

2022 *Short Story Contest*





*The Future.
Starts Now.*

**Produced by Innisfil ideaLAB & Library
December 2022**

Seepe Walters

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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

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The Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library would like to congratulate all the students who entered the 21st 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. Looking back at over 20 years of short stories, 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 many residents whose work with the former Friends of the Library that supported this program for many years; the Ferraro family for their years of involvement; Judge and Canadian children's author Michelle Kadarusman 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 2022 edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

Laura Jeffery
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.

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2022 Seepe Walters Short Story Winner

The Suited Sailors By: Emily James (Gr. 7)

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*Our story begins on the open seas
A tale of pirates, a tale of teas
Of rivals posh in perfect dress,
Of buccaneers with great finesse
For china fine - and never cheap-
They brave and sail the briny deep...*

“Well, Freddy ole boy, we’ve finally done it. *Just imagine*- such a treasure within our grasp.” Captain Henry giggled with excitement as he poured steaming Darjeeling into a gold rimmed teacup. The boiling liquid sloshed back and forth like a miniature ocean as he plopped two perfect cubes of sugar into the amber brew. Not even the racket coming from the piano next door and Edward’s passionate, out of tune singing could spoil the moment.

With a flick of his lacy wrist he unfurled an ancient-looking map atop his stately carved desk. “I’ve outsmarted those French *pretenders* this time.” A streak of sunlight illuminated the eagerness in his eyes and the silver plating of his jacket buttons cast constellations of moving reflections around the tidy quarters.

“Squawk! Henry the *pretender*!” Freddy croaked, moving his balding head up and down with a shower of downy feathers.

“Cursed parrot! I’ll make a hat out of you yet.” The Captain’s voice trailed off as his eyes remained on the parchment before him.

An elegant shadow crossed the room. “Do you have our new coordinates ready yet?” Victoria, the first mate, said in her most dignified tone.

“Yes, yes, here they are!” Henry exclaimed, his shaking hand rattling the teacup on the saucer as he sipped.

Without warning, the bellowing next door ceased in a clatter and the alternating sounds of Edward’s heavy boot and mahogany peg leg grew louder.

“Mozart - too easy,” he cried casually, parading into the room. Henry rolled his eyes. “Ooh, a treasure map!

“No ordinary treasure map, my good chap,” the captain explained. “The long lost location of the rarest china pattern ever produced this side of the Caspian Sea - Carnation Cruise. And it’s all ours.”

Edward opened a canister of *Polished Pirate Pomade* and began taming his handlebar moustache into symmetrical spirals.

“It looks like a perilous journey, but I know I can get us there,” Victoria commented, studying the map over the captain’s shoulder.

“What percent of the treasure, hypothetically, would be mine if-.” Edward stopped suddenly and let the jar of product tumble to the floor. His face scrunched; his nose twitched. His body tensed and he instinctively reached a protective hand down to his artificial leg. He dashed to the porthole and pushed open the glass. Inhaling deeply, his eyes narrowed to inky slits, he whispered coldly, “Butter.”

“What in Davy Jones’ locker are you on about?” Henry barked indignantly in between bites of scone, bursts of crumbs peppering his beard in the process.

“Davy’s butter!” contributed Freddy, feeding off the growing excitement.

“Sir!” A nervous, chipper voice chimed from the stairwell and Elizabeth stuck her head around the corner. “Sir! There’s a ship on the horizon, Sir!”

“Ahahah!” Edward cackled maniacally and flew up the stairs. “Croissants!” they heard him shriek breathlessly from the deck.

“The Beau Biscuit!” Henry cried, crumbling the sad remains of his scone. “The scurvy dogs found us again. Will we never be free of this madness?” He pounded his fist on the desk and threw his head back in despair.

“Maybe Louis has come to take me away!” Elizabeth twirled and sighed dreamily.

“That is quite enough from all of you,” Victoria chided in a firm voice, bustling out of the room. “Hoist the main sail! Full speed ahead!”

“Yes, yes, what she said!” Henry called back, trying to recapture some of the dignity that lay shattered with the pulverized bun on his desk.

Up on deck everyone assumed their battle formation. The Captain took the wheel as Victoria skillfully conducted everything else until an animated voice bellowed from over the railing.

“Bonjour, mateys!” The great wigged Captain Charlemagne perched at the bow of a rowboat like a hood ornament while Louis struggled to keep the shade from the parasol centred over his face. “We’ve come to, for lack of a more sophisticated word, *battle it out*. Where is the map?” he charged accusatorially.

Captain Henry scrambled over and wildly clutched the slick siding. “Terribly sorry, my dear chap, but you’ll have to pry it out of my cold, dead hands!” Turning to Elizabeth he instructed in his fanciest voice, “Lower the ladder.”

The crew of the Beau Biscuit ascended single file up the ladder to the deck of the Jolly Proper. “Louis, my son! It’s in my eyes! It’s in my eyes!” Charlemagne shrieked as Louis adjusted the tilt of the lacy umbrella to secure a one-handed grip on the rope. Marguerite followed with trembling fingers from the six cups of chai tea she drank that morning, and Bernadette took up the rear with a fearsome glint in her eyes, angrily kicking at the hoops in her skirt that impeded her movement.

“Prepare to meet your fate like gentlemen,” Captain Henry taunted as the two bands of pirates squared off. The captains circled the width of the deck, facing each other. Their feathers and laces billowed like two great ostriches.

“At least I will meet my fate dressed like a proper gentleman. Those pantaloons look like two *poissons* fighting over your kneecaps,” Charlemagne scoffed as he gestured with his sword.

“Well, at least I have a dignified hat, you scurvy dog, instead of wearing a powdered poodle on my head!” Henry laughed at his own cleverness.

Suddenly, Charlemagne lunged forward with his sword. With one swift flash of silver, he freed the neat row of plated buttons from Henry’s red velvet overcoat, and the first casualties of the battle plopped imperceptibly into the watery abyss. The buttons were not the only thing freed, as Henry’s generously padded midsection, kept round and soft by his diet of scones and cream, now ballooned free from its form-fitted prison. His undershirt billowed like the great sails overhead.

Henry's eyebrows knit together like a thick, fraying length of rope as he looked down sorrowfully at the loose threads reaching out from his coat. "Those were antique!"

Letting out a guttural cry, he swung his sword with vengeful intent. The others stood by as the battle raged on, and Freddy contributed his commentary excitedly.

The intensity of the attack startled Charlemagne who was now on the defensive. Shuffling backwards awkwardly down the length of the ship, he failed to see the bucket of pine tar that Elizabeth had been using to waterproof the wood boards of the deck. Charlemagne tripped, and in agonizing slow motion, all eyes watched as the wig took flight, soared, and like a parachute, descended delicately into the puddle of black, sticky, oozing, pitch.

"I've got it, Papa!" Louis scampered across to his Father who lay dramatically motionless from the critical wound to his pride. Stooping down, Louis drew the soggy, tattered wig from the deck boards with a loud smack of suction. Only a strip in the centre of the wig remained relatively unscathed by the ordeal.

"The good news is, Papa, no one will accuse you of looking like a poodle anymore."

Charlemagne snatched the wig from his son, and with as composed of a look as he could muster, plunked the dripping accessory onto his head.

"No, they won't," Edward howled. "No one would dare insult such a fine looking skunk by calling it a poodle!"

In a flurry of bellies, feathers and tar, all eight pirates brawled on the deck of the Jolly Proper.

"Give us the map or we'll blow up your ship!" Charlemagne angrily threatened.

"Squawk! Blow up the ship!" Freddy flew away eagerly.

“I would never resort to such tomfoolery. You are a disgrace.” Henry grunted under the weight of two other pirates.

Across the water in the hold of the Beau Biscuit, Freddy cheerfully hopped from one canon to another and picked up a match in his skillful beak. “Squawk! Cursed parrot! Squawk! Make a hat out of you yet!”

KABOOM!

“What was that?” Marguerite jolted up from the fight and wrapped her shaking hands around the mast.

“It sounded like a canon! We’re under attack!” Victoria whipped her head around and scanned the horizon.

The Jolly Proper began to lilt dangerously to starboard.

“We’ve been hit!” Elizabeth yelled over the growing chaos.

“Don’t worry, Elizabeth - I’m here!” Louis cooed ridiculously before sliding off the edge of the tilting deck into the water below.

Henry started to laugh uncontrollably at the disaster around him, his cackles echoing like the canon boom that sealed their fate. “FREDDY!”

...

On the deck of the Beau Biscuit, the bedraggled band of pirates stood and watched the final remains of the Jolly Proper disappear into the blue.

“A fair trade - the map for safe passage,” Captain Charlemagne strode like a peacock, his striped wig still dripping. “We leave at once!”

Towards the horizon our heroes race

*In sticky tar and shredded lace
Through storm and rain and fearful gale,
Both day and night they trace the trail
Tempers short, croissants too few
At last an island swims in view...*

“Land ho!” Bernadette shouted from the crows nest before swinging from a rope down to the deck.

Captain Charlemagne and Captain Henry stood behind the wheel aggressively taking turns looking through a telescope.

“To the rowboat!” Henry hollered.

“Excusez-moi, I give the orders on this ship.” Charlemagne paused. “To the rowboat!”

The patchwork crew piled into the small craft and set out. Edward propped his peg leg up on the bench in front of him. With his finger, he reached over and scooped a glob of the tar oozing from Charlemagne’s wig, and began to style his moustache into its signature spirals.

“Hypothetically,” he began, “how many shares of the treasure will be mine?”

“There are eight of us, so your share would be one eighth, of course.” Victoria explained calmly.

“Blow me down! Only one eighth?!” Edward leapt into the ocean and began to swim with all his might towards shore.

“What is this treasure everyone is so excited about?” Marguerite asked as the boat rocked from the force of Edward’s jump.

A determined look came over Henry's face. "Only the rarest pattern in the finest bone china ever crafted: *Carnation Cruise*."

The boat came ashore and everyone started running, except for Edward who was still swimming. Captain Henry's tummy bounced up and down as he jogged, and Charlemagne ran with one hand on his wig until they both collapsed on the lid of a pristine oak treasure chest as the top of the sand dune.

"The moment of truth," Charlemagne said in his thick accent as they lifted the lid.

Both men stared silently down into the box, then Henry reached in and pulled up a single slip of paper. He began to read out loud:

"Tired of spending your days hoisting sails and swabbing the poop deck?

Sick of relying on currents and winds to get where you need be?

Head down to Car Nation on Cruise St. and trade in that soggy piece of wood for a set of four wheels. 10% off. Limited time offer."

"Carnation Cruise. A pattern so rare it never was," Edward sighed, soaking wet.

Freddy chose this moment to reappear and land on Henry's shoulder.

"Squawk! Soggy Henry!"

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"Is everyone ready to go?" Henry called back from the front of the bus.

"So ready," Edward replied, lowering his sunglasses.

"The pastries are..." Charlemagne kissed the tips of his fingers, "*magnifique*."

Elizabeth carefully tied Louis' apron just in time for Bernadette to crash into him with the silverware.

"The Jolly Biscuit Mobile Tea Shop is ready for launch!" Victoria cheered happily.

Captain Henry smiled and pulled up his lace cuffs to get a better grip on the steering wheel. “Let’s go sell some tea, me hearties.”

Freddy hung off the side of the rear view mirror. “Squawk! Tallyho!”

Junior Division Grades 3-6

Rabbit Hat By: Anne Bowman (Gr. 6)

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My tail is itchy, Chutti thought. She was sitting in a hidden compartment in a black hat. She desperately wanted to scratch her tail, but if she did, it would spoil the magic. Chutti didn't like the cramped place, but it was worth the discomfort when the dark space suddenly burst into light, and the sound of applause filled her ears. Here it comes, 3, 2, 1, and the applause of the audience. Now she could scratch her tail. Marcus the magician looked down at her with a smile. She'd done great, as usual.

Once the show was over and they were back in their little white bungalow, Chutti hopped onto the kitchen table, looking forward to her dinner. It had been a long day, mostly because it was a 2 hour drive home from their performance. Chutti's ears swiveled when she heard a knock at the door. The magician stopped washing her carrot, and went to the door. A man with a monocle and long beard entered their home.

"Marcus! Good to see you again! The monocle man said. "Wonderful performance today. Everyone loved it."

"Thank you Samuel! But why did you drive 2 hours to see me?" the magician asked.

"Well, it's your rabbit. I want to buy it." the monocle man said.

"No." the magician gasped. That's right, Chutti thought, you can't buy me.

"I want a rabbit and yours is soft and sweet, it's perfect."

"No!" the magician repeated. "You may not have my rabbit! And with that, he showed the monocle man out the door and slammed it. "Sorry Chutti, dinner time."

That night Chutti was asleep, when she woke to the sound of the door being opened. She jumped on the magician's face to wake him. "Chutti what the-" he heard footsteps. He ran towards the window in the hall with Chutti behind him. He opened the window and jumped out. Chutti was halfway through the window when someone grabbed her. She pounded her captor with her feet, but he was wearing a leather glove. "Boss! We've got what we've come for!" And with that, she was stuffed into a dark bag.

Chutti woke up with a start. She was in a cage, with a hamster wheel, a few cardboard paper towel rolls, and 2 bowls with water and food. She looked around and realized that she was in a basement somewhere. She heard footsteps coming from the stairs. To her surprise, the monocle man appeared. He bent down so that he could see her. "Getting you was so easy! You and your magician didn't even put up a fight! But now I have you and you are going to make me so much money! Pulling a rabbit out of a hat, who knew people would pay that much just to see it? We will be famous! And I will be rich." And with that, he walked back up the stairs.

I have to escape, she thought. But how? She thought of her magician, and had an idea. She grabbed the paper towel tube and ripped off a long and skinny piece of it with her teeth. She picked it up in her paw, and pushed it into the lock. She twisted and turned it, and it opened. Now she needed to escape. She spotted an open air vent and hopped in. She stopped when she saw a small shadow. She cautiously walked around the bend in the vent and saw a little grey rat. She took a step closer, and the rat turned its head. "Why hello there!" it said. "Shush!" Chutti said. "What! What did I do?" He shot back. "I am trying to escape!" Chutti whispered.

She continued down the vent and turned a corner. Three new vent paths were in front of her. She had to pick one. She heard a voice behind her. "I know my way around the vents. I can help you escape." the rat said. "Really? Which way do I have to go to get outside?" She asked. "Follow me." He replied. They walked in silence for a long time, until the rat spoke. "What is your name?" he asked. "Chutti," she replied. "Yours?" "Parru," he said. "How did you get here?" "Stolen from my home by this guy who wants a lot of money." "Wow. That's a story. Oh! We are here!"

They jumped out the hole in the wall, and Chutti looked around and was surprised to see that she was back where she had performed the day before. "I'm a 2 hour car ride away from home!"

"Uh oh," Parru said. "But I have an idea. "You need to jump on a car and ride it down the highway to exit 36, jump off, and it is just a short walk to your house."

"How do you know all of this?" Chutti asked. "I'm a rat! I've got family everywhere!" he replied.

"I need to get back to my magician, he must be so worried, and I need to warn him about the monocle man."

"Monocle man, you mean Samuel, the guy who lives here?" Asked Parru.

"Samuel, monocle man, poe-tay-toe, poe-ta-toe." Chutti said.

"Ok," Parru said. "30 minutes through the forest, and you've made it to the highway."

"Let's go." Chutti said. And with that, they entered the forest.

Are you sure this place is safe? Chutti asked.

"To be honest, not really." Parru said. It was dark, so it was hard to see. They heard rustling in the trees.

“Stop,” Chutti whispered. Chutti looked up to see an owl. To their relief, it flew away.

“That was close,” Parru said. They kept walking. They were nearing the end of the forest when they saw a bush rustle.

“Parru-” A fox leaped out of the bush and raced towards Chutti.

“RUN!” Parru yelled. The foxes' jaws narrowly missed Chutti. They ran hard, with the fox racing after them. “The fox is faster, we're not going to make it!” Parru yelled.

“Yes we will! See there's the highway!” Parru tripped. Chutti stopped. “Hop on!” He jumped on her back, and she bounded away with Parru holding on tightly. Ten seconds and they would be there. A truck was about to cross in front of her. She leaped. Soaring through the air, front paws grab hold of the tailgate. Her hind legs were still hanging off the end of the truck. She kicked her legs over.

“WE MADE IT!” Chutti yelled.

“That was a big leap, Chutti!” Parru said.

“Thanks! How far to exit 36?” Chutti asked.

“2 hours,” Parru replied.

“So where are you going to go after this?” Chutti asked.

“I think I'll stick around, maybe I will live in your drain pipe.” Parru said.

Chutti laughed. “Of course you can stay! But you don't have to live in the drain pipe. You can probably live with me.”

“This is our exit!” Parru said excitedly.

“Oh no!” Chutti said anxiously. “What will we do if this truck doesn't take exit 36? Wait. It is taking exit 36!”

“Whew, that would have been a kink in our plan.” Parru said. When the truck slowed, they jumped off.

“I know this place! My home isn’t far! Get on, I am going to get us there fast,” she said as they ran down the street. “We’re almost there!” She yelled. The white bungalow was in sight. And then she was scooped up in a net.

“Ha! You little trickster almost escaped!” He said slyly. Parru! Where are you? She thought. He must have fallen off on her run! They had made it so far, just to be caught in a net.

Suddenly the monocle man screamed. Parru bit him on the ankle! He dropped the net and Chutti raced out. She sprinted home, with Parru behind her. She hopped up the front steps, and pawed at the door. Her magician opened it. “Chutti! I thought I lost you!” They looked over to see the monocle man drive away in a van. Her magician was talking on his phone. “We’ve found him. 4 Elizabeth, Dulenham. Goodbye.”

She looked over to see Parru sitting awkwardly on the sidewalk. She sat beside him. “Oh, you’re friends. Well then, let’s all go home.”

A week later, Chutti was back in the hat performing, this time with Parru. The monocle man was in jail, and the world was great. They’d never forget the adventure that brought them together with the magician, and the friendship that kept them going.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

Mito No Hitachi
By: Tenveer Paabla (Gr. 6)

more inside

8 years ago my brother went into the Holy Nakamaki Shrine and never came out. The Holy Nakamaki Shrine was a seed planted on the top of a mountain called Mount Tokoyashi 800 years ago or maybe even more than that. The seed turned into a huge tree in what we call "*Aragumi Sakura tree*" It turned into a giant tree with beautiful cherry blossoms. Then the people made the Holy Nakamaki Shrine. The seed took around 300 years or a little less to grow, and the shrine was built 500 years ago. The shrine was used to worship a god who lived up in the sky in an unknown realm and played melodies for eternity and the god who so loved playing tunes on her harp roamed her unknown realm for an everlasting eternity. Her name is Midori Agashi. She's the god of our nation and sometimes she comes down to our nation to resolve problems or festivals but she doesn't normally come down to our nation.

Back to the story. I'm 13 and my name's Himiko. My older brother Sara-Kun is 15. 8 years ago when I was 5 and when Sara-Kun was 7. We were joking about climbing the top of Mount Tokoyashi. "Sister... Do you wanna actually climb it?"

"Funny one onii-chan!" Onii-chan means older brother.

"No, I'm serious sister, I actually want to climb it. Y'know, to go see the Holy Nakamaki Shrine? I heard if you go into the shrine and sing a melody that Midori Agashi sang you can go to her realm!".

There was a long silence then I spoke "You can go. I'm not, I mean you know how long it's gonna take to climb up that mountain? Over 3000 steps!"

"Alright, suit yourself! I'm gonna go climb Mount Tokoyashi and I'm gonna meet Midori Agashi! I'll tell you about what happened when I come back!".

8 years later, present time. Is he still in the realm? Still climbing Mount Tokoyashi? Or is he.... G-gone? I don't know. Sara-Kun is gone and I have to go find him. I mean who knows what happened to him? The bad thing is there's an evil spirit flying around Mount Tokoyashi called Amaku. A bad one it's a dark spirit and it looks like black dust flying around the mountain. If you encounter it you have to put your hands together and close your eyes. It's a ritual to use when you encounter an evil spirit. It makes you glow so bright that the evil spirit will have no choice but to fly to the other side of the mountain. If you don't do the ritual you fall into an unknown realm filled with darkness and you can never get out. I force myself to believe that Sara didn't fall into the unknown realm.

Find Sara... Bring him back home...

I'm here, at the foot of Mount Tokoyashi. It's... so tall... It's so tall that I can't even see the top! I can't even see the Holy Nakamaki Shrine... In front of me I see steps that lead up the large mountain and a sign.

Welcome worshiper of Midori Agashi the large mountain in front of you takes almost 5 hours to climb and has over 3000 steps. Beware the evil spirit Amaku floats around if you encounter it, just close your eyes. This route of stairs isn't finished and has very little imperfections so please.

Climb at your own risk

One step on the stairs and then another I slowly start climbing the mountain. The stairs don't seem so weak. I think I can manage to put all my weight on it. As minutes pass and I'm nowhere close to the top. It feels like an endless path with no point to climb. I can see cherry blossoms falling from the Aragumi Sakura Tree. They're beautiful. I wish I could just watch them everyday. An hour passes and I see people running up the stairs and running down the stairs and I see shrine maiden's gifting people with envelopes that have 100 yen and a necklace. I'm on a new level of steps in what we call Matakoto. This level is where you see more people. A lot of people. Matakoto is one of the four levels.

There's Nonoko the first level, the second level Matakoto, the third level Anako and the fourth, Taniko. I only have 2 more levels to go. Why so long... I walk past a shrine maiden wearing a reddish pinkish kimono with beautiful sakura designs on the bottom and a white ribbon. "Good evening traveler, would you kindly accept this envelope" I reach out my hand and take the envelope. Suddenly I felt a shock threw me. I screamed in pain with my eyes closed. I opened my eyes and then the pain was gone. The stairs were gone, everything except for a white universe with absolutely nothing in it.

The shrine maiden was standing in front of me "Let me tend to your wounds I know why you are here. You're looking for a family member aren't you? Close your eyes. Relax. Let me give you a gift" She giggled. I closed my eyes shut tight. In a few seconds I open them. I.... I was at the top of the shrine!

My vision was blurry but I saw someone with green hair who looked alot like... *Midori Agashi* and beside her was Sara-Kun. My vision got better and I teared up a bit. "Onii-chan!" "Himiko?". We ran towards each other and gave each other a hug.

"I missed you so much" whispered Sara.

"Me too" I whispered back.

Midori Agashi, the god of our nation, was standing behind him "Seems like we found your sister. I'm quite surprised that she didn't meet Amaku. Now it's time for you to head home". Swirls of sakura blossoms spread around us and we floated away back home... How did Midori Agashi know that I didn't meet Amaku?

Junior Division Grades 3-6

In the Land of Moonlight By: Ophelia Berridge Kassam (Gr. 3)

more inside

In the land of moonlight there was a magical forest filled with elves, fairies, unicorns and dragons. The forest had many magical and powerful creatures and one was a prince named Orpheus. He had long hair that flew in the autumn breeze and was tall and handsome. He would be heard often walking in his bronze buckled leather boots in the forest crunching leaves. He had powers that could attract wild beasts, charm rocks and move trees through his singing.

Deep in the dark side of the forest in an old creaky cottage there lived an evil witch named Marilde. She had warts from her head to her toes and was the ugliest of the evil creatures in the land. She wanted to rule the forest and keep it for herself and so the creatures feared her. Orpheus knew of this and could not let that happen. He packed a bag and set off toward the lake to find a way to be rid of this evil witch. On his journey he came across a wild beast and sung to it in order to tame it. He named the beast, Frost. He headed toward the dark side of the forest to try to defeat Marilde.

When he came across her cottage he yelled, "come out and fight!". All the animals of the forest watched from behind the trees. As she opened her creaky wooden door, Orpheus yelled to his beast Frost, "Now!", and the beast came running in and fought Marilde with all of his might. Orpheus moved the trees with his song in order to block Marilde. Soon enough the evil witch grew tired and her powers weakened, and Orpheus commanded the fairies to capture the witch and sent her to the prison tower.

She remained locked in the tower and all of the forest and creatures rejoiced in happiness and the dark side was gone. Orpheus ruled all the land and continues to keep the forest magical to this day.

Junior Division Grades 3-6

The Enchanted Forest By: Aamaal Akinade (Gr. 4)

more inside

Outside was where I was happiest. I grew up with my mum who loved nature, though she has passed now, my love for nature remains unwavering. I am mostly seeing to be too quiet and unbothered by my foster parents, telling me to go out and play was my foster parents' way of telling me to go away, but something I enjoyed. Walking around the backyard gives me joy, while at the backyard today, I saw a bird and followed it, the bird continued to run farther and farther, and I kept my trail till I got closer, I realized how strange it looked. It was gold with white streaks and red dots on its head that looked like rubies. It also had big red and gold feathers coming from its tail. It flew farther and farther until it flew onto my shoulder. I looked to my front to see why the bird had stopped. It was the big forest with the lake and waterfall that I always saw. Whenever I showed it to people they always said there was nothing. I had never been inside but I decided to finally go. The little bird on my shoulder flew to the floor and chirped. "I'm gonna name you Ruby," I whispered.

We went into the forest and saw so many beautiful things, after walking around a bit, I sat on a log and felt something crushing under my foot. Then felt a knocking on my foot, I looked down and saw an angry chipmunk knocking on my foot. It screamed at me. "You just crushed my nut!"

I was shocked. "You can talk?" I said surprised.

"Of course, I can talk, but what are you going to do about my nut?" This chipmunk was probably collecting nuts for the winter.

“Sorry, but I’m sure you find another one,” I replied. The chipmunk knocked on my foot one more time before it went away.

Ruby and I went to the waterfall next. When we got there, I looked into the crystal clear water in the lake underneath, but instead of seeing my face, I saw another one. I tried to see closely who it was and fell in, but luckily I was able to climb back up. The person smiled and I saw a tail. The mermaid swam away and I left.

Ruby was flying around and I decided to rest, there was only one place in the forest we hadn’t explored: the “Orchard”, which was known as the heart of the woods. We walked and walked until we finally got to it, “Woah!” it was beautiful. I rubbed my lucky necklace and went inside and saw the most beautiful pear tree. The pears were gleaming and looked delicious, I was hungry so I reached up and plucked a pear. Taking a bite, I was already full. The pear tasted terrific and was very filling. I then noticed a throne made out of branches and flowers.

Suddenly a fairy comes up to me. “Hi! We’ve been expecting you!”.

“What do you mean?”

She told me that her mom, the queen had heard about a human girl. “Come meet my mom!” She grabbed my hand and flew me over to her mom. The queen of the forest was a beautiful fairy with red hair and a beautiful white gown. She had a crown of flowers and a green bird that looked just like Ruby. She was talking to a couple of elves. “Mom! I found her!”

The queen looked at us and smiled, “Good Afternoon. I’m Queen Anastasia and this is my daughter Princess Briar.” Queen Anastasia seemed like someone I could talk to.

“I’m Jade.”

"How did you get into the forest? I've never seen a human come into my forest."

I told her my whole story, about finding Ruby, the chipmunk and the lake.

"I didn't know humans could have crystal birds," Briar said.

"What a crystal bird?" I asked.

Anastasia answered my question. "Well, that bird Ruby is a female red crystal bird. Mine, Lora is a female green crystal bird."

"I use magic to protect our forest so only people that have magic can see it...I wonder how you did." Then the queen saw my lucky necklace. "How did you get that necklace."

"My mom gave it to me. Why?"

She took the necklace. "It's a witch's gem. Every witch has a special gem that is the source of their power and this looks just like one. Someone must have sold it to your mom. Can you still see the forest?" I could still see the forest, and I nodded. She gave me back my necklace and asked if she could see my hair. I was always wearing a cap because of my hair but, I took it off. My curly gold hair was huge and just like my mom's. The queen smiled and so did Briar.

"You're a witch Jade!" The queen hugged me but I was confused.

"I'm not a witch. I don't eat children or cast spells I'm certain."

Briar explained everything to me. She said that my mum was probably a nature witch which was a super talented gardener because of my hair and I couldn't cast spells because I didn't have a witch gem. They helped me make a power gem and mine was cyan. When I activated it I felt great. The best part was that I could stay in the enchanted forest forever. Just what I needed, went back home with a crystal bird Briar helped me get and slipped through the back door, my foster parents were working in the office. I said goodbye bird but was very

sure of seeing it again. The forest brought me a new family and closer to my mum, what a renewed hope from the enchanted forest!

Junior Division Grades 3-6

Double Trouble By: Andy Li (Gr. 5)

more inside

One time, a rabbit and fox were once friends. You ask how a rabbit and a fox become friends? Well, let's go back to when they have never met. One time, there was a fox that was named Fox. He used to live in north Ontario and traveled kilometers to south Ontario to build a new home after it started to get wintery and cold in north Ontario.

There was also a rabbit named Rabbit and he came from west Ontario. There were too many animals and He couldn't ever find space. Somehow, they managed to land in the same forest. When the first creature came, Fox started to dig his burrow on the right and Rabbit started his home on the left. Then, they both came to the pond in the middle and saw each other and stared.

"What are you doing here and who are you?" said Fox in surprise.

"I am Rabbit and I am going to live here, so back off," said Rabbit.

"I got here before you ever did and I have a right to make this place mine." Fox said with a strong voice. After that, it was nighttime. Do not worry, Fox and Rabbit will find their way soon through this. Day one began in the morning and both are still working on the homes. They were not happy with each other.

"Get out of my forest!" Fox yelled.

"I won't because I am the owner!" replied Rabbit.

Fox tried to speak, but couldn't. Rabbit went back into his warren, Fox wandered off to his den and it was the end of this day. When day two came and Fox was in a bad mood because Rabbit was still here after all that, he had a thought of kicking him out of the forest

with something big that the Rabbit had feared. Rabbit woke up rather tired. Rabbit came outside just to see Fox and his front door.

“If you won’t leave, I will make you have to live with each other,” said Fox and he walked away to get supplies, Rabbit seemed a little less nervous now after that.

Day two, Rabbit woke up and firstly was a little worried about why Fox wandered off and went to get food. When it was about noon, something big shook the ground and out of the distance, came a swarm of wild animals. It came dashing on the ground, destroying everything in its path, with Rabbit bursting into panic. “What is that?!” yelled Rabbit.

The noise and chaos was what Rabbit always feared and the reason why he even came here, he didn’t want more. The swarm split with wild animals running over everything, including Rabbit’s warren and it collapsed where it was.

“Hey, I worked hard for that!” screamed Rabbit in despair. Then, Fox came out of the distance behind the chaotic swarm. Rabbit saw him in madness. “Did you do this?” said Rabbit in a deep voice.

“No, what do you mean, do what?” Replied Fox, the swarm was behind them. “What is that!” yelled Fox.

“The swarm!” Rabbit replied. At first, they tried to resist the strength of the swarm. It did not work, so the swarm ended up stopping and resting here for the night. This did not make Fox and Rabbit happy because now they had to sleep here without waking up the swarm, which they both agreed was very annoying. They managed and time passed through the night.

Day three, the site was a mess after yesterday's disaster, Rabbit and Fox were too tired to ever clean a speck out of this place, so Rabbit had an Idea of fleeing this place and

just finding a new forest to live in, he shared his ideas and Fox liked it. The swarm was still asleep, so they could just get by them if silent enough.

Rabbit went first and signaled Fox if it was okay to go or not. When he did, they got across. The second they were out of the woods, Rabbit and Fox dashed through the wild forest in one direction until they found a decent place to live. This place was pretty small, but at least it is isolated from any other animal in the forest. "Hey, we make a good team together," said Fox in a happy mood.

"We do and maybe we should go together, so let's try not to killed," stated Rabbit.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Snowbound

By: Reiner Stoer (Gr. 8)

more inside

April 3rd, 1918, 14:24

It was on this day that our small convoy landed on the southern Finnish shore, and we prepared for what would be an excruciating mission. This was much different than the shores of Hamburg I was used to, the smoggy but hard working factories and the trains rushing past every morning. No, this was a sparse, unforgiving, disastrous war here. I hope for a future back in my town, that I can wake up and roll back my eyes to reveal the small room, and the smell of dry wood and crackle of embers. No, this was real. If I do-

“Private, get the hell out of there! The cavalry are getting ready.” Damn, my sergeant was stubborn. We were supposed to be unloading the ship, and I was hiding behind molasses with a small journal in the cargo section. Yeah, it sounds pathetic, but I can guarantee that every other soldier here was just as pre-emptively terrified as they should be. I hauled the molasses and dropped the barrel next to the rest of the food-if that’s even what you can call it. Canned corn, corned beef, creamed corn-where did we get so much corn? Not sure why we had molasses either, but maybe it’s important that someone fills a sweet tooth. I think I’d rather starve. We had to move quickly, as the reds already knew of us. They were pilin’ down onto the port and we had about a day to dig in and advance. I walked over and picked up some weapon crates-probably better than my service pistol. We weren’t allowed rifles until they had been taken into care and certified by the White Finnish government. So there I stood, with a crate of something that could save my life, and then the puny thing in my holster that probably couldn’t hurt a fly.

But maybe it was for the best. Hell, would I even need the thing? I didn't know much other than rumours but they were sayin' this war was almost over. Maybe it's for the best.

April 3rd, 1918. 22:06

We had set up camp near a Finnish reserve base. They welcomed us warmly, and delighted us to a fish dinner, but nothing like the schnitzel I had at home. Still, we set up camp quickly after. My freezing hand shivered assembling the metal poles of the tent. The small bonfire growing by the lucky few on "duty" there didn't help when you were 30 feet away, although it sure did after. Still, it wouldn't help with the cold, hard ground; and just to my luck, a long earthy root stuck right under my tent. Wonderful.

I put the journal down and checked my pocket watch-22:18. I should head off to bed, I thought. We had to set up artillery barrages tomorrow; rough work. I set the book down and curled up under the thin bag layer, and the world closed around me.

But not for long.

I was thrashed and shaken around as I darted up, and a gleaming blue pair of eyes stared back at me. Instinctively, I reached for my knife.

"Get up, they're here". My sergeants' usually booming voice was cold and quiet. I wanted to ask a million questions, but he was already gone. Nonetheless, I grabbed the unfortunate pistol and my Bowie knife, and snuck out of my tent. Glancing from the outside, I couldn't see anything, but I spotted my sergeant motioning me furiously towards a thick oak tree, and I crept over. He handed me a pair of binoculars, and motioned just beyond the tree. It was too dark to see much, all I saw was a large rock, some trees, a glare of light and smoke, the small creek, wait. A glare of light and smoke? I quickly swivelled my view back and I saw it; a small

fire with soldiers positioned around it. Most importantly, a bold hammer and sickle on each of their sleeves.

These were none other than typical socialist infantry-practically the Soviet Armed Forces. At least that's who they were fueled by. They wanted to stomp out this civil war and take Finland under their rule, and our duty here was to stop that.

Little did they know I was a socialist.

One of the soldiers stood up and walked over to a small green tent, alongside a small collection of logs and branches, presumably to keep the fire going. Numbers wise, there were 3 visible tents and now 2 soldiers around the fire. Considering the size of the tent and the 3 pairs of boots around two of the tents, there was space for 9 men. Since one man at the fire had laid his boots outside of the closest tent and gone inside, the other two at the fire also belonged to that tent.

They were about 5 kilometres south over a small creek. I had the idea of assaulting it, but then remembered that our rifles were under Finnish law, and we wouldn't have them until morning.

Except that we weren't moving soon, and they would quickly discover us. If we didn't get them first, they would most definitely get us soon.

They'd find us, and as we only had the 5 of us until morning they would outnumber and destroy us.

Meaning that effectively we had no chance.

Unless we took them by surprise.

My sergeant, still shocked by their quick arrival, graciously accepted the binoculars. I looked into his large, dark eyes. "I'll take them out," I whispered.

He didn't look very surprised, and stared at the ground, letting out a hoarse "god bless you".

It didn't take long for me to find a way; they weren't that far. I walked around the side of a cliff, and marvelled at the dazzling arrangement of stars. So far away, not a clue what was happening here, and just as unknowingly we had no clue what happened out there.

I wielded my light pistol stealthily out of its holster, and while crouching, approached the back of the farthest tent. I pulled out my knife, and softly cut a large slit into the material. I put one foot in carefully, avoiding stepping on anyone, and managed to get the rest of myself in rather quickly.

I stumbled around, until I remembered what I was doing. There were 3 men asleep, and so I slowly knelt down next to the closest one, and clamped my hands to the sides of his head.

Bracing myself, I waited.

His eyes flashed open, and I snapped.

It was quick, and quiet.

Just two more.

I closed my eyes for a moment, until I was awakened by a tingle on the back of my neck.

And I then felt a barrel push hard in.

I slowly moved my hands out from my pockets, and I felt my eyes quickly tear up. I tightened on the inside, and I could feel myself sweating. Cold, hard salty liquid dropped from my forehead, rolling silently down my jacket and onto the man I had just killed.

I had just killed a man.

The man behind me pushed me up, and I was guided out of the tent, and towards the fire, where the other two sat happily, drinking and laughing until they noticed me.

April ?, 1918, 04:24

I sat solemnly shackled in the back of a truck, my whereabouts unknown. I don't know where I am. I don't know what day it is. I only know the time, and it must not have been more than a few hours. Although I might have slept for days. It didn't matter. I want to know what happens next.

Here I am, waiting for this ride to end, finding out where I'm going. My eyes started to adjust, I could depict two bodies crouched and armed. Both asleep.

How nice of them, I thought. I snuck over and snatched the rifle out of one's hand, and smacked both of them over the head with it, to make them sleep a little longer.

Then the idea rolled in.

The floor was made out of wood. Stupid, right?

I stomped it with the edge of my heel and it quickly gave way. The cold air rushed in, and I knew I had to be fast.

I kicked the back of the door open, which was luckily unlocked, and just as I was about to jump out, I aimed down my sights onto the tank.

I opened fire.

The initial blast blew my ears out and I could only hear ringing. I was thrown out of the van and hit the snow hard, just a metre away from a tree. I skid back until I felt the hard bark scrape my neck, and all I saw was a blur.

Fire, smoke, the white snow, the early morning dark sky, it was unclear colours to me, as if someone had removed a nearly blind gentleman's monocle. I grunted harshly, and lied back, the cool tree fighting the heated fire in my head. I never wanted to kill a man. Now I just blew up a whole truckload of them.

And here I am, in the middle of enemy Finland, with no civilization. No people for hundreds of kilometres, at least. All I had was the sounds of nature, and the crackling fire. I thought of home with that last sound.

Small children running through the streets, cooking marshmallows by public fires, awaiting presents.

Nevertheless, I was alone.

I sunk back into the tree, and with nothing else to do, I had to hope.

April ??, 1918. ????

It's hard out here.

The wind curls against my bones.

I can feel myself losing warmth, quickly too.

April ??, 1918, ????

I need something.

I just want to go back.

God bless the people that find me.

??????, 1918. ????

I'm losing touch.

"So, what'd you find?"

Looking down at the well preserved body, I could only think of one thing.

We were months too late.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Caramel
By: Tempest Collett (Gr. 8)

more inside

A day had passed.

Just one day had passed since I had truly lost contact with my best friend — my only friend. Several years ago, when we met, I never thought it'd go the way it did. I couldn't help but feel like I took the bond we had developed for granted.

As of last month, my friend Melissa had moved far away. I never knew why, nor could I ask. I thought we could stay intact through other methods, but I was so, so wrong. As of recently, she stopped responding to my texts, to my calls, to any alternative method of contact I thought of. I doubt it was out of malice, but I couldn't find out now.

I sent yet another text to her phone number. I had lost track of how many I had sent; I lost track after 30. I was still hopeful that at some point, she'd say something, letting me know her phone had just died. Deep down, though, I knew she wasn't going to reply. It never took her longer than a few hours to respond, and her parents had never taken her phone away, or even threatened it.

I sat there on my bed, feeling cold from all the tears I had wept. The lights were off, but the room was lit from the light streaming through the windows. My door was shut and locked, in hopes of no interruption. I continued to scroll up through our previous text conversations, as I nervously awaited for a reply that wasn't going to happen. I stopped scrolling when I saw a photo I had sent Melissa. It was the first photo we ever took together.

We had both gone to the park together that day, wind blowing through our hair; such a wonderful breeze it was too. We slid down the slides in our own fashion. We swung as high

as we could on the swings, and we raced each other up the plastic rock walls. It was simple fun, sure, but it's fun I wish I could get back. I was holding the phone when we took the photo, grinning and holding up a peace sign. At the other end of the photo, Melissa was upside-down on the red slide, her black hair scattered down, also with a big smile on her face. I wiped the tears off of the screen, just to see the clear photo yet again. Reminiscing the time, we spent together in that photo only caused me to sob harder.

In my sorrow, it was hard to notice the fact that my mother knocked on the door.

"Honey, you've been in there for half an hour. Do you think you can come out now?"

She asked.

I said nothing. I hoped that if I just stayed quiet, she'd leave. I'm not sure what I expected from my mother, though.

"I have something to tell you. *Please* come out." She stated.

With a quiet sigh, I tried to hide the fact that I had been crying, and got up to open the door. When the door creaked open, my mother was standing in front of me, a soft smile displayed on her face.

"Come on Gracey, I have some good news for you." she said, walking towards the stairs.

I followed her down the stairs and to the couch. We both sat down, and my mother began to speak.

"So, I know you've been wanting a pet for a long time." She said.

I raised an eyebrow. Why is she mentioning this now?

"After a lot of negotiations, your father and I decided on something."

As my mother said this, she took her phone out. She was looking for a photo. After a little bit, she showed her phone to me. In the photo was a grey tabby cat, no more than a few months old.

“Her name is Caramel.” my mother said, “She’s now part of the family.”

My eyes lit up. Even though I bugged her for one a lot, I never expected my mother to actually allow us to get a pet.

“Your father is getting her right now, actually. They should both be here any moment now.”

Butterflies flew through my stomach in excitement. I got up and looked out the window, to see my dad’s car roll into the driveway. I sat on the stairs, waiting for my father to enter the home. I was fidgeting with my hands, aching as I waited for what felt like eternity, although it was likely just the excitement of it.

My father entered the home, holding several grocery bags in one hand and a pet carrier in the other. He put both of them down. I looked in one of the plastic bags to see mainly cat supplies: Kibble, cat treats, et cetera. I then looked back at my dad.

“I hope you know you’re in charge of feeding her.” my dad said in response to my enthusiasm.

I nodded back, and then looked over to the pet carrier. It was a fabric carrier, half black and half turquoise. I then heard a faint meow from inside the carrier.

“So...can we open the carrier now?” I finally asked, hardly able to contain the sudden excitement. My dad nodded in response.

I unzipped the carrier. I anticipated for the kitten to walk out of the carrier, but nothing happened. I peered inside the carrier to see Caramel, who sat in the far corner of the carrier. She looked scared to leave.

I looked up at my parents, confused. They both seemed to understand the situation, though.

“She was likely very used to her life at the adoption centre,” My mother said, “with her cat friends and such. It’s scary to be in a completely different area suddenly.”

I looked back at Caramel, who was now looking back at me. I scooted back a bit from her, sitting on my knees. After a moment, she started to walk out. She seemed to be looking around at everything in front of her, alert. Any sounds, no matter how small, caused her to become startled.

As she was looking around, I thought about her situation. Caramel had several friends at that adoption centre until she was whisked away and brought to an unknown place. It may have made me happy to have her here, but she’s lost contact with her friends. That’s when something clicked in my head. I wasn’t about to say it was just like what I was going through, but it’s similar. I could understand just how Caramel may feel, and that made it easier to sympathise with her.

As I was lost in thought, Caramel looked at me. I looked back at her. As we looked at each other, Caramel started to walk towards me. As she got to my legs, I held my hand up to allow her to sniff it. She ended up doing just that. As she did so, she rubbed the side of her face against my hand. I was surprised by this response. Hesitantly, I went to pet Caramel. I gently brushed my hand along her soft fur, as she purred. I didn’t expect her to act like this towards me so soon, but it was nice to see.

As I was petting Caramel, she jumped onto my lap. I sat there, unsure what to do with her standing right on top of me. She got up to my stomach, and rubbed herself right on me. After that, she laid down right on my lap, and closed her eyes. Confused as to what to do, I continued to pet Caramel as she laid there. The warmth of her contrasted with how cold I had still felt at the time.

“Aw, it looks like she likes you!” My mother chimed in.

I took a moment to look at my mom, then looked back at Caramel. As she laid there purring, I took more time to think. From how I had felt from losing Melissa, I could understand that Caramel likely wasn't the happiest too. Knowing this, I didn't want to maintain those negative emotions for either of us. As Caramel continued to purr, I knew that it was going to be my duty to make this kitten a happy one. As I continued to feel her fur under my hand, I realised something else. Caramel had only just come into my life, and she had already done for me what I wanted to do for her. I was in tears until I was told she'd be here with me, to which my mood completely changed. It's strange how that happens, but I wasn't about to complain about it. In fact, it was the polar opposite.

I clearly must have been thinking about it too hard, or too much, as before I knew it I felt myself fighting back tears. This time today, though, it wasn't because of losing Melissa, as much as it did hurt. It was because someone new has come into my life, and it had already changed things for the better. Words couldn't describe how grateful I was for Caramel at that moment. She was truly special, and she would continue to be for years to come. As I looked down at Caramel, I allowed a tear to slide down my cheek, rolling by the smile now plastered on my face.

Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

The Cat Prince By: Morgan Burkitt (Gr. 7)

more inside

Rain raced down the white-paned window. If you looked from the outside, you could make out a linen-coloured cat tower, and a cat sitting at the top of it.

The cat was well rounded, with cold hazel eyes, and a bark-gray tabby coat. He was staring out the window to glare at some chattering squirrels, as a fluffy black kitten with round blue eyes trotted over to the cat tower, looking unbalanced as she skidded across the hardwood floor. She leaped onto the tower, almost missing the platform. Seeing this, the tabby cat turned down to glare at her.

“Laloo, I will *claw* your tail off if you don’t *get off my tower*” The cat hissed.

“But Eglon, isn’t the cat tower for all of us? I’m sure *Mary* would allow me on here! She isn’t mean like you!” The kitten mewed with an innocent gaze, proceeding to bat at the hanging pom-pom toy, oblivious to Eglon’s annoyance. He just turned his head away and closed his eyes. He wasn’t up for arguing with an obnoxious kitten.

Eglon’s rest was short lived as he perked up hearing heavy footsteps. The only living thing he didn’t mind, his human *Mary*, walked in with *Cleo*. He was a silver mackerel tabby, who was Laloo’s dearest friend—Eglon *hated* Cleo. He was a snobby know-it-all.

Cleo jumped from Mary’s arm, turning to Laloo, running up to her while exclaiming “Oh Laloo, leave the old goose alone, I found that mouse toy stuffed with catnip we lost, remember? Let’s go play with it.” Cleo mewed.

Laloo looked over excitedly, jumping off the cat tower. As the two peas-in-a-pod walked away, Eglon sighed and slowly stood up. He was quite hungry, and he was sure he could convince Mary to give him a treat.

Creeeeeak.

Eglon's pupils turned to slits as he jumped off the cat tower, landing with a painful *thump*. Behind him, he heard cracks and smashes. He turned around fearing for the worst. The Cat tower was in pieces.

Eglon opened his eyes groggily, stretching out on his soft cat-bed. He perked up his head to see if the kittens were up, and thankfully, they were fast asleep, as they cuddled together peacefully. Eglon stood up and ambled out of the bedroom, heading to the hallway. To his delight, a nice meal of kibble waited for him. He gobbled it all up, and then walked over to the living room, feeling satisfied with his full stomach. He was going to his spot; to lay on the top of his cat tower and watch over the outside world as he liked it.

Except the tower wasn't there.

Eglon slouched in sadness as he remembered last night's events. To even more of his dismay, Laloo and Cleo walked into the living room. Cleo purred in amusement. "The cat prince has lost his castle, hasn't he?" he chuckled.

"Shut yourself up, Cleo." Eglon hissed, flopping onto the carpeted floor in defeat. Laloo gave him a pitying look.

"Eglon, Mary's outside with the cat toy, what about you join us?" she suggested sweetly, and with nothing else to do, he agreed sadly, and got up to join the kittens.

It was a nice day outside, and Mary sat in the sun-chair with a cat-wand in her hands. The kittens ran over and started batting at it playfully. Eglon scoffed, laying down in the grass and enjoying the sun's heat. Cleo turned around to face Eglon.

“Eglon, how about you join us?” he asked with a hint of sympathy. Eglon glared at him, then turned away. Cleo turned over to Laloo purring.

“The cat prince sure is lazy, huh?” he trilled. Eglon got up in an instant, walking over. He was *not* going to be called lazy by *Cleo*.

Pushing the kittens aside, he batted at the toy. Mary made a delighted noise and reached into her pockets to pull out a treat. Eglon's mouth watered as he snatched it, maybe this wasn't so bad. He continued to bat at it, gaining more treats. The kittens took turns with him, and he had to admit, they were good aimers.

After a while, Mary got up, gave them all a pat and went inside, the cats following. Laloo turned to Eglon. “That's the first time you've ever played with us!” she remarked.

Cleo gave him a friendly face. “I take back my words. You know though, you looked happy playing with us, why don't you ever do it?”

Eglon sighed, slouching down. “Oh, it's just so nice to eat, rest, and sleep, nothing else. You'll understand when you're older.”

“I hope I don't.” Laloo muttered quietly to Cleo, who pushed her playfully.

“You aren't a proper cat, are you?” Cleo observed.

“Oh, and how so?” Eglon hissed.

“Well, you never hunt or play.”

“That's stuff for silly little kittens.” Eglon scoffed. “And anyways, I-”

Eglon was stopped short as he was slammed into by a small force. *Laloo*. She batted at his face, and out of instinct, he grabbed her scruff and pushed her off. He swiped at her, Laloo barely missing the swipe as she ran forward and swiped at him. Eglon swiped back,

catching her off guard as he pinned her. She let out a happy purr, getting up as Eglon recovered from the shock.

“Now, you have played off the list.” Cleo mewed.

“Thanks.” Eglon muttered coldly. Well, he would *never* tell them that it was quite fun.

The next day he was out in the backyard while Mary read a magazine. Cleo hunched down into a hunting position as Laloo watched with Eglon, who looked rather confused. Cleo’s sight was dead-set on a bright green leaf swaying in the wind. As it was pushed into the air again by the breeze, Cleo pounced and brought it to the ground.

“That’s not *real* hunting. You need to catch something, you know, *alive*” Eglon said bitterly.

Cleo responded by glaring at him. “What about *you* try?” He taunted sarcastically.

“Fine.” Eglon huffed as he walked over, Cleo trotting over to sit with Laloo.

His sight was set on a maple-leaf, and he stretched into an awkward hunting crouch. He could see amusement written all over the kitten’s face. As the leaf was lifted by the wind, he leaped, and missed. He snarled in frustration, tried again and missed. “This is pointless!” he snapped, walking away furiously.

Laloo lifted a paw up. “Eglon, try again, it took me a while to perfect it too.”

He gave the kitten a frustrated look but turned back and crouched again.

Missed. “Try again.” Miss. “Again.” Miss. “One more time.” he leapt, reached out his paws, feeling the maple leaf’s smooth texture as he slammed it into the ground. The kittens cheered for him, and he was overwhelmed by pride. He trotted over to them with a sway in his pace.

“How was that?” Cleo asked Eglon, to which he replied with a purr.

“It was.... fun.”

Laloo happily jumped up and down. “We have to show you more, the hidden maze in the attic, shredding that paper in the bathroom-”

“We’ll show him all that, Laloo,” Cleo interrupted, in a reassuring tone, then turned to Eglon “If you want.”

Eglon nodded, and Laloo gave him a nuzzle. They ran off, to dive into whatever mischief they could.

Mary shut the door on the delivery man after thanking him, bringing in the box of cat-tower pieces. Opening it up, she assembled it with ease as she had done this before. She thought that Eglon would like this cat tower, it was quite a wonderful one, with soft white fabric, lots of hiding places, a cute little hanging pom-pom to bat at, and the cherry on top, a high up perch with a rounded rim and circular shape that would perfectly fit him. Standing up, she gave it one last proud glance before walking away to her office to work.

Mary took a pause from her work, looking at the time on her laptop. It had been a few hours since she had assembled the cat tower and wondered if Eglon was already flopped on the perch, staring out the window as always. He must have had quite a shock losing his beloved tower, and she was sure he’d love his new one. She stood up, opening the creaky door as she headed to the living room.

Tiptoeing to the living room, she was full of excitement to see if her beloved Eglon liked the cat tower as much as she liked the appearance of it. Taking in a long breath, she turned the corner to see the living room, the cat tower coming into her sight.

She was quite relieved to see Eglon on the cat tower, glaring at the squirrels that hung out around the window as always. But this time, something was different. It took her a moment to realize, but when she did, she was in disbelief...that is, that the two kittens laid with him.

The Guardian of Here and Beyond By: Isabella Campagnolo (Gr. 8)

more inside

Deity's, entities, guardians, they go by many names. They are beings that observe over the universe and all that is beyond. They keep worlds from drifting into madness by putting a stop to all evil that lurks beyond in dark dimensions trying to sneak its way into ours to cause chaos. Around 3,000,000 years ago a new entity arrived. Not much is known about this entity. In fact, no one really knows his true name which is why everyone just calls him different names and no one can seem to agree on what they should call him. Some people devote their whole lives to honoring him and some people simply take no notice of his greatness. However, just a couple of days ago he had stopped wandering the cosmos and came to rest on earth.

To no surprise, news about the entity being on the shoreline spread like wildfire and people are coming from all over the country to see him in all of his glory.

Stanley is a short kid that always seems to mess up his hair whether it's styled up or it's even just been brushed nicely, due to him running around all the time. He lives about 10 minutes away in walking distance from the entity's resting spot and has been begging his parents to take him to see "the world famous hero everyone is talking about." His parents immediately assumed that this was his imagination running wild and then, they had started hearing people talk about it everywhere. So his parents decided to pass by the area where the deity had been seen while coming home from dinner. Stanley also has a very energetic sister named Jaime who has also been interested in seeing this entity. They are both ten

years old, so of course they've been wanting to see this hero, imagining that he will look like some giant superhero.

Their family is now heading home from dinner and it's getting a bit late. The sun is slowly setting on the water and it's almost blinding to the eye. The colour is of a bright honey with amber blended into the sky. "You kids might want to take a look at the beach," their father cheered. Stanley and Jaime immediately look over to their left window and see a giant statue looking over at the sunset right along the shore of the beach. Both Stanley and Jaime started begging their parents to let them see him from a closer view. They drove into the beach parking lot only to spend a solid five minutes trying to find a free spot to park. They had all left the car and both Jaime and Stanley started running towards the giant. By the time they got to the shoreline from the parking lot they were already tired and immediately fell down onto the soft sand.

"Stanley we have to keep going, the entity is right over there!" Jaime pleaded.

Stanley stood up and responded with "Oh, right the entity!"

After a couple more steps they finally made it. There he was, the guardian and protector of our universe crowded by a bunch of tourists taking photos with him and selling merchandise. He looked exactly like the ancient photos but made out of stone. He was sitting with his knees facing upward, his hands wrapped tightly around his knees and his eyes popping out of the top almost like a scared child. He has a long stunning blue cloak, two shoulder pads, a chest plate with a fauld attached below and star shaped eyes. Jaime and Stanley's parents looked at him in disbelief, what they had only seen in photos and heard about in the news was right on their beach.

Stanley ran up to his parents and asked, "How come the entity is made of stone?"

His father looked down at Stanley and replied, "Well apparently when he first appeared here there were only a few local families and some other local people and apparently he looked more like a giant human. However, he probably realized that scientists would have mistaken him for a giant human and would have run tests on him and would maybe even dissect him." "But he's our protector! What kind of selfish people would want to study our universal guardian!" Stanley yelled out. "I'm not too sure either. I know that he can change his form whenever he wants to but I'm not even sure why he's stone myself but that's just my assumption" Stanley's father explained.

After twenty minutes of loitering around the entity Stanley and Jaime's parents suggested that it was time for them to head home. However, both Jaime and Stanley refused and had to be carried back to the car. By the time they had reached home they were already asleep dreaming of visiting the entity again. The next day, both Jamie and Stanley had begged their parents if they could go and visit the entity again and eventually they worked out a schedule and let them go for about forty minutes each day.

It became an everyday routine for them. Going down to the shoreline and trying to talk to the entity, trying to see if he would break out of his stone form was an everyday activity for them.

After about seven months everyone had simply just lost interest in the statue. There would still be tourists visiting the area but not as often as it was before. However, even after

seven months both Jaime and Stanley still would come to the same spot wondering when the entity will go back to space.

Maybe he won't even go back to space.

Maybe he's stuck here.

On a warm August day Stanley and Jaime came back to the same place they always have, usually running around in the water or even talking about what they want to be for Halloween which usually changes once every week. "That's it! I'm going to be some kind of superhero." Stanley decided.

"But you said you were going to be some kind of supervillain last week?" Jaime replied.

"Well I'm going to be a hero and I know it." Stanley proclaimed.

"What hero are you going to be if you're so sure about this idea?" Jaime questioned.

Stanley replied with confidence "I'm going to be the entity!"

What came next, the kids would never have guessed. A giant drop of water dropped from the sky. The kids both looked up to see the entity no longer made from stone with his hands on his head followed by a river of tears running down his face.

"Why, why would you be me?" He wept. His voice was soft and modulated. Stanley and Jaime were left staring at him. It was too good to be true. The guardian of the universe talking to two ten year olds.

“Because you're my idol and- oh! I should have gotten permission from you first! I'm so sorry.” Stanley babbled. The entity laughed and assured Stanley that it was fine and he could be him for Halloween.

“Why is it that you come by here every single day and not get bored of doing so?” The entity wondered.

Jaime stated “Because we always wondered if you would ever eventually wake up one day.”

“So you kids knew I wasn't just a statue huh.” The entity chuckled.

They spent a while talking about themselves. Stanley talked about his love for the game tag and how he wants to become a professional runner when he's older. Jaime talked about how she prefers team sports like baseball and then they both proceeded to argue over which sport was better. Meanwhile the entity told them about his experiences with other worlds and how he can change his form to whatever he desires. He told the kids about how he could fly across the stars and hop across from galaxy to galaxy.

The sun began to set and both Stanley and Jaime began to get sleepy but Stanley still wanted the entity to answer one last question. As the entity just stopped talking about his space travels he suggested that Jaime and Stanley should get going. But as Jaime started to walk away Stanley asked “What are you doing on Earth?”

“Huh?” The entity gasped. “What are you doing here? You've been here for a while. Are you still doing your job?” Stanley questioned. The entity stood up and started hyperventilating. He was having a panic attack.

Jaime shouted “Hey entity are you alright”

The entity screamed in response “Stop calling me the entity!” He sat down and apologized to Jaime. He had calmed down and was willing to explain to them.

“You know how people like your parents have to work to earn money to get food to eat and to take care of themselves. After all, that they save up money for their retirement and they finally get a break. I needed a rest from all the pressure of saving everyone from evil beyond their own worlds. Whenever a force of evil is ready to attack a planet or a galaxy I get an ache in my head so I have to rush to the area in which they're attacking. It gets exhausting. I always knew it was selfish of me to leave these people behind but I just want to know when I'll be able to stop.” The entity remarked.

“Well, me and Jaime go to school nearly everyday and some days it feels like the work won't stop but I've heard you've been doing this job for what, 3,000,000 years. That's a very long time, but when you first appeared on the shoreline I read into your history and apparently there was an enti- um I mean guardian before you and that he got to be reborn as a human after all of that work.” Stanley stated.

“Actually?” The entity murmured.

Jaime added, “Yeah apparently every few million years a new guardian comes to protect a specific dimension and the old one gets to move on from their job by being reborn as whatever they want.”

“So I just have to keep doing my job then will it all pay off eventually?” The entity queried. Both Stanley and Jaime nodded their heads.

After hearing that he felt a lot better and began to sob. But these tears weren't formed from fear or sadness, it was tears of joy. It was now he realized that it was time for him to get back to work.

He stood up and was ready to set off. the sun was now almost completely set, and he glanced off into the distance. The feel of the cold water splashing against his leg but the warm sun hitting his face was a perfect balance. "You know one of the reasons I decided to take my break on earth are the sunsets. They never cease to amaze. Your planet has the perfect conditions for living. Do me a favor and don't ever take that for granted alright you two?" The entity inquired.

Jaime and Stanley nodded and smiled. Their smiles shined in the light. Stanley announced, "Well we better be heading out."

And then right after the entity grabbed the two and started hugging them with all of his strength. He wiped away the rivers of tears from his eyes and began his ascent into space. He pushed slowly off from the ground and shouted, "You know I prefer the name the guardian over the entity, it sounds a lot more friendly you know?"

Then he was gone.

Later on Stanley and Jaime's parents came to pick them up. "You were supposed to be home hours ago!" Both of their parents yelled.

"We know," Stanley and Jaime responded sadly.

Every once in a while he comes back to visit Stanley and Jaime, having small conversations seeing them grow older and older each time he visits.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Destruction

By: Ava Dadollahi (Gr. 10)

more inside

A nightingale glided through the night sky, soaring past minarets, dipping between the trees that flanked the rectangular courtyard. It perched on a low branch and began to sing, its majestic voice spiralling through the darkness.

Ayeh's steps slowed. She looked up at the small bird, captivated by its chant. The nightingale sang drunkenly in the night, intoxicated by the moon rather than wine. Its melodies were an arcane thing. They encaptured hearts, grew flowers on the soul. The nightingale had the ability to sympathize with all the broken hearts that yearned for solace. It brought hope in the face of destruction. It mourned with thousands. Despite its small size, it carried the sorrows of the entire world upon its delicate wings. There truly was no bigger burden.

Hayedeh's footsteps came to a stop from behind her. Her eyes followed to where Ayeh gazed.

"A fascinating little creature, no? In spite of its small and humble body, it gives voice to the most beautiful sound the world has ever heard. With just its presence, all the other birds and animals go mute. I have never envied anything or anyone more than I envy this bird," she mused, her rosy lips pursed.

Ayeh breathed out a laugh. "Then you best not stay here and stare at it any longer. You look like you'll explode from jealousy. Just leave the bird alone."

Hayedeh stared for a moment before bursting into laughter.

Ayeh grinned. She reached for her little sister's hand and interlocked their fingers. The coolness of Hayedeh's ring bit into her skin. A shiver coursed down her spine as her mind grew polluted with memories that threatened to undo her.

You're being ridiculous.

Perhaps she was being ridiculous, but nevertheless, all Ayeh saw when she looked at the ring was the blackened feline corpse before her little sister's small feet all those years ago, and the way her eyes darkened when she perceived what she had done. Eleven years had passed, yet it felt as if it were only yesterday.

A small, curly haired girl with bright green eyes that glowed like the stars, and whose curiosity rivaled the most brilliant philosophers. An innocent girl whose tiny hands had discovered too much.

"Abji," Hayedeh had exclaimed, bursting into her room, saying *sister* in a way that raised suspicion within her.

Ayeh stood from her armchair and crossed the room. She dropped her gaze to what she held in her hands. It was a large, leather book, blackened from age and coated in dust. The cover was inscribed in ancient scripture, the calligraphy large and painted in gold. After squinting at it for a moment, she made sense of what was written. *Kitab Jaaduyeh Siyah.*

The Book of Black Magic.

There were several copies of the book, and Ayeh knew that one copy was kept in the palace. She also knew that the book wasn't just out in the open. It was kept with the witch, an ancient woman who was the palace apothecary. She made magical medicines, which were stronger and much more effective than regular treatments and herbs.

A gasp escaped Ayeh's throat. "Oh. My. God." She snatched the book from her hands. "Hayedeh, what have you done? How did you get a hold of this?"

Hayedeh dipped her head, peering at her through her lashes. She had been but a child then, no more than thirteen years old. "The witch. The door to her apothecary was wide open. She's an old crone now, nearly blind and very forgetful. I found this on her countertop and just had to get a look at its contents."

"You idiot! This is no toy to be played with. You aren't even allowed in the apothecary!"

Ayeh dragged her finger down the book's spine, and slowly opened it. Hayedeh immediately shut the book and tore it from her hands.

Ayeh frowned. "What?"

She shook her head. "Don't open it."

"Why?"

"Because I..." she swallowed. "...already made that mistake."

Ayeh's hand flew to her mouth. "What mistake? Speak!"

"I- I wanted to see what was inside. There were spells, many of them. I accidentally read a curse, and it-"

"It what?" Ayeh cried, grabbing her sister by the shoulders and shaking her hard. She yelped.

"It gave me a power!"

"What kind of power?"

Hayedeh's soft features set in a grim expression. "Let me show you."

Before she could say a word, Hayedeh grabbed her hand and dragged her outside to the courtyard. She spotted a fat cat sauntering on the grass. She let go of Ayeh and knelt next

to it. Ayeh noticed that it was pregnant. Hayedeh held up her hand and slipped off a golden ring on her thumb, a ring she hadn't seen before. It was thin, engraved with calligraphy. It was too far away, so she couldn't see what was written on it.

"Here, hold this." She gestured for Ayeh to hold out her hand then dropped the ring into her palm.

"What is-"

"Quiet, just watch. I want to see if this will work."

Ayeh held her breath, carefully watching as Hayedeh pressed her hands onto the cat's back.

To her horror, beneath her hands, the cat's fur began to blacken. It let out a strangled hiss, before its entire body turned black.

Ayeh opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Hayedeh slowly got to her feet, peering down at the small animal. Her expression was aloof.

"What is this?" Ayeh cried. She could barely comprehend what her eyes had witnessed.

"It worked," Hayedeh whispered, her voice hoarse. Her beautiful eyes were filled with bewilderment, and she looked up at her.

Tears streamed down Ayeh's face. "Do you not see what I see? Must I pluck my eyes out and exchange them for yours for you to realize what you've done?"

Whatever astonishment that remained on Hayedeh's face quickly faded. Her mouth twisted in a pout as she began to cry.

"What kind of power is this?" Ayeh hissed.

“Lethal touch,” she whispered. “Hand of death. There was another spell that created this ring. It’s the only thing that can cease the curse, as long as I’m wearing it. But without the ring, whatever I touch dies.”

“Abji,” Hayedeh said, tearing Ayeh from the past.

“Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

She paused, then nodded.

Hayedeh smiled, flashing her dimples. “Lost in thought?”

Ayeh smiled back. “Yes.”

Suddenly, Hayedeh’s grip on her hand tightened. Her breath hitched.

“What?” Ayeh asked.

She jerked her chin forward. “Look.”

Ahead, panicked guards swarmed the palace entrance. Some bustled inside, while others paced back and forth in consternation. The clouds rushed to hide the moon, as if they sensed danger.

“Something is wrong,” Hayedeh whispered.

Ayeh’s jaw tightened. “Let’s go inside.”

The cobblestone clacked with their footfalls, their skirts billowing in the evening breeze. When they entered the palace, they sped down the hallways, the crowds growing larger and larger until they could barely move forward from the mass.

“I’m going to find Dariush,” Ayeh said. Hayedeh nodded and she let go of her hand.

She squeezed past the alarmed servants until she found the prince. His arms were folded as he examined the chaos. She gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “Dariush.”

He whirled. "Ayeh, are you all right?"

She nodded grimly. "I am, but clearly, everyone else is not. What happened?"

He grasped her elbow and drew her closer, his dark eyes clouded with worry. "There was a murder in the palace. Five of the servants were found dead in their wards."

She drew in a sharp breath. Her stomach churned with turmoil, her blood rushing with trepidation beneath her skin. *Murder.*

Hayedeh and Prince Naser managed their way through the crowd to join them. Ayeh bowed her head in greeting to Hayedeh's husband. "Your Grace." He nodded his head in reply. Ayeh's gaze moved to her sister. Her posture was rigid and her narrow brows were furrowed. It appeared she had just heard the unsettling news. She twisted her ring around her finger.

Don't tell anyone about this. This shall remain a secret between you and me. That was what Hayedeh had said when Ayeh insisted they get the witch to reverse the curse.

She swallowed.

Prince Naser rubbed Hayedeh's shoulder. She looked up at her husband lovingly. "Don't worry. We will have this figured out soon." She nodded, grasping his hand.

Then, all heads turned in one direction, and the crowd parted, clearing the path for Queen Azar. She struck the ground with her golden scepter.

"Silence!" She demanded.

Everyone hushed at once, bowing their heads in the face of their queen. She made her way down the hall, flanked by her maids. Her chin was lifted, her bearing regal as ever. She stopped before the four of them, and jerked her head to dismiss the maids. They quickly

scurried away. Queen Azar's scrutinizing gaze moved over Ayeh and Hayedeh then stopped on her sons. They all mumbled their greetings.

"A murderer. Can you believe it? These incompetent guards and soldiers," she grunted, shaking her head. "I swear to God they cannot do their jobs right."

"Whoever this murderer may be certainly is skilled. It will take time to discover who it is," Dariush reasoned.

She closed her eyes and nodded. "Hmm." She pursed her mouth in appraisal. "Well, you should go to your father and see what's happening. Both of you. He must need your help."

Dariush looked at Naser. Naser nodded. He dipped his head to whisper in Hayedeh's ear. She smiled and squeezed his hand, then turned to Dariush. She placed a hand on his arm.

"The best of luck to you both," she said.

He nodded. "Thank you." With that, the princes went on their way.

The queen turned her gaze to Hayedeh and Ayeh. "Return to your chambers. There's a literal killer wandering the palace. You wouldn't want him getting to you, God forbid."

Hayedeh nodded. "We will, Your Highness." She smiled. "Take care of yourself." The queen smiled and patted her cheek. When she left, Hayedeh jerked her head to the side.

"Let's go."

Ayeh frowned when they reached Hayedeh's chambers. "So, we can't leave our rooms?"

She blinked. "Of course we can. Just not often."

"All right then. Good night." Ayeh leaned in to kiss her sister's cheek then headed for her own chambers.

...

A blood-curdling scream sounded from outside Ayeh's chamber. She jerked upright, alarm raising her pulse. She placed a hand on her chest, trying to slow her breathing. She looked to her side, where Dariush lay next to her, still asleep.

It was only in my head.

Another scream rang, echoing in the halls.

Not in my head.

She jumped out of the bed and grabbed her chador, wrapping it around her as she opened the door. She peeked her head out.

Hayedeh knelt on the ground outside her chambers, howling in grief. She lifted her hands in the air, then brought them onto her head, hitting herself over and over again until a servant caught her wrists. Her eyes were clamped shut in anguish. Queen Azar was hunched beside her clutching her hand, her chest heaving as she sobbed.

"Abji?" Ayeh cried, running to her. She dropped to her knees and grasped her face. "Abji? What happened?"

Hayedeh opened her eyes, her gaze dark in a way that made Ayeh wonder if she was on the brink of insanity.

"Dearest Hayedeh," Ayeh whispered, tears filling her own eyes. "Speak to me."

A servant strode to them, her face pale. "Prince Naser..." she swallowed. "D-dead."

Ayeh's brows drew tightly together. "What?"

"He passed away."

"Oh, God," Hayedeh wailed as she threw her head back, her hands folded in supplication. Her shrill wail pierced the high ceiling and soared all the way to the skies.

Ayeh frowned, struggling to register what the fair haired girl had said.

"Why did you make me a widow?" Hayedeh sobbed, her head still tipped up towards the heavens. "Why?"

Ayeh's hands flew to either side of her face in shock. "Oh, Hayedeh..." She opened her arms to embrace her, but Hayedeh abruptly stopped her.

"No," She blurted. "Don't touch me." She waved her hands. "Don't touch me."

Ayeh's heart cleaved in two. Her sister was broken and she couldn't fix her, couldn't do a single thing to alleviate her pain.

It had been less than a week since Hayedeh and Naser's wedding. Even the henna still lingered on Hayedeh's hands, ornate floral patterns spiralling up her arms and disappearing beneath her silk sleeves. She had been so happy to be married into the same royal family as her older sister. What a beautiful privilege that had been, being the daughters of the Persian king's beloved vizier.

"Please," Ayeh rasped out, reaching her hand out.

"No." Her voice was firm, despite the tremors that had been present in it only moments before.

The servant gripped Hayedeh's shoulders, bringing her up to her feet. "Come now, my lady. How about a nice warm bath to make you feel better?"

“My son has died. We should all be mourning, yet you want to give her a bath?” The queen snarled.

Her personal attendant came around her and knelt next to her. “Your Grace, please come with me.”

She clenched her teeth and let out a guttural wail. Still, she allowed the servant to lead her to her chambers.

“Come, darling,” the fair one murmured to Hayedeh, managing to drag her away.

As the distance between Ayeh and her little sister grew, her sobs grew quieter, yet still, the sharp sounds pulsed in her ears.

Even after the hall emptied, Ayeh remained rooted in place, still shaken from what had happened. What was worse than fresh grief? Perhaps the long glum period that would inevitably follow, where misery would slowly eat away at the heart. And when the rib cage was robbed of its fruit, the parasitic sentiment stealing their victim’s peace simultaneously, it would move to the soul. That’s how grief was. Its greed was incessant.

Will this be Hayedeh’s fate? She wondered, the radiating pain in her chest making it hard to swallow.

Still, she remained in the great hall, the ornate, mirrored walls reflecting the distressed mess she had so quickly become. Her disheveled hair, dark and wavy tendrils that slipped from her chador and spilled onto her face, nearly making her forget she was the wife of a prince. Her cheeks had been drained of their colour, her green eyes bloodshot and marred with dark bags. When her legs began to ache beneath her, she finally managed to drag herself to her room.

She opened her door, eyes wandering to the bed, where Dariush still slept.

Wait.

The sheets were strewn to the edge of the bed, making it seem as if a body slept beneath it.

Ayeh slid her hand along the table, finding a candle. She lit it, the small shaft of light illuminating a dancing shadow along the walls. She paused at the sound of grunting and coughing.

She turned around. Dariush knelt on the ground hunched over, heaving.

Ayeh gasped. She rushed to the other side of the room and dropped to the ground next to him, pressing a hand against his back.

“Dariush?”

He lifted his head ever so slightly, enough for her to see blood staining his mouth and spilling over his lip. He quickly turned his head away and hacked. To her horror, there was a puddle of blood and vomit before him.

Her heart leapt to her throat, its pulse so violent and loud she feared it would tear through her skin. Frantic, she ran from his side and burst out of the bedroom, completely forgetting she wore a flimsy nightgown that barely covered her body.

She should have remained at his side. She should have called for help. She should have at least thrown on her chador. But being in the state that she was, all logic had disappeared.

She unconsciously ran to Hayedeh’s room. She tried the knob and was surprised to see it open. Her bedroom was empty, but a small beam of light escaped the gap from beneath the door to the bath. She could hear Hayedeh’s muffled bawling.

Her knees buckled, and she fell to the floor. She gripped the nearest thing to her, which happened to be the small bedside table. A couple of things fell to the floor with a loud clang. A small bowl of fruits, a book, and a jewelry box.

She reached for the jewelry box. It was silver, carved with flowers and adorned with pearls. It had landed on its side, and all of its contents had spilled onto the floor. A golden chain, bangles, cuffs, and rings.

Tiredly, she slid all the jewelry in a pile and began to put them back in the box. It was such a small job, yet it took strenuous effort. Her fingers trembled violently, and her mind reeled. All knowledge that her husband was coughing up blood and dying in a couple rooms away had been forgotten.

She stopped as she got to one of the rings, frowning. She peered at it, struggling to make out its small details in the darkness.

Oh, God.

It was the ring. *The* ring. A thin gold band engraved in calligraphy, writing that was way too small to clearly decipher. The same ring that made her grow tense whenever she caught a glimpse of it. The ring that was always on Hayedeh's finger.

Clearly, not always.

She drew in a choking breath, dropping the ring to the floor and reaching for her hair, wanting to rip all of it from the roots. Her chest began to throb, fists enclosing her lungs.

"Oh, God," she murmured, too shocked to scream, too broken to sob.

A nightingale flew past the window, opening its small mouth to sing. It had come to mourn.

I accidentally read a curse.

Bile rose up her throat. Had it truly been an accident?

Betrayal flooded her veins, muddled her mind. The way Hayedeh was hitting her head as all mourners did, the wails that had escaped her throat, the tears that had streamed down her face - it had all been a facade. It didn't even matter that she had refused to touch Ayeh, knowing very well what would have happened to her.

Realization hit her hard, merciless with its revelations. The twisting of her ring in the hall, the clutching of Naser's hand, the gentle touch of reassurance she gave Dariush. How many others had she touched? The maids, the queen. So many people.

Except for Ayeh.

Darkness dispersed within her like poison. There were fates worse than death.

But why?

Why did a young thirteen-year-old have such dark intentions? Or had it truly been an accident, and it had taken time for the wickedness of the curse to corrupt her? Why hadn't she touched Ayeh? Was it out of love?

So many questions.

The nightingale continued to sing, its melancholy voice echoing in the room. It devoured her miserable story and created a song from it, just as it did for all the other mourners it visited.

A cry escaped Ayeh's throat, loud and piercing. She didn't even hear the immediate thunder of footsteps that rushed towards the room and burst through the door. All she heard was the nightingale's ballad that it had stitched together with its chirps.

Calm like an ebbing tide, dangerous like a storm.

A fool thought she loved her kin, but had verily wreaked destruction upon her soul.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

The Summer of Latrines, Canoes and Aching Arms
By: Laura Forgrave (Gr. 9)

more inside

"It will be fun," encouraged my parents.

My friends said, "Everyone is coming, you just *have to* come."

"It is worth a credit, you might as well go," the guidance counsellor claimed.

I sighed. I knew my parents and counsellor were working hard to find an enjoyable summer school option for me, but you'd think they would know me better by now. I hated the outdoors. They expected me to look forward to camping? Besides, the reason I needed to go to summer school was downright embarrassing. I had failed phys ed. How, you ask? I was terrible at anything that involved moving. You want me to give a presentation on the economic and social effects of the World Wars? No problem, I can do research. Solve quadratic equations? Sure. But if you want me to throw a baseball? Not a chance. The three week camping trip was supposed to be fun, and it would count as a phys ed. credit. Most people were going for enjoyment, and the fact that they earned a credit was just a bonus. Me? I desperately needed that credit, so this was how I was going to get it.

.....

Two nights before we left on the trip, I started to pack. I hadn't even heard of half the stuff on the kit list. A Coleman Stove? A flint and magnesium fire starter? After a long trip to Canadian Tire, I finally had everything I needed. The course started with a week in a cabin before we left on a two week canoeing and portaging adventure. The course material explained that we were responsible for carrying all of our own gear, as well as our share of

the group equipment. I had no clue how the canoes would fit everything if everyone packed as much as I had. "Let's hope most kids pack light," I muttered as I zipped up my third duffel bag.

.....

The bus picked me up at 6:30 am on July 1st. It was a rickety old vehicle that looked like a renovated minivan. As I stepped on, I realized that was exactly what it was. Ms. Stanfield, one of the most notorious teachers at the neighboring school, was sitting in the closest seat.

"Name!" She barked at me.

"Gemma . . . Gemma Willson," I muttered. She checked my name off a list.

"Sit." I moved towards one of the less stained seats in the back. "No! Not there. Sit in alphabetical order." She pointed towards my seat. It was stained and torn, with stuffing poking out. I sighed and sat down. This was going to be a long ride.

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After a 12 hour drive, we finally arrived at the cabin. My friends were taking a different bus, but I was supposed to meet them here. Ms. Stanfield and about 20 kids disembarked from our bus. I got my first glimpse of my home for the next week. It was a small white cabin, slanted sideways, with a moss covered roof. A small outhouse stood off to one side. A well was partially hidden by some trees. Ew! Did that mean there was no running water? I followed Ms. Stanfield inside. The cabin was all one room, filled with bunk beds and a fireplace in the corner. I counted the bunks. There were only 9. There were 20 of us, plus a second bus of kids that was supposed to arrive soon. How were we supposed to fit?

"Ms. Stanfield? There are only 18 beds. How are we supposed to all fit?" A boy asked, trembling.

Ms. Stanfield walked towards a door I had not seen before. It was only two feet wide, and was hidden behind one of the bunkbeds. With difficulty, we managed to move the bunk and open the door. Ms. Stanfield peered inside. "Just as I expected. Very good." She pulled out two soiled cots that looked like they would barely hold an infant, let alone a ninth grader. Then she walked into the small room and pulled out a deluxe cot that looked fresh out of a store catalog.

"I'll be sleeping here. Everyone to bed, now. Scram!" It was only 7 pm, but the look she gave us sent everyone scrambling for a bunk. I was not quite fast enough, and ended up with one of the old cots. I lay down, half my body on the cot and the other half on the floor. Eventually I fell asleep.

.....

"Everyone! Up! It's time to get moving!" I woke up to the piercing sound of a whistle. Ms. Stanfield looked slightly less scary in neon pink pajamas, but she was still intimidating. I looked at my watch. It was 5 am. Was she waking us up for a night hike? No, by the look on her face it seemed she thought this counted as morning. Ugh! "Alright, before you all start to think this is going to be an easy course, let's get some things straight." Ms. Stanfield's commanding voice carried through the room. "I am the boss; you do what I say. You are still in school, and should behave as such. Now, I have a chore chart here, finish your chores and get ready. We will start classes at 6:30 am."

"Classes?" One girl asked.

"Yes, Jane, classes. This is school, not a vacation. Health class starts in 90 minutes. Now get to it!" I sighed and looked over at the chore chart. Ms. Stanfield had arranged us all

into groups that rotated to get everything done. I was in the group Perseverance. Our chore today was Ugh! Latrine duty.

I stomped over to the outhouse, where I met my group members. The boy who had asked a question last night was there, along with two other kids I didn't know. I learned that their names were Ben, Delilah and Kalia. Then we got to work. Delilah refused to do anything, but Ben and Kalia were helpful. We wiped down the countertop, replaced the toilet paper and swept the floor.

Ms. Stanfield came out to inspect our work. "Not terrible," she said, "but wash the walls. And replace the candle in the lantern on the ceiling."

Half an hour later, we were finally done. I got dressed and waited for breakfast to be served. The Endurance team was on breakfast duty, and they were struggling to light the fire.

At 6:15, Ms. Stanfield gave up and started cooking breakfast herself. Burnt toast and undercooked eggs were served a few minutes later.

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The second bus never showed up. I later found out that this course was full, so anyone who didn't need this course to pass gym had been transferred to the Caribbean Adventure course. So while I cleaned latrines and ate burnt bacon, my friends were learning to surf and enjoying all-you-can-eat buffets. The irony!

I had forgotten about the health part of phys ed. We started the first morning with healthy eating, stopped for lunch, and learned about human growth and development in the afternoon. After a dinner of hot dogs without buns (still cold) and corn from a can, we learned to do CPR. After lying on the floor with someone breathing into your mouth, you tend to become good friends with the person. Kalia and I were inseparable after that.

The week continued in a similar manner. We woke up at 5 am, and went to bed at 7 pm (6 pm if we hadn't met Ms. Stanfield's standards that day). We wrote a couple of health tests, and team Determination managed to light a fire. The meals tasted terrible, and there were bugs everywhere, but I survived. As the first week drew to a close, I realized that next week we would be canoeing our way up the river. As I lay in bed that night, I realized that as horrible as this week had been, the coming two weeks would probably be worse.

.....

The morning whistle woke me up at 4 am that morning. "Let's get moving everyone!" Ms. Stanfield shouted. "We have a long way to go to reach our campsite tonight!" After closing up the cabin, we pulled five canoes out from under the trees. We put on our backpacks and turned to Ms. Stanfield. "What are you waiting for? We have a two-hour hike ahead of us." She turned and started walking. We picked up the canoes and followed.

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At 7 am, we finally reached our starting point. Every group put their canoe in the water. As my bare feet touched the surface of the water, I shivered. It was freezing! The river was rough, with a strong current, and rocks poking out here and there. Paddling would be hard work.

After we put our gear in the canoe, I went to step inside. Ms. Stanfield stopped me. "Oh no, Gemma, you have far too much stuff. There wouldn't be any room for your group. This should fix the problem." She picked up one of my duffel bags and emptied it into the river.

"Hey! I need that stuff!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, your Archie comics and cookie stash? Essential, I'm sure," she scoffed.

"But my toothbrush and sweaters were in there!"

“Seems pretty warm for a sweater. And we won’t have clean water to spare for teeth-brushing anyway. I brought floss for everyone instead.”

I groaned and climbed into the canoe.

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We reached our campsite at 7 pm, after a long day of paddling. We had portaged several times to reach the next stream deep enough for our canoes. Now we had to set up camp. After we unloaded all the gear, we pitched the tents. I wasn’t familiar with tent camping, but I knew enough to understand these tents were terrible. They were stained canvas, held up by heavy metal poles. Another tent was set up for the kitchen prep area, along with a foldable table. Then Ms. Stanfield made us set up her camping area. She had a 3 room tent that was still sealed in its packaging, complete with built-in LED lights. With aching arms, I inflated her two air mattresses by hand and set up her portable clothesline. Then we set up her shower tent, complete with a portable shower. Her third tent was her personal cooking area, with a camp oven and all sorts of tasty ingredients. And she was complaining about the amount of stuff I packed!

.....

The routine stayed the same, day after day. Wake up at 5 am, eat breakfast, pack up camp, be in canoes by 6:30. Canoe all day, portaging when necessary. Reach the campsite by 5 pm and set up all of Ms. Stanfield’s gear. Eat dinner and go to sleep. I was exhausted.

Almost 2 weeks into our course, I had the worst day yet. As we canoed, it started to pour. Then the thunder and lightning began. We huddled by the river under the canoes, but we were all soaked. We never reached our campsite that night, so we slept with our sleeping bags on the forest floor. Ms. Stanfield still made us set up her tents, much to our annoyance.

We woke up early the next morning wet, cold and annoyed. We had a long way to go to reach our campsite for the night. Because our gear was so wet and heavy, we couldn't fit as much in the canoes. Instead of leaving her precious shower tent behind, Ms. Stanfield dumped more of our bags into the river! I was outraged. I turned and tipped over her canoe, dumping all of her possessions into the river. She turned scarlet and started yelling. I ran away into the woods. It just wasn't fair!

.....

After fishing her belongings out of the river, Ms. Stanfield ran after me and found me crying under a tree. She didn't look angry, just sad and disappointed. "Gemma," she said softly, "that wasn't very kind of you."

"You threw away my belongings, I should be able to throw away yours," I replied.

She sighed, "I've been a horrible camp counselor, haven't I?"

"Yes, yes you have!" I snapped.

"I'm sorry. It's just... I never wanted to do this. I applied to teach English to summer school students. I love teaching research skills and helping people write essays. There was no need for another English teacher, so I was dumped here. I guess dumping your stuff in the river was retaliation for having to go camping. I was never an outdoorsy person."

"I get that," I responded, "but that doesn't mean you can take out your annoyance on us. Some people here actually want to have fun camping, and people like me do need the phys ed. credit. This would be so much more enjoyable if you weren't so mean, and strict and... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tipped over your canoe."

"That's okay," she said with a smile, "I deserved it. Let's go back and try to make camp a little more enjoyable for everyone now, shall we?"

We stood up and walked back to the others.

The last week of camp was much calmer, and more fun. We had beautiful blue skies and no wind. Ms. Stanfield let us use her portable shower, and we spent the evenings laughing around a campfire and eating chocolate chips from her secret stash. We all went to bed exhausted, but happy. When we finally returned home, I was thrilled to have running water and air conditioning, but I missed the days spent roasting marshmallows and chatting with friends. I had passed the course, but I was almost tempted to take it again next year.

Four weeks later, I walked into my English class on the first day of school. I stared in shock at the teacher holding open the door. "Ms. Stanfield! It's so wonderful to see you!" I exclaimed.

She smiled back. "You as well. Are you planning on camping next summer, then?"

"Yes!" I said enthusiastically. "But only if you are."

"You bet," she replied.

Senior Division Grades 9-12

The Adventures of Dr. Oxford: Temple of Mount Meru
By: Benjamin Reaume (Gr. 12)

more inside

A dense mist settled on the shaded jungle floor, as beams of sunlight shone through palm fronds illuminating the tropical overgrowth. It was a sultry humid midday, as the dark jungles of Tanzania echoed, and roared with exotic, and unknowable whoops, screams and hollers. Then a slight rustling murmured from a dense bush and out stepped a rather peculiar man. He walked with sway from side to side as if put off balance by his rather large pack strewn with a bedroll, an ornate watch, tea kettle, umbrella, and worn rolls of maps.

Though his posture would make him appear lost, he walked excitedly with an air of determination, and curiosity. His bushy eyebrows, and near comically large moustache were shadowed by an oversized pith helmet. His worn British officer's jacket seemed at odds with his khaki shorts, which appeared to only be held up by a faded leather belt, and Webley holster. He walked vigorously through the jungle, his brown ammunition boots, and puttees brushing against fern fronds, and branches alike. He held a large stained map, and brass compass which he checked routinely.

Suddenly a dark brown shape dashed through the undergrowth, and abruptly halted at the man's feet, its head jerked upwards, and began to silently stare at the man. The man lowered his map to reveal that its face oozed saliva, and was covered in a dark brown coat. As it stared at him it thought "oh oh I got the stick master, oh yes, I saw it, then brought it back" as his stubby tail wagged incessantly.

A large smile came over the man's face as he said, "Jolly good show Gauge, well best keep moving, tally ho," with an enthusiastic English accent, which was, despite being upper class, not pompous, and he had an enthusiastic child-like energy.

Another voice bellowed from the bush. "Oxford! Where the heck are we? I've been walking here for two days straight!" said the man in a gruff New York accent.

Stepping out of the bush, he was quite a sight; he was brandishing a Tommy gun, wearing a dark navy blue trench coat, cap toe shoes, and grey fedora, which shaded his pointed nose, and goatee.

"Ah, there you are Mr. Cannoli, thought we'd lost you" said Dr. Oxford, continuing deeper into the thick jungle.

"For the last time Doc my name is Vinnie, and some cartographer you are! Where da heck is this place?" said Vinnie, swatting large mosquitoes away with his fedora.

"Oh not to worry, Mr. Cannoli, the temple of mount Meru should be just over heeeeeeeerre!" screamed Dr. Oxford, brushing aside lush branches, and unexpectedly falling wildly off a mossy ledge, and towards a murky green lagoon.

Then with a resounding splash he struck the cold muddy water, only to surface and discover a rather startled little fish within his pith helmet. Gauge and Vinnie quickly scrambled to the ledge just in time to see a large dark green object slowly lurking behind Dr. Oxford.

"Doc, get your culo outta the water!" yelled a startled Vinnie, desperately cocking the bolt on his Tommy gun.

"Actually Mr. Cannoli, the water is quite lovely this time of year, feel free to take a dive won't you" exclaimed Dr. Oxford, while calmly treading water.

Undenounced to him, the menacing narrow head of a crocodile began to slowly emerge from the muddy water, and open its primeval jaws behind Oxford. Vinnie, and Gauge looked on in horror as the crocodile began to lurch forward at Dr. Oxford, when *pop!* The

crocodile's jaws had set off Oxford's umbrella, which flung Dr. Oxford out of the water, and onto the shore.

After regaining his senses, and collecting his umbrella, a stunned, and bewildered Dr. Oxford turned to face an almost prehistorically large freshwater crocodile rushing towards him, with primal ferocity in its slit-like eyes. Dr. Oxford was desperately trying to draw his Webley revolver, but by god it was only five, three, and now only TWO metres away! Then a withering burst of submachine gun fire rang out, and the primeval creature retreated into the murky depths.

"Take dat you overgrown chameleon, poke ya nose out of the water again and I'll turn you into luggage!" screamed Vinnie with smoke, and the smell of gunpowder wafting up from his searing Tommy gun barrel.

"Doc you nut, get up here! I found a path that doesn't try to eat ya" hollered Vinnie.

"Much obliged Mr. Cannoli, however are you quite sure though" said Dr. Oxford scampering up the hill.

"Well what's this look like to you, Broadway Avenue?" remarked Vinnie taking a sip out of his canteen.

"Terribly sorry Mr. Cannoli, it appears to be quicksand," said Dr. Oxford, investigating it with a branch.

Vinnie's face turned pale, and glancing down he realised that the ground below him was moving; and it was now three inches higher. Vinnie lunged to grab Gauge's stick in order to pull himself away from the ground which was now six inches high. Clambering to dry ground Vinnie swiftly brought himself to his feet. Gauge, moving up behind Dr. Oxford, thought to himself "Oh master Mr. Ravioli took the stick!".

“Oh what is it my furry chap, now Mr. Cannoli this is hardly the time to play fetch” said Dr Oxford glancing behind him. “After all I do believe I've spotted what we're looking for,” remarked Dr Oxford, pushing away vines to reveal a remarkable structure in a small lush valley below.

The temple itself was herculean; it was entirely made of a light grey stone, with two massive bridges on either side leading to a large set of stairs. These led to a wide entrance, festooned with pillars on either side, all of this topped off with a colossal dome which shone in the sunlight like a beautiful piece of white quartz.

“Marvellous isn't it Vinnie? Just imagine it took the Punti a century to construct such a wondrous spectacle” remarked Dr. Oxford in astonishment.

“Dats nice Doc, I see a magnificent, oversized flower pot, full of a very shiny paycheck” said Vinnie.

“Well then time to claim our prize lads, tally ho” exclaimed Dr. Oxford with a look of excitement, and triumph on his face.

“Hey Doc, don't claim your trophy just yet, it appears a few hundred heavily armed tourists just showed up” said Vinnie in a sombre voice, as he stared down at a large encampment at a clearing, on the left side of the temple. It was swarming with soldiers in field grey uniforms, dark grey helmets, and menacing shiny black jackboots. The camp was as alive as an ant colony, with trucks, and armoured cars rushing supplies in, and men doing every conceivable task, like pitching tents, felling trees, cooking, unloading weapons, and preparing digging equipment for an excavation. At the centre of it all was a large open-air tent, and a strange rectangular shaped tank, with the markings A7V, and planted alongside it was a flag, it was that of the Imperial German Eagle.

Suddenly a voice with a thick German accent roared out from the main tent “Schultz!”. Soon after a rotund officer came hurrying out of the treeline, a small flock of tropical birds following behind him; as he ran he struggled to keep his dark green officer’s cap from flying off. Despite this he sped through the camp, and rushed to stand at attention at the entrance of the tent, with the flock of birds still following. He swiftly raised his hand to salute, and said, “Yes mein kommandant”.

The voice then calmed, and almost spoke in a pleasant manner, “Ah Schultz, you wouldn’t happen to know about any missing rations from ze mess, would you”.

Schultz responded anxiously “Mein kommandant, I saw nothing, I heard nothing, and I know nothing of zis”.

“Well it may shock you to hear this Schultz, but for breakfast this morning we had nothing!” said the voice in increasing frustration.

“I-I know nothing of this mein kommandant” pleaded Schultz. The voice spoke disappointedly, and appeared to change position

“Why are those birds following you?”.

“They are mein... pets” replied Schultz, cautiously nodding his head.

The voice said sternly “why does that one have a sausage in its beak” and a hand appeared from the tent, pointing at a large, blue, tropical bird, waddling off towards the treeline with a sausage in its beak. Schultz’s head turned to look behind him, and a combined look of shock and embarrassment came over his face; he nervously smiled, and saluted, then frantically began chasing after the bird, shouting “give me mein lunch, or I’ll turn you into schnitzel!”

Schultz desperately chased the bird over logs, under tables, and through the medical ward! Vinnie looking at Dr. Oxford and Gauge, and grinning from ear to ear, said “We better scam into da temple before they finish their slapstick routine” with a chuckle.

Descending the dense ridge, and sneaking their way through the thick underbrush of the jungle floor, they reached the edge of one of the large bridges, and began to cross its long cobblestone path. Once inside, the warm jungle air quickly dissipated, and they soon found themselves in a series of macabre, nearly pitch-black tunnels and passageways, only illuminated by the flickering light of torches.

The tunnels became increasingly damp and chilling with wet moss covering some of the ancient carvings and figures. Soon they came to the largest chamber, and it sparkled and shimmered like a golden moon on the water, as it was covered from all corners with spectacular treasures beyond imagination. In the centre was a small ornate pillar with the greatest treasure of them all a massive blue diamond that shone like glittering waves of an ocean. Vinnie’s eyes lit up like Christmas trees, as he said “the Maltese Falcon, Klopman diamond, Montezuma’s jade mask, Pizzaro’s gold, and to think I didn’t have to wack no one to get it!”.

“Steady now, Mr. Vinnie, remember we must only retrieve what we’re here for” reminded Dr. Oxford, pointing to the diamond in the centre of it all.

“The Great Diamond of Mount Meru” murmured Dr. Oxford, his voice echoing in the ancient walls. Cautiously he approached the diamond, carefully removing his pith helmet, he bent down to waist level. Noting that obtaining his prize had been relatively easy thus far, he reasoned that the pillar must be weight sensitive, so he slowly removed his tea kettle from his pack. Gauge drooled incessantly, as he observed Dr. Oxford cautiously prepare to make the

switch. Then with one swift motion, he made the switch, and held the beautiful diamond in his hands.

There was a nerve racking dead silence afterwards, as Dr Oxford stood up and anxiously waited to see if he had failed or indeed now held the greatest treasure he had ever seen.

“Was that it... no that was Gauge panting” he thought. Within a moment he knew he had done it, and he looked up in triumph to see Vinnie stuffing as much gold, and artefacts into a large, olive green, canvas bag marked “*Costelli Brothers Construction.*”

“Hey Doc, why don't you get a little more than you bargained for too, Ah” said Vinnie with a cheerful expression in his voice. Though Dr. Oxford's shock didn't last long, as the trio heard the eerie slap of leather gloves clapping slowly, and the sharp clicking of jackboots on the cold temple floor. The sound rose until a figure appeared out of the murky darkness of the tunnel, his hair was slicked back, and the light revealed his bony cheeks, and glass monocle which covered one of his hawk-like eyes. His uniform was a dark grey, with bronze buttons, silver epaulettes, and a large black Iron Cross hung from his chest. His voice was familiar. He was the one from the large tent, and he said, “Ah, Dr. Oxford it appears our paths cross once more.”

“Oh jolly good day Captain Kurtz” said Dr. Oxford, his hand shaking as he tipped his pith helmet.

“Nein not for you Oxford, fortunately your luck has finally run out, shoot them” calmly ordered Captain Kurtz, swiftly motioning to the soldier beside him with a mp-18.

Dr. Oxford chuckled, and cautiously said “He huh, I don't suppose I could have one final request”.

“What is it?” responded Captain Kurtz irritably.

“I rather fancy a spot of tea,” said Oxford with a slight grin.

“Get on with it” agreed Captain Kurtz, cleaning his monocle.

So Dr. Oxford retrieved a tea bag from his pith helmet, some china from his pack, and poured a little milk from a thermos, he then lifted the kettle from the pillar and began to pour the steaming water. He began taking sips of his tea when Vinnie stormed over to him, and said,

“What da hecks the matter with you, we're gonna get rubbed out and you stop for tea”.

“Dying, shant think of it Mr. Cannoli old chap... and in three, two, one” mumbled Dr. Oxford, taking another sip of his tea.

Then a low rumble began to shake the temple floor, Vinnie began to back away towards his bag of many shiny paychecks, and Captain Kurtz exclaimed “What in ze name of the Kaiser is that!?!” his voice increased in anger.

All of sudden the temple began to collapse all around them with thunderous crashes, and booms, when a large pillar struck the ground separating the two groups. Dr. Oxford drew his Webley revolver, Vinnie drew his Tommy gun, and grabbed his bag, precious treasures spilling out of it, and Gauge wagged his tail not fully understanding what was going on. The trio then burst through the opposite tunnel narrowly dodging collapsing pillars, and statues. The Germans beat a hasty retreat through the collapsing tunnels, and began frantically rushing back to their camp. Dr. Oxford came to a stop at the edge of the collapsed bridge, which, when Vinnie saw it, his face grew sombre, and saddened. He took his fedora off and said “Dat’s it end of the line, and to think I was gonna go Venice”.

Dr. Oxford responded “I'm going to move this cannon”.

Then Vinnie raised a necklace from his bag and said “I was gonna give Ma this.”

Dr. Oxford responded again “I’m going to tie this to my waist”.

Vinnie spoke again “and I swear, I was gonna give this bag back to Paulie”.

Then Dr. Oxford spoke once more “I’m going to load this cannon, and you and Gauge are going to hold onto this rope, and chipper up”.

Vinnie looked up and said, “I’m gonna... wait what, hold a rope”. Abruptly Dr. Oxford ignited the large black cannon which launched a cannonball, that Dr. Oxford had tied to himself, and to Vinnie’s bag of riches sending the trio soaring wildly through the air. Vinnie screamed with a look of terror in his eyes, Dr. Oxford laughed, and Gauge’s jowls fapped like he stuck his head out of a car window. Vinne bellowed, “Doc you’re looney!”.

Dr. Oxford exclaimed “It’s marvellous isn’t it!”.

Suddenly with a resounding smack the cannonball struck a large exotic baobab tree, sending them flying into a large bush. A dazed Dr. Oxford quickly clambered out of the thorny bush, and into the tropical sun, he came to the feet of a rather confused Schultz staring down at him with five other Germans beside him. Dr. Oxford’s face grew pale, as he saw the same strange looking tank rumbling, and groaning to life. Within one chilling moment Dr. Oxford came to his senses, and realised where he was.

Soon after the Germans changed their focus to observe an amusing, and increasingly angry Vinnie crawling from the bush while Gauge dashed out behind him. Peering down at the two peculiar men, and the rather confused dog, Schultz asked, “Who are you?”

A battered, and enraged Vinnie shot to his feet and bellowed, “I’m the undertaker, and your boxes are ready!”. With a metallic click Vinnie cocked the bolt on his Tommy gun, it spewed bursts of submachine fire at the stunned and confused Germans, sending them

scrambling for cover. Dr. Oxford drew his Webley, blasting Germans aside, as he fought his way over to a large desert yellow truck. Soon the Germans began to return fire, and Vinnie valiantly stood up and ran forward sending Tommy gun bursts at anything that moved, while Dr Oxford, and Gauge commandeered the large truck. Upon seeing this, an enraged Captain Kurtz drew his long barreled, black, C96, and climbed to the commander's cupola of the A7V tank, furiously ordering the driver "driver full forward!".

Then with an enormous roar from the engine, and black fumes shooting from the tanks external vents, it lunged forward firing its main gun as it charged. With Vinnie grasping his bag, and dashing into the back of the truck, Dr. Oxford and Gauge sped off down a muddy, overgrown, and winding jungle road. The Germans with rifles, and machine guns loaded, piled into trucks and armoured cars, and sped off down the road after them. Captain Kurtz, and Schultz were close behind in the lumbering A7V. Vinnie slammed a fresh drum magazine into his Tommy gun as Dr. Oxford weaved down the narrow jungle road. Then the first German trucks came darting into view, and suddenly exchanged fire with their rifles, while others promptly manned Maximum machine guns. Vinnie swiftly sent a fiery burst into the first truck striking the driver and sending the smoking vehicle veering off the road and into a deep gorge. Then the other truck's Maximum machine guns sent their own bursts of fire riddling the canvas roof, and sides of the truck with holes. Now the trucks were rapidly closing, and were nearly side by side, and a group of Germans leapt wildly onto the cargo nets on the side of the truck, cold mud from swerving front tires splashing onto them.

Dr. Oxford yelled for Vinnie to take the wheel as he drew his Webley, and a small machete from his pack. He then clambered onto the side of the truck desperately trying to not be flung off, he turned his head to face a group of four Germans climbing on the side of the

truck. One of them raised his pistol, then with one fell swoop Dr. Oxford sliced through the cargo nets sending the Germans flying onto the mud-caked road below. Dr. Oxford then took the wheel again while Vinnie furiously exchanged fire with a large armoured car behind them to no effect. Meanwhile a quite dizzy Gauge noticed a strange pile of sticks rolling around on the slippery metal floor.

Dr. Oxford's eyes widened as he looked down to find Gauge nudging his arm with a stick grenade, without hesitation Vinnie pulled it from Gauge's mouth and threw it onto the road. Then with an immense boom the armoured car burst into flames sending flame, tires, and scolding hot steel in every direction. Dr. Oxford gave out a resounding hurrah, as the smoking wreck blocked the path of the other trucks. Then bursting through the dense jungle overgrowth a vine-covered A7V came lumbering towards the truck, one of its shells tearing off the roof of the truck. Its appearance was almost that of the prehistoric crocodile, its engine letting out a roar, as its metallic primeval face lunged forward ever closer. Vinnie reached for his bag as he frantically tried to stop its treasures from spilling out. It was then that Dr. Oxford spotted a pool of quicksand, and it burst into his mind "the lagoon" he murmured.

Unexpectedly he made a sharp turn to the right narrowly avoiding another shell. Retrieving his umbrella, he held onto Vinnie, and Gauge for dear life. Then in an instant, he opened the umbrella, and the biting wind sent the trio into the air, and over a speechless Captain Kurtz, just as the truck darted off the ledge and into the cold murky green water below. Captain Kurtz's monocle fell to the floor, his eyes widening with panic, as the mechanical beast's engine turned from a roar to a creaking moan, and the A7V was thrust off the mossy ledge. Its cold steel hull smashed into the frigid murky water below. Collecting himself, and retrieving the diamond from his jacket pocket Dr. Oxford dashed over to see

Vinnie staring into the lagoon. A dazed Schultz, and the crew were crawling ashore, and there was Captain Kurtz treading water with a look of hatred on his face. This built until he let out a scream "Schultz!" Then he felt something rough and scaly touch his leg, and the scream was reduced to a murmur "Schultz...?". Realising what had touched his leg Captain Kurtz's face went pale, and he frantically swam to the safety of the rocky shore. Bringing himself to his feet and glancing up at a smiling Dr. Oxford, and hysterical Vinnie who was nearly bursting with tears of laughter.

"Vinnie, that is hardly humorous, however it's marvellous when you throw bananas at him" said Dr. Oxford wiping a bright yellow banana into the lagoon.

A soaking, and infuriated Captain Kurtz began jumping up, and down bellowing "Oxford! You swinehund, you coward, you feigling, komm zuruck, come back!".

"Ah, you're alright Doc" said Vinnie, with a chuckle.

"Well Mr. Vinnie, I'd suppose it's time for you to retrieve your bag, and cash our winnings, come along Gauge " said Dr. Oxford glancing at the blue diamond.

With that the trio left the dark jungles of Tanzania, and the strange sounds of the jungle returned once more, with one new one of course.

"Schultz!"

Senior Division Grades 9-12

The Great Mage By: Aisha Akinade (Gr. 10)

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My father is a great man. He is one of the greatest mages in Elvcolire, travelling throughout the land and serving his talents. He has such wisdom, so smart it's unthinkable. They say he tricked an owl witch on the quest to retrieve *The Nut of Òir*, convincing her he was a new protege. Oh, and how strong is he! On his quest through the *Boile* Sea, he slayed a sea serpent with his bare hands. He is all of that I aspire to be, truly. I wish to join him on his travels, just one day. Oh, how I wish. He always leaves me for months at a time, left only with my mother and stories of his adventures. Father says I'm too young, too naive. Father says there is too much out there that will hurt me, Father says I need to be stronger. Father says I'm too much like my mother, too fragile. I disagree with Father though, the one thing I disagree with him on. I believe I'm just like him, the Great Mage of the Kingdom of Elvcolire.

The sun hasn't fully risen by the time I awake. I look out my windows, and the sky is covered in a fluffy cloud of fog, the air smelling wet and cold. The vines surrounding my window let droplets fall off every few seconds. I love foggy mornings. I rush downstairs, sly as a fox, grabbing onto the cedar railing, trying my hardest not to make a sound. Mother and Father are still asleep. The maids prepared the most delicious pecan tarts yesterday, so I need to finish them before anyone else finds out. My mouth waters at the thought of them. I enter the kitchen and scour the cabinets. I groan in frustration, unable to find them. "Good morning, darling," my mother smirks, a mouthful of pecan.

I groan loudly at the sight of the missing tarts. My mother laughs, skin wrinkling up around her green eyes.

“Mother! I was to eat those!” I say, expressing frustration.

“Don’t worry. There’s still some left, child,” She giggles, ruffling my hair.

“You shouldn’t be such a glutton Faye,” My father chuckles. He scratches his long beard and raises his bushy, greying (though he denies it) eyebrows. I make my way to my mother, and pick up a tart as my mother kisses my cheek. It’s so nice being all together for so long, fathers last trip was 3 months ago. It’s incredible, I get to hear about his travels, play with the gifts he’s brought home, and just enjoy his company. I admire my father and everything he does, I just wish I saw him more.

“What would you like to eat, darling? I’ll ask them to prepare it now so I can get you sorted. Your hair is an unruly mess.” My mother smiles, pointing at the red scramble on my head.

“The tarts are fine mother,” I say, my voice muffled with the nuts in my mouth.

In my chamber, my mother parts and braids my long red hair, adding on golden hair cuffs every so often.

“Darling,” she says, ever so softly. My blue eyes, meet her green. Everyone says I’m a replica of my mother, same red hair, the same freckled face, and the same bright smile, not the eyes though. The eyes are all my father’s.

“Please don’t be too disappointed this time. He means well, he just...” she trails off. I’m confused so I don’t reply. My mother was once a mage too, keeping most of her work here in *Gaisge* where we reside. Specializing in woodland magic, she was known as *Edith of Gaisge*.

She tells me she stopped because of stress, but I know deep down it's because of me who was born shortly after her last travel. Once my hair is finished, I made my way downstairs, sliding my hands across the railing as I went. However, at the bottom of the stairs stood an unpleasant surprise, waiting for me. My father stands at the door, his long hair tied up and a huge bag on his back.

"I must go now, dear," he says solemnly.

"Then I must come with," I reply, stoic.

I hide within a bush, peaking out every few seconds so I can track him. The fog has finally cleared, the sun now shining brightly down onto my skin. Mud still lays on the ground from the rainfall the night before, so I try my hardest not to dirty my clothes. His footsteps make the mud beneath his boot squirt, and I try to mimic his steps. Suddenly he turns around, so I return to my hiding place. He sighs and continues his journey, the music of the squelching mud playing once more. I almost giggle at his ignorance. I almost laugh at my cleverness. Look at me, following the Great Mage. As I travel through the deep of the Elven forest, the dew of vines and trees dropping onto my skin every so often and the songs of birds strong in the air, I reminisce of my and my father's prior conversation. I was shocked when he said no. I was everything he needed me to be, older, wiser, and stronger. I told him over and over, begged even. Nonetheless, he dismissed me and sang the same old child.

"No. You are not ready, child. You are too young and weak to bear the horrors of my travels. You may come when you are strong," he said, voice loud but calm.

"I am a strong Father! I am-" I persisted.

"No, and that is final,"

Little did he know, it was not final. I carefully trail behind him, copying his every step, marking the places I pass in my head. Here I was, little Faye, daughter of the Great Mage, on my first trip. I may not know where I am going, nor the challenges to face, but I know I am ready. I am strong.

Like I've said before, my Father is incredible. I had always been fascinated by the story of his journeys, always told to me as bedtime stories. My absolute favourite of all time has to be the trip to the Lake of *Faye*, the last journey my mother joined him on. Pregnant at the time, Edith of *Gaisge* and the Great Mage of Elvcolire travelled to the meadow surrounding the cool of October, unsure of what to expect. The water of the Lake of Faye was said to be all-powerful. Anyone who would drink it would gain all the wisdom, all the strength, all the power in the king. However, all those in search of the lake either return with nothing or never return. No one knows where it is, no one knows what it's protected by, and no one knows if it even exists. I don't know why my parents were in search of it, but they found it. The Great Mage and Edith of *Gaisge* found it.

I remember nights when I was very young when my mother and father would tell me the tale, reenacting the parts and making silly voices as they went. They told me about the mythical beasts, the harsh weather, and the absolute beauty of the Lake when they found it. At the end of it, every single time, my mother would whisper,

"Then we sat beside the lake, and everything stood still as we admired its beauty. Your beauty. That's where your name is from, my beautiful, beautiful Faye."

The sun slowly disappears as I continue my journey, and I, hiding behind the tall cedars, have become unfathomably tired. I didn't bring food, a grave mistake. Father wouldn't have done something so idiotic. Father wouldn't be so tired now, father wouldn't be so weak. I look up, and my heart drops. The Great Mage is nowhere to be found.

Along with him, the sun has left me alone too. The thoughts flooded into my head all at once. Once the gravity of my situation sinks in, I feel my heart try to escape my body. No food, no shelter... *What was I thinking?* I begin to panic more and more as I take in my surroundings. The *Glen of Gaisge* is so beautiful during the day, but the juxtaposition to the night terrifies me. The tall cedars once standing next to me now tower menacingly above me. The once dewy hue of the forest was now replaced by an eerie shadow. The birds have all disappeared, replaced by sounds that I don't want to describe. I cuddle up next to a bush and hope for the night to end, better yet, for the mage to return. Unfortunately, I'm met with another visitor, howling as a greeting. I turn around and meet the beast, eyes locked with mine.

It looked like a wolf but wilder, more mythical. I had never seen anything like it. I don't approach, it's furry grey head tilting to the side. Its fur shimmers in the moonlight, giving the illusion of glitter. Or maybe it is glitter. It's quite beautiful actually. I snap out of my trance and think of a way to escape, I have no idea what it's capable of. I slowly stand up, the creature still staring at me. I take one step, which sets it off, howling at me in response. It rushes to me and I stand as still as *elvenly* possible, my heart stopping. The animal stops at my feet, howling at me while making intense eye contact, blue on blue. It snarls at me, eyes filled with venom,

and I decide it's my queue to leave. I back up slowly, trying not to startle the animal. I shake at every step, petrified of what would happen if I were to startle it. I avoid eye contact, knowing that could intimidate it. I don't dare run, that could be a death sentence. I continue to move backwards and the wolf stops snarling, his mouth almost resembling a smile now. It soon turns around and starts to walk. I, confused, remain still, unsure what to make of the interaction.

The animal turns around and howls again. Still puzzled, I slowly step forward, in which the animal turns around and continues in response. *It wants me to follow. Would Father follow?* The beast reminds me much like him, the gray fur reminding me of my father's beard, the blue stern eyes, and the big, broad build. It comforts me, so I decide to trust it. I hesitantly follow, hopeful of finding some sort of food, maybe even shelter, fearful of falling into my untimely death. As I follow the gray beast, I fully take in the surroundings. The horrifying forest is no longer scary, in fact, it's quite beautiful. The creek's water slowly moves, insects and creatures chattering around it. A colony of pixies light up the sky, riding upon fireflies. They light up our trail, making me feel more at ease. After walking for what seemed like a millennium, the furred beast stopped. I looked around, trying to understand my surroundings, but the beast suddenly disappeared, leaving me alone once more. I duck behind a bush and crawl into a ball, rocking back and forth.

"Oh no..." I whimpered, my voice shaking. "What would Father do?"

"Father would tell you to get out of the bush and face him," The voice said, voice loud but calm.

"Father?"

There he is, the Great Mage of Elvcolire, standing right in front of me. The beast from before lays at his feet, the mage's hand above its head. I slowly stand to face him, unable to make eye contact.

"Look at me Faye," he says softly, causing me to do as told.

"You were right, father. I wasn't ready, I wasn't strong or wise enough. I'm so sorry for disobeying." I whisper, tears falling down my face. All he does is groan loudly in response, rubbing his temple.

"I want to show you something, Faye. Follow me," He said softly, wiping my face dry. He hands me something wrapped in tin, I open it relieved to find food. I ate as we walked through the forest, my hand in his.

"Do you know where we are, child?" my dad asks as we continue to walk, the midnight breeze carrying his voice through the forest. I look around, trying to recognize our surroundings and shake my head, making him laugh.

"We're in *Gaisge*, Faye. We never left," he chuckles. My eyes become wide, trying to understand what he just said. *We never left? I've been walking for hours!* I think to myself. "You know I have a beautiful story about this Glen. It's from almost 10 years ago, one of my dearest travels." He continues, tracing the leaves on the trees as we continue.

"Why would a travel to *Gaisge* be your favourite if we already live here Father?" I question him. My father has travelled throughout the kingdoms, seen things some people will never be blessed to see, and a trip to the place he resides is what he loves the most. He stops in front of a cliff and grabs my hand. I didn't even realize how far we had gone. "Hold on tight," he smiles, and then we jump.

Usually, when you fall to your death you scream. I, however, did not. It didn't even feel like we were falling, rather we were floating downwards. As we fell the world around me shifted. All the vines and plants now had a blue, almost aquatic tint to them. The air felt moister, and all my surroundings were covered in dew. Once we finally meet the ground, I gasp. Everything is so beautiful. There are aquatic plants everywhere, big water lilies with little water pixies asleep inside. In front of me was something I thought I would never see. A lake stands in front of me, the clearest water I have ever seen with specks of glitter inside, and a huge willow growing out of it.

"Is this..." I startle, my hands over my mouth. My father just nods, smiling.

"Lake Faye. Have I told you the story?"

"Yes, about how you and mother travelled here to collect the water-" I start.

"Would you like to know the full story?" My father pitched in,

"Your mother had always known where the Lake was, it was her job to know. As the leader of *Gaisge* and all its inhabitants, she protected the Lake and those who live within it. The lake is what keeps *Gaisge* alive, what keeps its residents alive and what gives us our home. We used to share the beauty with all the kingdom, but the elves are greedy my child. More and more water was being lost. The forest was dying and your mother was dying. We decided we needed to close it off, and travelled to fix it. We created this world you see around you, and only those with the purest, strongest hearts can see it. You were born right inside this Lake, Faye. You have the purest, bravest heart of them all,"

My eyes are wide at my father's telling of the story. *Me, the strongest?*

"You are strong, Faye, and you are brave, so very brave. You know the type of courage it took to follow me out here. I was wrong for ever doubting you." He says, quite solemnly.

"It's okay," I assure him, causing him to laugh

"This is to be my last journey as The Great Mage of Elvcolire. The years of travel have worn me down, I have too much to go back home to," He sighs.

"WHAT?" I exclaim, shocked.

He laughs and shakes his head, "I said this was my last journey as the Great Mage. I still have so much of the world to explore as the father of Faye, don't you think?" He smiles and stretches his hand out, "I invite you to join me on my final journey, Oh wise Mage of Faye,"

I laugh and grab his hand, "Of course, oh wise Father of Faye,".

Senior Division Grades 9-12

Leather Bag Besties

By: Cassandra Parent (Gr. 11)

more inside

I'll never forget the day a white package arrived at my door... the surprise I felt since I didn't order anything, the curiosity wondering what was inside, and the slight feeling of worry about the person whose package got lost.

"Maybe I should just throw it out," I thought after seeing that there was no shipping address. After much consideration, I decided to open it. Deeply wrapped in bubble wrap was a large leather tote. Myself, being a bit of a shopaholic, instantly knew that this bag would be worth around five hundred dollars.

Is it bad that I considered keeping it? Sure, I didn't pay for it and it wasn't mine, but is it really stealing if it was delivered to my doorstep? I consulted my Catholic upbringing and strict teachings... sadly enough for me but good for whoever ordered the bag, I decided that I must return it to the rightful owner.

I checked the parcel once again for any clues of who the expensive leather bag belonged to. The only thing I saw was the return address. It crossed my mind that I could send it back to the manufacturer, but that would not ensure that the person who bought it would receive the shipment. I decided to call the company.

"Hello! My name is Rebecca Balmer and I received a leather bag to my door that I did not order," I began to explain when the company answered the 1(800) number from their website. After dismissing my concerns, they told me I could drive two hours away and deliver it to their warehouse. With gas prices being so high and the company not reassuring me that the rightful owner would receive their delivery, I didn't find it worthwhile to drive and bring

them the parcel. This left me with another choice either keep the bag or find the rightful owner myself, and I knew I could not keep the bag.

The venture began. I searched the bubble wrap and packaging once again for some clue of who the owner is. Finally, I managed to locate an engraving inside the pocket of the tote: Det. Jane Doe. Not sure what “Det.” means but at least I have a name. At first, I thought it was a practical joke though because Jane Doe is the most generic and popular name on the planet. I did not let that fact deter me from at least trying. “I am a teacher for heaven sakes! If I can teach a six-year-old the multiplication tables and to read, I can do this!”

The first place I checked was Facebook. If you are cool enough to buy a leather bag you are definitely cool enough to be all over social media. After typing in accounts using the name, “Jane Doe,” I got a whopping 449 search results. That was a little discouraging again, but I had faith I could do it. I inspected over two hundred Jane Doe accounts before I came across an account with the same phrase: “Det. Jane Doe.”

“That has to be a match,” I thought to myself. I still was unsure, though, because maybe it was a popular name from a tv show or something. After giving the profile another brief look, I noticed that she worked as a detective with the FBI. It was all coming together. Of course, this Jane Doe worked as an investigator and of course she would need an engraved book carrier!

I decided to message the account. I didn’t know how to explain the situation without this seeming weird. I didn’t want to accidentally make a cop think I stole personal property, and I didn’t want this detective to think I’m a stalker for having found her Facebook account.

“Hi there! I received a leather tote in the mail that has your name on it. Were you expecting that package? I’m very sorry for this mishap and I would be happy to ship it to your

correct address if you'd like to send me your info," as soon as I hit send, I became embarrassed and worried that the detective would think I was running a phishing scam. I decided to add: "I am a teacher and I just feel compelled to return your item. I swear this isn't a scam, but reading my prior my message back it sounds sort of like one LOL," as well as a photo of the engraved leather bag.

After an hour or so, Jane Doe answered me: "Good afternoon. Thank you for your honesty and for letting me know. I am a detective, so my senses are telling me you have good intentions HAHA. I am happy to meet you in person just so I do not disclose my confidential address ;)"

Conveniently enough, it turns out we live in the same city, so close to each other, that it seems like the delivery truck driver just took a left instead of a right turn when trying to deliver the parcel. We met for coffee, and I gave her her bag. She thanked me graciously and said to let her know if I ever needed anything. I thought this would be the end of my adventures with Jane Doe, but we got along so well that we decided to meet again to share more funny stories. She found it hilarious that I compared finding the parcel's owner to teaching a child how to read.

Det. Jane and I have been best friends ever since. Although I lost the opportunity of getting a fancy free leather bag the day that I messaged a stranger on social media, I gained a great friend, detective to help me with riddles, and a close confidant.

6 months later.....

Jane and I hang out every week to swap mystery novels and movie recommendations. On my way out of the house one day, I noticed a package at my doorstep. "Hmmm I don't

remember ordering anything,” I thought to myself recalling what happened last time someone’s package got lost in transit. “Here we go again,” I laughed while still feeling grateful for that adventure and the friend I made out of it.

As I opened the package, I was overwhelmed with a sense of déjà vu because wrapped amongst the tissue paper was a leather tote. The only difference this time was that the personalization said: “Ms. Rebecca Balmer.”