and frustrated, tumbled out from her mind, landing back to a temple which she found quite too recognizable. Before her stood a figurehead of shock, as Manko gazed back at her, gaping.

“Who has taken hold of your tongue? Did you not expect me to arrive?” Komi snapped, far from pleased with the rough journey back down to the Earth. She rose and composed herself. “You. It is you whose words have plagued me so greatly these past three days.” She stepped forwards, lightly and gracefully stepping down from the steps of her likeness. “And it is I who shall ask for a favor. Your words – what is it they meant? There exists no justice than my own, yet I cannot find fault with that which you spoke. The desperation of your heart told me so. So I command of you – speak.”

But all Manko could conceive of was a desire for laughter. Thus he laughed, much to the dismay of his own mind, and the incredulity of the goddess. He raised his hand at her, motioning to give him pause. Komi could but oblige. It took just a minute for him to recover, and once he had, he spoke, with the confidence the goddess had given him: “You know as well as I that none could claim to understand the true nature of justice. Much less to tell you of what they mean, in but a day’s worth of speech.”

“So three days.”

“No, I would require twelve, I-”

“Three days. It was not a question. I will await your first call in five days, and five days after your second, and the final after five more. And with those three days of speech you shall tell me the meanings of your words.”

There was nothing else needed to be said. And so each took their leave.

Over the next fourteen days, Manko told two stories. Stories of justice, just as he had promised. The justices of mankind. On both of the two days he found the goddess always ready for his call, anticipating the precise time of her summons. And naturally she lent her ear generously, whose presence Manko quite enjoyed. That first day he told her first of the man’s own justice – that which his own life was obligated to pursue. The justice composing the conviction which keeps a man arising from his laurels each and every day, to seek the justice of which he lives in. Where can man’s own purpose, Manko asked her, come from, if not from his own justice within? And this tale came to be what we recall now as the First Dialect.

On the second day of stories came a tale of a man’s justice against his parents. Manko spoke to Komi of the unequal justices – those actions which are not equal, yet just. How might justice fare against that which inequality creates? For man’s right to conviction stops right when it tramples another’s right to his; we know that well. But when a parent works against the justice their child deserves, has the child not the right to fight back? To struggle against this injustice? And as such Komi learned of the Second Dialect.

Yet as all things do, the tales came quickly to an end. Though a fortnight might have lasted a century if time had only inched forward, it sped quickly when it became that which Komi longed so desperately to live through. For Manko and she knew – that whatever the final

tale might entail, the greatest was left for last, as in all things too. And as that date drew near, Komi gave little heed to anything else – waiting only for Manko's summons.

But on that date came nothing. The goddess, in her confusion, sped quickly to Earth herself. She feared the worst, and at first, her suspicion was but confirmed – no one stood in the temple. Of what irony, thought she, could this be? And from that thought rose an anger. Anger was far from that which Komi could usually feel – for what in the mortal realm bring her emotion? Yet it was that feeling, one from a man in the mortal realm which spurred her onwards, into the heart of Imari.

Komi knew not where Manko lived, but it took no longer than a minute to find him. She found him not in his own house, but in lazy relaxation beside a young sapling. Her anger spilled out into the air, quelling the chatter of the birds, but rattling them into flight nonetheless.

"Now where has my little storyteller ran off to? Does he see it fit to deny a goddess the story he vowed to tell? Or perhaps he wishes to incite my wrath, to fulfill that purpose all men wish to?" She spat the last phrase, only hesitating to spit once again:

"Is this the justice you spoke of? Is this the justice you claim all men should pursue? Where men do as they please to satisfy themselves, and lash back at those who oppose them? They certainly find their justice within, and fight back against those they feel trample theirs. But what of the order? What of the balance? You can hardly claim this to be justice."

A long silence ensued. It was broken, by neither words of apology or defiance, but by laughter, as Manko had done scarcely more than two weeks prior. But this laughter brought neither indignation nor dismay to either of the two. It ended with just eight words:

"You are not yet ready for that story."



Another silence, broken this time by a wave of rage. For Komi understood not how she was unprepared, nor did she believe she was unfit to hear it. And in that fit of rage her hand lashed out, as it had against the village of Imari, all those years ago. She caught Manko's likeness: unwavering, just as it had been when he first met her. Where was his fear? And again her hand lashed out. There came no reaction once again. And on the third lash came an awful crack, as she regretted not her actions. She knew Manko must be put to justice for his defiance.

But her rage faded instantaneously to that regret she had just lacked at the sight of his blood. Komi felt weak – her strength sapped at the realization of her actions. And still all Manko did was laugh. More weakly did he laugh this time, but still it was that laugh which had brought Komi to silence twice before. It failed not this time either.

"And this unto itself," came the cracked words of a dying man, "is the very definition of justice. But not in the way we sought so long for. Where is that, Komi? Where is the justice which we pursued? My actions were meant to teach you of the justice of tolerance. For that is the greatest justice."

There came but silence from the goddess in shock.

"As my story now comes to a close, I ask of you one final favor: allow me to teach beyond the limits of my body. Allow me to serve the one purpose I have lived for. Allow me to pursue the justice I desire. Lament my loss little, though my end comes in the first act of our play. For I am still there backstage, waiting to be spoken of."

But Komi refused to let Manko go. She refused to let herself fail him.

"You will," she spoke gently, "be the ones to teach the lessons of justice yourself. Fear not, for your journey ends not here."

And out reached Komi's arm, slow and purposeful, but without the grace she had always maintained. For this was hardly a time for grace. From his fading body did she craft the tree to remember his loss. That first cherry blossom was grown right here, in the soil before which we stand. For centuries has it blown in the wind, always leaning but refusing to break loose. It holds both the grace of justice which Komi learned to pursue and the firmness of it which she retained. But most of all, once a year the cherry blossom brings flowers – if only for a short time – to blow over the quietest peace, and soothe the anger-wrought soul.

# Senior Division Grades 9-12

**Blue Magic**  
**By: Laura Forgrave (Gr. 8)**

*more* inside

Melina hovered her fingers over the fine threads on the loom. She murmured, “Nasia Halum,” and watched as the threads danced together to create a tapestry before her eyes. She glanced up at the clock. She would have to pack up soon in order to arrive in time for the festival.

\*\*\*

Etalia’s eyes darted at the people around her as she drifted up the cobblestone street toward the city’s gates. Her black tunic drifted down to her ankles and her long blonde hair was tightly tied back into a bun. The only thing unusual about her appearance was her hands, which she kept pressed firmly against the outside of her thighs. As she passed through the gate, she murmured some words softly under her breath and coins flew from her pocket into the sleeping gate keeper’s pouch. She glanced up at the sun. She would arrive just in time for the festival.

\*\*\*

Stylla crept along the apex of a darkened rooftop. She was dressed all in black, and a hooded cloak covered her shadowy hair. Her eyes, as dark as an abyss, gazed studiously at the town square. “Oh, dragon’s teeth!” she exclaimed. She had misjudged her timing. She would have to wait until after the festival to complete her task. She leaned against the rooftop. There was nothing to do but sit and watch and wait.

\*\*\*

Etalia's eyes glanced around, looking at her surroundings. To most passersby, she was nothing more than another visitor, coming to town for the festival. But in truth, she was something much more serious. An invader. A traitor. A spy.

The festival was a window to the past, a glimmer of the magic that used to be. A contest, of sorts, but with occasionally dire consequences. For if you were too talented, you disappeared, never to be seen again. The Empire encouraged the festival, but town folk generally agreed that it was just the Emperor's way of picking out the wisplings. That was why Etalia could not afford to be caught. She was a wonderling, a former wispling, and an extremely powerful sorcerer. This year, it was her task to go to the festival and recruit people with astounding magical talent to join the Sorcerer's Guild. It was difficult, however, to communicate with those who had magical potential before the Garuth captured them. Etalia winced as she remembered the incident last year that had forced her to come here alone. A pang resounded in her heart as she thought of her mother. Etalia was the only one who could save her. She was the only one left to save *everyone*. She had no choice. She would have to try her best. With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders. Ensuring her hands never left her thighs, she took a seat in the spectator stands.

\*\*\*

"Selia monga blastiray," Melina repeated over and over. She needed to perform this spell perfectly. She needed to be close enough to the real spell to win the festival and the prize money for her family, but mess up in such a way that the Garuth, the Emperor's henchman, didn't think she was worth arresting. The dungeons were already full from the horrific chaos of last year's festival, so hopefully her goal wasn't too hard. She shuddered remembering the blasts of magic and clangs of weapons from the battle last year. Suddenly,

there was a bright flash of light and a loud BANG! above her. She looked up as the remnants of an exploded fireball floated down to the ground around her. She glanced down at her hands. They were glowing a pale blue: the colour of illegal advanced magic. Whoops. She had accidentally performed the spell correctly. She looked up to see an entire battalion of Garuth surrounding her. There was no way she could fight them all. She craned her neck in the hopes of seeing one last glimpse of her family before being taken away, but all she could see was a girl about her age, maybe 12 or 13, jumping out of her seat. As she stood, her palm slipped from her thigh for just a second, and Melina saw a glimpse of bright blue light, the sign of a sorcerer with phenomenal powers. The Garuth started to advance, but were stopped by a seemingly invisible wall. On closer inspection, Melina noticed a pale purple bubble surrounding her. Was it a force field? She had only heard about those in myths. The girl she had seen earlier slipped between two Garuth and into the force field, unharmed.

“Come on, I can only hold the field for so long,” the girl said. Before Melina could reply, she found herself floating in the air, held up by an invisible force. *Levitation*, she realized. The girl pulled them both over to the nearest rooftop, where they landed safely. “We need to get out of the city before the Garuth catch us. I have somewhere we can hide. I’m not going to hurt you, I’m saving your life. I’m Etalia, by the way.” And with that she was off, bounding to the next rooftop with the help of some minor levitation. She turned around. “Oh right, you probably can’t levitate yourself yet.” With a flick of her finger, she was levitating both of them. *Probably can’t levitate? Of course I can’t! Who is this girl?* Melina thought. Soon they were bounding from rooftop to rooftop, with the Garuth following close behind.

\*\*\*

“Dragon’s teeth and salamander bones,” Stylla groaned. It looked like there was a commotion at the festival. She had seen a fireball explode into the air. That was definitely illegal magic. It would probably be hours before she could report back to her commander. She noticed two figures bounding along rooftops, rapidly approaching her. That was also illegal! Several Garuth were now on the rooftops, struggling to keep up with them. She was just about to duck out of sight when she was lifted up into the air. Two girls ran past her and Stylla found herself being pulled behind them as they continued over houses. “What did you do that for?” she exclaimed.

“Cut me a break. You were either going to be trampled by the Garuth, or questioned for answers you don’t have. I’m saving your life,” the blonde-haired girl said. Her teeth gritted noticeably as she spoke, and Stylla suspected she was the one keeping them all levitated.

“She’s Etalia, and I’m Melina,” the second girl explained apologetically. “Don’t worry, this is new for me too.” Etalia was growing visibly exhausted, and her whole body was trembling. She managed to pull them just over the city gates, and they made a rough landing in a nearby forest. Etalia collapsed to the ground immediately, but still kept her hands pressed against her sides.

“We need to keep moving, but I’ve used up all my energy. I’ll be lucky if I can even walk, let alone perform spells,” Etalia sighed. It was getting quite dark now. “Melina, we will have to see if you can do the spell to unlock my magical reserve. Your hands were glowing blue when you made the fireball, though, and this spell requires hand signals. The Garuth will see the blue light, so Stylla, I guess you’ll have to do those,” she explained.

“Wait! I didn’t ask to come here, you know. It isn’t MY fault you’re on the run from the Garuth. Now you’re asking me to help you perform an illegal spell? Are you serious?! And

perhaps you should have thought about asking me who I was before talking all about illegal magic. You're clearly part of a magical guild. I thought we had captured them all, but I guess the magic folk left some children at home when they came to town last year. The Emperor will surely be pleased with his newest captives. By the way, I work for the Prevention of Magic: Children's Division. I have enough information to turn you in." In one swift movement, Stylla grabbed Etalia with one hand and Melina with the other. They were both too weak to resist.

With the mention of the Children's Division, Etalia knew what she had to do. Stylla could yell for guards any second now. "Melina, curl your hands into fists and then loosen them again. REINSTINERATE!" With a flash of blue light, Stylla's eyes widened. She dropped Melina and Etalia onto the forest floor.

"Who... How... Where..." Stylla murmured to the other girls, "I'm on your side?"

At the exact same time, guards shot a golden flare into the sky, revealing their location. Heavy footsteps thundered towards them.

The energy drain from the spell kicked in. Etalia, Melina and Stylla failed to notice the golden marks on their wrists as they fell unconscious to the ground.

\*\*\*

"Remind me never to do that again," Etalia groaned. She reached up to stretch out her arms, only to find they were restrained by chains. Her mind whirled as the events of the past few hours came flooding back to her. A drip of water fell onto her head, and she looked up to the cracked stone ceiling. About five feet away from her were the bars of her cell. Cells stretched into the distance as far as her eyes could see in the dim light. *I must be in the palace dungeons, she realized. I've failed my mission. I'm captured. All hope is lost.*

*Not entirely,* said the voice in the back of her head. *Don't forget the spell you cast that drained energy from all three of you.*

Of course! Hopefully she had unlocked memories in Stylla's mind that would hold useful information. She noticed that Stylla and Melina were sleeping right next to her. They must have been arrested as well. She glanced at her own palms. No blue light to be seen. She felt very weak. She had blown through every last ounce of power in her body. She nudged Stylla's leg, who woke with a start.

"What did you do to me? My life was fine, and now I have all these horrible memories of the Emperor hurting sorcerers! My commander has been hiding memories from me my whole life!" With this outburst, Melina awoke.

"Wait, where are we, what happened? The last thing I remember is a blast of golden light."

"We are in the palace dungeons," Etalia said with a grimace. "The last place in the world I want to be right now."

As Etalia explained the details of the spell she had cast and her plans for the future, color slowly returned to her cheeks, and blue light reappeared in her palms.

"I was hoping to train you to be a sorcerer, Melina, but that might not work out. At least I will probably be able to get some important information out of Stylla's memories that will help protect the entire magical community," Etalia finished, glancing down at her hands. "It looks like my powers are returning. Let's get some more light in here. Ignous!" A glowing blue orb flowed above her head.



"Looks like they have not gotten around to restricting your powers yet," said a quiet, but familiar voice from the cell across from them. They looked up to see a woman with frayed blonde hair looking at them.

"Mom?" Etalia gasped.

"Etalia, my dear, it's so good to see you. Although I wish it was not in here," her mom replied, looking around her in disgust. Suddenly her mother's eyes widened, noticing the golden marks on the three girls' wrists. "No... It can't be... I thought they were gone forever...Is the legend real?"

"Who is gone, Mom?" Etalia asked, concerned.

"Quick, we probably don't have much time until the guards come to restrict your powers. Listen to me. I need you to perform a spell on my other daugh- I mean, that girl with the black hair next to you, but that other girl has to do the hand signs. If I'm right, we will all have a lot to talk about."

"Mom, talk about what?"

"Never mind that. Just trust me. You can do this. Repeat after me. Uncoverate, Unvielerate, Discooverate. The girl with the brown hair, copy my hands."

"What? Why are you casting another spell on me!" Stylla shouted.

"Uncoverate, Unvielerate, Discooverate!" Etalia chanted.

"Where do I lay my hands now?" Melina asked.

"On her temples, dear."

Wham! The entire dungeon filled with golden light. Stylla's eyes widened, then she collapsed onto the floor in a daze. Her hair had turned blonde. Her eyes, the brightest blue. The same had happened to Melina. They looked exactly like.... *Etalia*. Their hands flickered

with blue light, which quickly disappeared. The hands of Etalia, Melina and Stylla snapped together and glowed with golden light. Melina gasped, but it was nothing compared to the reaction of Etalia's mom.

"Listen, daughters, there is not time to explain it all, so listen closely. Etalia, this was meant to be. All of you, I love you more than you can ever know. I hope to see you again, wherever that may be. Hopefully not here." She smiled. "Now pay attention, and don't be afraid to take a leap. Etalia, remember the legend."

Guards burst into the dungeon, and the three girls were dragged into the palace.

\*\*\*

*Click.* Etalia understood what was happening. *No, it can't be. That's just insane. I'm overtired, or Mom's confused. Maybe I performed the spell wrong?* Etalia glanced at their golden hands. *Dragon's teeth. This is real.*

Finally, they reached the throne room, their hands still snapped together with golden light. Etalia could not stop thinking about the second last stanza of The Legend of Three.

*Three siblings unite with golden light*

*They, with all their might shalt fight*

*To save the day, to restore power,*

*They shalt be our saviours in the darkest hour.*

But for the prophecy to be true, they would have to be siblings. How was that possible? The prophecy was also surprisingly vague about HOW to save the world.

*How wilt they save the land? Thee ask.*

*They shalt complete a simple task.*

*30 fingers dig into the ground, then-*

*A blast of light, a ringing sound,  
Spreading glory all around.*

The three girls walked into the throne room in chains, connected together with golden light, and very afraid. While most of Etalia's mind was a whirlwind of events, she was trying to get a small part of her brain to think logically.

*Okay, how can I get us out of this mess?* Etalia wondered. Guards had restricted their magic before they had left the dungeon. *You're not strong enough to overpower the guards, and you don't have anything to trade in exchange for your freedom. Unless you figure out how to complete the prophecy, we're doomed.*

With that pleasant thought, the Emperor spoke. "Prisoners. Bow to me." The guards hastened to press Etalia, Melina and Stylla onto their knees, but they stood firm.

Stylla was tired of taking orders from the Empire her whole life. *If nothing else, at least I can annoy him*, she thought. She took a deep breath, narrowed her eyes, and spoke. "I will not bow to *you*," she said angrily.

"Fine, have it your way, don't bow," the Emperor replied, an evil smirk crossing his face. He was surprisingly young, maybe only three or four years older than Etalia. His eyes glinted red in the firelight of the torches on the wall. "Let's begin your trial. Names?"

"No," Stylla said aloud.

*Good, she's stalling for time*, Etalia thought.

"I asked you a question, and I expect an answer," the Emperor glared at them. After a pause, he stamped his foot on the ground. "You're wasting my time! You're number one, two and three," he yelled, pointing to Stylla, Melina and Etalia in turn. "Number three, you are accused of single-handedly interfering with the orders of guards, creating a force field,

practicing levitation, leaving the city without permission and the overall act of being a sorcerer.”

Etalia’s mind raced. *What can I do? What can I do? What can I do?*

“Technically, she *was* allowed to leave the city. She doesn't even live in the Empire, she was just visiting for the festival. She can come and go as she pleases,” Stylla added.

The Emperor growled in frustration.

Etalia noticed some strange marks on their hands. All three of them had scars on their fingertips. They must have appeared as part of the spell.

“Number three, do you plead innocent or guilty?” The Emperor shouted.

Etalia looked towards the floor. She suddenly noticed that the same marks on her hands were also carved into the throne room floor, right next to 30 small circular holes. Etalia suddenly had a thought: *Maybe this is where we need to dig our fingers into the ground!* “Put your fingers in the holes!” she screamed.

The three girls rushed to fit their fingers into the holes with their palms still connected. The guards just stared at them, confused. Etalia hoped for the best. For a second, nothing happened.

Then, there was a blast of golden light. The chains on the girls disintegrated into dust. Etalia and Melina’s hands glowed blue once again. Their magic was no longer restricted. The guards rushed towards the girls, but were stopped by a force field that had appeared around them. Etalia looked around in amazement. “Look!” Melina gasped. She nodded towards their fingers. The scars on their fingers and the marks on the floor, now that they were connected, spelled out three words: Let Magic Live.

\*\*\*

The next month was a busy one. All the sorcerers had been released from the dungeon with their powers restored as part of the prophecy. After finding his dungeons empty and force fields surrounding all members of the magical community, the Emperor gave up and fled back to his homeland with his guards following close behind. Etalia, Melina and Stylla took over the throne, with Etalia's mother as their chief advisor. The three girls *were* siblings, but had accidentally been separated at birth, with Melina ending up adopted by town folk, and Stylla stolen by dark forces. Together once again, they ruled over the kingdom with justice and equality, and did their best to ensure that the Emperor would never take over the kingdom again.

And everything went smoothly for generations, until one day over a hundred years later when Etalia's great-great granddaughter looked out the window and saw...

But that's a story for another day.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### The Great Squirrel War By: Daniel James (Gr. 9)

*more* inside

You may have been in a park once and seen a squirrel chase a bird or vice versa, but to the trained eye it's so much more...

Here lies the tale of a battle over the rule of a park. A battle between talons and teeth, feathers and fur, Birds and Squirrels.

. . . . .

"Marcona, report to the boardroom immediately," the PA blares into the dorms. Marcy (as she prefers to be called) is a grey squirrel, always wearing a purple leather jacket over her light grey fur and a red beanie. She jumps off her bed towards the exit, when she exits into the open air she takes a few paces back and sprints up the rough bark of the enormous walnut tree which the squirrels had turned into their military base. She stops about halfway up the tree and opens the door into the boardroom.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, this is quite the urgent matter." In the room sits a table, and at the table sits a stout squirrel in an army jacket with a super bushy tail, he's Commander Fluffs. (Of all the names for a commander...) "Our best code breaker and maker, Cheeks, is in bird custody. The birds have him running on 'the wheel', and if he dies so do his codes, the old coot never told anybody how to decode his theorem. You will have to make the perilous journey to The Great Oak, the highest security tree in the park as well as the bird's headquarters and retrieve Cheeks so we can finally win this war. Are you up to the task?"

"Yes sir, I'll be in and out as quickly as possible." Marcy gives the commander a quick salute and proceeds to skitter down the tree towards the battlefield.

. . . . .

Inside the hangar near the base of The Great Oak, Private Tweets and Sergeant Boid participate in a heated conversation...

“Private Tweets, what are you doing!?” says Sergeant Boid, quite alarmed. “You should to be oiling the seed blasters on the Phoenix suits!”

The Phoenix is a large exoskeleton flying suit. It has an all glass cockpit bubble surrounding the pilots head and a reinforced set of wing covers with seed-blasters under, small turbines over and a nut-bomb-bay under the belly.

“I got you a poppy seed tart instead sir!” says Tweets rushing over to the old Robin with a yellow pastry on his black wing. “I’ll finish tomorrow when the rookies do target practice sir.”

“They do practice today!” yells Boid angrily. Boid and Tweets look out of the hangar towards the sky to see a small bird take off in his suit, line up with the target, and moments after the pilot leaps out and swoops safely to the ground, explode. Tweets decides it would be a good time to finish oiling the blasters, before Boid turns him into a very flat sparrow.

. . . . .

Marcy, with a backpack full of equipment and an anti-seed jacket, runs across the barren landscape between The Great Oak and The Walnut. The turf shows the scars of battle, shards of glass, rusty old war machines of all sorts, and ammunition littering the once beautiful landscape of manicured grass and flower beds. Suddenly, a squadron of 10 Phoenix’s on patrol cruise over the battlefield. Marcy sprints toward a fallen Phoenix suit and shuffles under the wing, out of sight of the squadron above. After the patrol passes she comes out from under her cover and proceeds to make the trip towards the duck pond.

The duck pond is a small body of water right near the base of The Great Oak. The many foul residents of the pond are in alliance with the birds, and act a last line of defence in case of emergency. Marcy leaps, runs and rolls around in a desperate attempt to make it to the duck pond before dark, undetected. She finally makes it to the pond and sets up camp in a tall birch tree near the banks of the pond and sleeps undisturbed in her 'quick sleep kit' nest.

. . . . .

"Ok, last bomb," Tweets says to himself as he takes a giant acorn, places it in a vice and crushes it into a powder, he adds the powder into a bucket and hops over to the wall where he whistles into the intercom and Sergeant Boid picks up.

"Hello, this is Boid."

"Hi sir, it's Tweets I finished crushing the acorns into powder."

"Oh good, but don't you mean stuffing the bomb powder into the acorns?"

"Yes sir, crushing the acorns into powder."

"What?! For the love of poppy seeds Tweets!" 'Click.'

. . . . .

Marcy wakes up and gathers her backpack for the journey across the pond. She arrives at the ponds edge and slowly, carefully climbs a droopy overhanging branch. She dashes across the branch to gather some momentum and then leaps into the air to land on the back of a nearby duck. Marcy stands up and looks around for a split second before jumping and landing on the back of another duck. Immediately she springs off and glides onto yet another duck. She does this four more times before misjudging her final jump, plummeting into the pond's murky water!



As everyone knows, squirrels are not ideal swimmers. It didn't take long for the feathery quack-heads she used as stepping stones to catch up to her. Marcy realizes that her path is blocked by one of the waterfowl. Without wasting a moment, she sinks down quickly to the very bottom of the pond, and springs up at an angle toward the surface. She lands on a series of rocks leading to the shore and scurries to the face of The Great Oak.

. . . . .

"Tweets," starts Boid as he paces the boardroom on his scrawny little bird legs. "You've made too many mistakes; destroying a Phoenix suit, wasting rare genetically modified acorns, and worst of all giving the ENTIRE council indigestion WITH YOUR COOKING!"

"Yes sir," mumbles Tweets with a strong sense of impending doom. "It won't happen again."

"It darn sure won't," Boid says with a slight chuckle. "The council has decided you're needed elsewhere. You will make the fatal journey to The Walnut and monitor ant traffic up the tree. Only YOU have what it takes to complete this task," he finishes sarcastically.

"Yes sir," Tweets answers enthusiastically.

Tweets, in a moment of excitement, runs to the glass exit door, slams into it, steps back, opens it, and without stopping, yells back, "I'll be finished before you can say 'millet'!"

"Hopefully not," Boid mutters under his breath before collapsing on the table.

. . . . .

Marcy, at the top of the tree where Cheeks is being held captive, attempts to free a very cranky, old red squirrel.

"I've seen my mother pick a lock faster!" Cheeks critiques from inside the large hamster wheel he had been forced to run in for the past week as a kind of hairy generator.

Marcy ignores him and tediously picks at a small lock on the hamster wheel. She looks at her tool kit and selects a lock-pick that once entered, pops the cage open, and she starts to nibble at the restraints on Cheeks.

“Watch the fur, you rookie, it’s the last stuff I’ve got!” Cheeks wheezes out.

Marcy continues to bite at the grass nest mummifying the agitated rodents head and torso. After a while she forms a tear large enough to wiggle out of.

“Ok Cheeks, squeeze though,”

“Not until you apologize for the damage to my coat.”

Marcy being Marcy, she hoists Cheeks onto her back and scampers out the window onto the slippery face of the bark-less oak tree. She loses her balance and plummets toward the ground still carrying Cheeks.

“I’m too young to die,” wails Cheeks.

“No you’re not,” Marcy mumbles as she angles her body midair and returns to the tree in the nick of time to make a heroic landing before dashing back to The Walnut.

. . . . .

Tweets looks around the small cockpit of his Phoenix at the dials, buttons and Whistle Activated Mechanics (W.A.M!®). Tweets whistles a tune and the suit starts up. He races down the launch track before taking to the air heading for The Walnut, soaring into the setting sun.

Tweets was rather enjoying the flight when the thought arose – he could be patrolling the ground below him throughout the flight. He takes to the sky, higher, higher and higher and he just notices the silhouette of two squirrels running along the battlefield far away. As he begins to pursue he vaguely remembers Boid telling him ‘don’t forget to charge your suit’ before he left.

As if on cue, Tweets loses control of the depleted Phoenix suit and plummets downward.

“Oh, for the love of poppy seeds!” he curses as he desperately undoes the buckles and lets the Phoenix go down in flames.

. . . . .

Marcy’s vision goes black as she is thrown across the field by a massive explosion. When she wakes up she can just make out the dawn sun through the thick blanket of dust on everything and in the air. She rolls over weakly and digs through her pockets until she surfaces a beacon and signals for help. She crawls over to Cheeks and checks his pulse.

‘The old quinoa brain is unconscious, of course’, Marcy thinks impatiently as she attempts to rattle him awake. He doesn’t respond. She starts to drag Cheeks toward The Walnut and realizes he’s getting weaker every breath. In the distance she notices bright floodlights coming near them. ‘What? How are we this close?’

A white and red tank-like buggy rolls quickly toward Marcy and the limp body of Cheeks. The front of the buggy opens up and half a dozen small chipmunks in hazmat suits dash out with stretchers and one of them, upon looking at the state of the tired squirrels, draws a small tranquilizer gun, aims it and fires it off twice before Marcy’s vision goes black yet another time.

Marcy leans on her crutches in a large room carved from the mid-section of The Walnut. Usually used as a war strategy boardroom, it was now being used as a celebratory hall.

“Well, despite my best efforts, you’re a mummy again,” Marcy chuckles as she looks to her side and sees Cheeks glowering in a wheelchair with a big, fat, neck-cast.

“Nine weeks Marcy! I’m doomed to this humiliation, never to live it down,” Cheeks squeaks out pessimistically as he stares at the ground.

Marcy looks up to see Commander Fluffs walking toward her with a small velvet covered box.

“Marcona, you’ve earned this. For all that you’ve done, accepting the mission, entering The Great Oak, making your way back, and risking your life by transplanting large amounts of blood to save Cheeks’ life in the end, well done.” Fluffs opens the box to unveil an extravagant blue and gold badge with an acorn-shaped solid gold clip and pins the badge on Marcy’s jacket near the left shoulder while the spectating rodents cheer in unison at the new war hero.

. . . . .

Commander Tweets struts down the hallway smiling (or as close as birds can get to smiling,) and admiring his beautiful new silver bird-shaped badge on his coat. *I can’t believe I got promoted!* Tweets thinks as he walks. *They think I intercepted the missile with my Phoenix on purpose, I can’t believe my luck!*

Giddy with excitement, Tweets walks a few more paces and turns into his beautiful new office, he sits down and reaches into a bowl of sunflower seeds and munches on them with glee for about an hour before Sergeant Boid enters the room, assumes a stance and salutes Tweets.

“Reporting for duty,” says Boid.

Without hesitation Tweets chirps out “If you wouldn’t mind, I would very much like a poppy seed tart.”

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### Words of a Stranger By: Riley Ma (Gr. 10)

*more* inside

May in the forest is bright-eyed and fertile. The days are sweet and soaked with sunshine. The leaves of the trees unfold in the fragrant air. Bluebells bloom. Daisies flourish.

*Plip. Plop.*

Leftover droplets from the rainstorm last night slide off deep-green leaves of the English ivy, splashing into pools gathered on the ridges of the trunk of the big oak tree. I snap a leaf off the vine and hold it above my head.

*Plip. Plop.*

Blades of lazily-swaying grass sprout around the roots of the tree and arch over me. Ornaments of morning dew hanging lazily on the surrounding foliage. Plump mushrooms have popped up where there were none last night, nourished by the rich, black soil of the forest floor. I sit down delicately, using the smooth cap of the mushrooms as a seat, and open my pouch, a small, scrawny bag my mother helped me sew out of an old handkerchief she Grabbed from the cottage nearby. My family are Grabbers, meaning we gather much of our resources from the neighbouring houses of humans.

"We mustn't be greedy though," Mother used to tell me when her and Father returned from Grabbing. "When the time comes that you Grab too, take only what you need, nothing more."

My wings have just started coming in, and until they fully develop, I am not to accompany Mother and Father to Grab, or even go out at all alone. Father says it is far too dangerous on foot. I am to stay safe in our hollow tree trunk we call home, where the

Collectors' pendants are blocked by our amber-coated walls and cannot detect our magical auras.

He does not know that when they go out to Grab, I set off too.

To be clear, I am not reckless. Every course of action I take is calculated. I do not set off unprepared, and I know my capabilities. Being flightless will not keep me grounded. I slide down vines of moonseed, leaping from trees and parachuting down with the broad leaves of hazel. I am strong with magic. I am a Healer, rare even amongst the fairies. I have been able to heal wounds and scars, illness and soreness, for as long as I can remember, perfecting it through my frequent expeditions in the forest and the injuries that often followed. Like other fae, I also have an affinity with nature. I can speak to plants and ask them to do things for me. I manipulate branches to bend down so I can collect things I couldn't reach otherwise, and charm tall grasses to clear paths for me to walk through. I Grab my own things; berries valuable for sweet jams, pins and scrap metal to fashion into knives and tools, lost watches that sparkle dimly through their wear. I bring them home to Mother. She helps me mend them, bringing new use to what was once purposeless. She dries the leaves and grasses I collect as herbs or teaches me how to weave them into small baskets.

Father goes to Grab every day, leaving at dawn and returning in the afternoon. He then works around the house, building in his workshop, mending the house, and gathering material around the woods. Mother goes out with him sometimes when she isn't busy with other chores. I am tasked to help cook, collect resin from the big oak tree, and gather whatever supplies I can for our family.

Father and Mother are both out today. I take out a small berry from my pouch and take a bite. Its juice is sweet and tart. I get up from the mushroom, smooth out my leafy green dress,

and set off, exploring the forest floor. I know it quite well, and am pleased with how efficiently I can travel across the foliage even without magic. As I scan my surroundings, I notice a glimmer in the dense leaves of the ferns up ahead. I make my way over and take a look.

A deep amethyst-coloured jewel hangs on a fine gold chain. A strange aura surrounds it, as if it were a heartbeat, and glows faintly. I can hardly believe it.

This must be a Collector's pendant. I recall what Mother told me when I was young.

*"Long ago, fairies lived under the radar of humans. They mastered Grabbing and snuck into human homes unnoticed, taking small things humans wouldn't miss for themselves. They never took more than they needed, partly in fear of the humans noticing, and partly because fairies are gentle, ancient creatures, inhabiting the great forests since long before the memories of humans. As time went on, more and more humans came across fairies, and we were able to coexist peacefully with them.*

*However, as humanity learned more of the fairies' powerful, elemental magic, they grew greedy. The King employed groups of soldiers, christened as his Collectors, to capture fairies and extract their magic to give to the King. They detect fae magic with charmed pendants crafted by the King's mages. We coat the walls of our homes in amber to block the detection of these pendants. You must stay away from any trace of the Collectors, Dahlia. Keep this amber necklace on at all times, it will dampen your aura. It is better if we fade from their memory. Then we will be safe again."*

I have never seen Collectors in my lifetime, but they must have passed through the area and dropped this. Father and Mother have before. They told me of their colossal size and might. I reach my hand forward and touch the jewel. It's smooth and oddly warm under my touch. Distorted reflections dance on the surface. A token from another world. *One that fairies*

*must stay separate from*, I think to myself. I back away from the pendant and walk away. I should be wary.

I gather nuts and seeds from trees and bushes in my pouch to grind up with Mother, which we use as flour. As I climb, I notice the growing heaviness of the air. The atmosphere feels dense with humidity. Leaves above me droop under the quickly greying sky. Spring rain. I'd better hurry home quickly. May storms can be relentless, and it is best not to get caught in one. As I slide down the tree, I hear the slow tempo of the first raindrops splashing on leaves and dripping onto the grass, warning the forest of the rain to come. I break off a leaf from an oak tree and hold it above my head as I quickly walk home.

Rain suddenly begins coming down in fast, heavy droplets. In a matter of moments, it's as if the whole sky has opened up in gaping holes. It comes down like waterfalls, my flimsy oak leaf pounded on by the torrential downpour. I give up, abandon the leaf, and begin running. I purposefully avoid the area where the pendant lies. I cannot afford to risk anything.

Lightening paints the dark sky with its brilliant, root-like patterns of bright light, accompanied by the booming drum of thunder. I run faster, my vision hopelessly clouded by the water drenching me. At last, the vision of home draws near. I am thankful I had not gotten too far before the storm started

The outside of our home is inconspicuous and unnoticeable to anyone who isn't a fairy. A small wooden door is shielded behind tall bunches of grass, leading into a hollowed tree trunk. We have small windows with thin amber as glass, letting in orange-hued light. Our home is cozy but perfectly sized for us. Dried herbs hang from the ceilings and various trinkets are organized on shelves along the walls. Furniture and dishes salvaged from an unwanted dollhouse decorates the home, polished and made as good as new by Father,



including a little metal stove. Father's workbench is pushed neatly to the side, and he and Mother sleep, build, and cook here. I stay upstairs along with more shelves of trinkets and scrap materials. I look around to ensure no one else is near before stepping inside.

"Hello, Mother," I say between breaths, the smell of sweet lavender and mint filling my lungs. I close the door behind me and exhale, out of breath.

Silence, all except the sound of water dripping from my ivory-black hair onto the wooden floor.

"Father?"

Still no response.

They must've gotten caught in the storm. Fairies cannot fly in rain, from the dampness of their wings. *It's alright*, I tell myself. This isn't the first time they've gotten caught in the rain. *I'll just wait a bit for the storm to die down. They'll be back soon.*

I break apart dry sticks I had gathered the other day for the stove and load them into the stove, producing a spark by snapping my fingers to ignite the firewood. I sit by the fire to warm up for a bit before unloading the acorns I gathered to crush. I accidentally graze my hand on the sharp point of an acorn poking through my pouch, and I watch beads of blood grow along the fresh cut. I stretch my hand over the cut and within seconds it's as good as new, dried blood flaking off the healed wound.

The rain shows no signs of stopping. I crush bits of acorn into a fine powder with a smooth stone, looking out the window in front of me. Rain blurs the amber, distorting the greenery outside. The crashing thunder seems to shake the whole forest, the herbs on the roof shaking with the pounding rain. I keep waiting.

I finish crushing the acorns and store the powder into a burlap sack, putting it away in the wooden kitchen cabinets. The sky is getting darker. It must be evening by now. I dust off my hands and decide to catch up on chores Mother hadn't got to yet.

At least another hour should have passed by now, and I grow worried. The rain has slowed to a steady patter, the lightning dying out. They should be home by now.

I grab my pouch and a cloak to shield myself from the rain, and head out the door.

The forest air smells fragrant with rain and soil, fresh with the night air. Raindrops splash off crinkled leaves and logs, splattering onto the rich, nourished earth. The moon peeks through a thin veil of clouds, shining dimly onto the forest. I take a deep breath and make my way over to where I had found the pendant. I have an uneasy feeling about this.

A familiar sparkle glimmers in the pale moonlight. I make my way over to the pendant and pick it up. It shines faintly. I take a shaky breath.

If the Collectors somehow got a hold of Mother and Father while they were flightless, this pendant might take me to them. I lift the pendant into my pouch. It isn't heavy, but still barely fits into my pouch. I assume the pendant will glow brighter if I'm close to magic, so I decide to set off to the north to start.

To my surprise, the pendant glows brighter. Determined, I set off through the rain, letting the light of the pendant guide me. I cast an incantation, and a small, golden orb of light appears and floats around me, illuminating the dark forest floor and emitting a slight warmth.

I see something bright flickering ahead of me, and I quietly sneak forward, extinguishing my light. A fire. And... voices. This must be the Collectors' camp. I tuck away my fear and hide behind a bush. I've never seen humans before, let alone a group of the most dangerous ones. A gruff voice echoes through the air.

“Shoulda caught ‘em little rascals too, had they not shot out of the net, them slippery pests. Left behind them cloaks tangled into the net too, ‘n all their stolen goods. Sugar cubes ‘n bits o’ sandpaper on the ground. Ain’t ever been this close to getting one of them rascals.”

Another voice speaks up, a younger one. “I had thought the King was bluffing, honestly. Few have seen fairies. They’re just too evasive. But these traps around houses while they can’t fly in the rain seemed effective. We should continue to use the spring storms to our advantage.” Grunts of agreement came up in response.

So Mother and Father must have escaped. They must have been injured if they had taken so long to return. I sigh in relief. It’s probably best if I head back then.

As I turn around to walk back home, I step on something bumpy. I hear the sound of rope, and something below me pulls upwards. I scramble to grab onto the edges of what feels like a net and throw myself to the ground, hitting the ground much harder than I anticipated and crumpling onto the wet grass. Disoriented, I desperately try to drag myself to the shelter of the nearby shrubbery. I notice a lightness in my pouch, and realize the pendant must have fallen out. No time to go back. I pull myself away from the trap as I hear the confused and excited voices of the Collectors’ draw near.

“Over here! I think we got something!”

I hear their footsteps pound over. My head is swimming and I feel dizzy to my core. They are going to see me.

As my vision goes black, what feels like a warm hand wraps around me. I hear the broken voice of a younger man.

“Looks like there’s nothing. I suppose it must’ve been a field mouse.”

My senses go dark.

My body is warm, dry, and relaxed, sinking into something soft. I feel hazy and tired. Blearily, I open my eyes, adjusted to the warm light around me. I feel a dull pain in my head and leg, but I sit up.

I'm in a tent, lying on a pillow. My eyes widen as I realize what's in front of me.

A human, sitting on a wooden stool.

Looking right at me.

He has fair skin and light hair, and his blue-grey eyes stare at mine in calm interest. He looks to be an older boy. A sharp pain pierces my head, but I try not to show it. *Stay strong.*

"Who are you. Let me go this instant," I say steadily, looking at the human.

He says nothing. He's dressed in a simple black cloak, but carries himself with a strange coolness. He smiles, and stands up.

"Careful. You're injured, little fairy. It's best if you rest for a while. And please keep your voice down. It's in both our interest if no one hears you."

I narrow my eyes. "I need no help from a human. Let me leave."

He paces around nonchalantly. "I wonder how far you'll be able to go with a twisted leg, especially in the middle of the night. At least rest until morning. It is better to recharge so that you may head home tomorrow." He stops pacing, and looks at me again. "I will not hurt you. I only want to let you recover, so that you may head back again. You have my word."

"The word of a stranger has no value to me," I retort. "And I need no rest to heal." I stretch my hand over my leg, and close my eyes. A warmth spreads down my arm. I open my eyes, and my leg is healed. "See? Good as new. I'll be off now."

"Please, fairy, I ask you to stay a while. Did I not just save you? At least allow us to talk a bit. I have never seen a fairy before," the boy states placidly, smiling at me again. I study him,

stony-faced. It does seem as though he hid me from the other humans. And he seems... genuine. Not that I can be sure he isn't lying. But if he wanted to harm me, he definitely could've by now. And he could've done much more effective and violent ways to draw information from me. As long as I filter myself, talking should be okay.

"I suppose that would be okay. But first, tell me who you are."

"My name is Mael, and this is my tent."

"Are you a Collector?"

Mael furrows his brow. "Well... not exactly. I was sent here by my father to see what the routine of the Collectors was like. I don't do any collecting though. I sort of... just observe."

So he isn't a Collector. Relieved, I ask him another question.

"Why did you save me?"

"I've always had a feeling that capturing fairies may not be the way to reconnect with ancient magic. I had heard fairies and humans used to live together in peace, assisting each other in their needs. I believe that rekindling our relationship would be the best way to make both groups happy. After all, fairies gather many materials from humans, and humans use the magic of fairies for healing and mending. I just wanted a chance to see if it could be possible."

"Fairies aren't very open to humans you know," I add. "We have always known of their greed and selfishness. They exploit all things around them with no regard for the consequences."

Mael sighs. "That may as well be true. However, I still believe it's possible, and the first step is stopping the works of the Collectors. My father doesn't share my sentiment, but I hope that one day I may bring an end to it myself. But enough about me. Tell me about yourself."

I think carefully about what I should and shouldn't say. "Well, my name is Dahlia. I am a Healer, and I explore the forest frequently."

"Tell me, Dahlia, why were you at a Collector camp? Surely you knew it was dangerous?"

"Well... yes, but I was afraid my parents had been captured during the storm. They're rarely late coming home, so I had gotten worried and decided to look for them."

"Ah. So your parents must've been the two fairies from earlier that escaped. Was it this pendant that drew you near?" Mael pulls something out from his pocket, holding out the pendant that had fallen out of my pouch.

"Yes. What magic do you have here that the pendant sensed? I heard my parents had gotten away," I asked. "Surely it isn't... other fairies?"

"Fortunately not. Fairies are incredibly difficult to capture. That magic the pendant senses... comes from me."

I look up at him with wide eyes. "Why would you have an aura? Are you not just a human?"

Mael looks down and sighs, a bittersweet smile adorning his face. "When I was born, I was already hopeless. There was no way I'd be able to make it past a few days. It was a fairy that had come and healed me, using the force of nature and life and instilling some into me to save me. Since then, I have always been linked to the magic of the fairies. I owe my life to it." Mael looks up at me. "My father is the King. He has seen the grace of a fairy up close, and yet, still sends out his Collectors in the hopes of capturing them. He is a loving father, but still human. One day, when I take over the throne, I will put an end to this. I promise this to you. Does a stranger's word still mean nothing?"

I scoff. "We are hardly strangers anymore, Mael. No human or fairy has communicated with each other for decades." My eyes soften, and I smile. "I hope you carry out your plans someday, Mael. With you, there is hope for the future of humans and fairies."

Mael smiles. "I hope so too."

Mael lets me go, giving me the pendant to put in my pouch once more in case I want to find this place again. He shows me where to find his tent. "We will be here for a few more weeks. I would be delighted if you could come again sometime, Dahlia", he had said to me. I thank him, resummon my ball of light, and disappear back into the forest, my mind swirling with new hopes and dreams. A civilization of peace and harmony. How perfect.

I reach home, and a few moments after, Mother and Father return. Father is limping, as he had also tumbled out of the trap and had broken his leg. Quickly, Mother and I help him to the couch, and I work on healing him. Broken bones are a bit harder to heal, the fragmented pieces needing to be aligned again. Patiently, I care for him until his leg is as good as new. They tell me their stories and how they hid in a rabbit burrow to wait out the rain, and we laugh and cry, reunited once more.

A week has passed. Mother and Father have decided against travelling in rain at all, and avoid walking on the forest floor as much as possible. Fortunately, the day is cheery with sunshine and clear-blue skies, golden with opportunity. Mother and Father have left to Grab again, and I set out too with my pouch and pendant. I am going to find Mael.

I follow the glow of the pendant back to the camp. It is much easier to navigate in daylight, and I make it there quickly. I am wary of any traps on the forest floor.

As I arrive, I notice the Collectors hurriedly rushing around. Curious, I eavesdrop on their passing conversations.

“We best make haste packing up. We need to get back as soon as possible.”

“How is he looking?”

“Not so good.”

I get a bad feeling, and locate Mael’s tent as quickly as possible, slipping under the fabric to get in.

“Hello? Mael?” I call out.

No response. His tent is eerily quiet.

I look up at his cot. There he is. I climb up, and am shocked by what I see.

He is extremely pale. His demeanor is sickly, bags under his eyes. He looks drained. He is breathing, but very lightly and rapidly. His eyes are closed.

He must be very sick.

Quickly, I stretch my hands over his heart. I close my eyes, and summon all the power I can. I feel my power draining quickly from my body, and my arms tire from the effort. He is truly very, very sick. I clench my teeth and focus on the flow of energy from my aura down my fingertips. After a few minutes, my body feels as though it will collapse from exhaustion. I force myself to stay grounded as I draw the last bits of my power into healing.

His breathing slows down, and his face relaxes. The colour of his face has improved drastically.

I collapse onto the floor and drag myself out of the tent. As I lay outside, I hear people enter the tent.

“Why, he looks so much better! Whatever could have happened?”

Smiling, I close my eyes and lie down on the soil, drawing back energy from the forest. Mael will be okay.



*20 years later.*

*The King smiles fondly from his balcony to his Kingdom. People are laughing, bustling around on the rocky streets of the marketplace. He is at peace. His people are at peace.*

*“Your Majesty, the person you summoned has arrived.”*

*“At long last,” the King smiles, his blue-grey eyes sparkling. “Do not keep her waiting. Invite her in.”*

*A small figure flies into the room, wings shining in the bright daylight.*

*“Hello, Mael.”*

*The King smiles.*

*“Good to see you again, Dahlia.”*