

2025

# Short Story Contest





**BETTER  
LIBRARIES  
BETTER  
WORLD**

Produced by Innisfil ideaLAB & Library  
December 2025

## Seepe Walters



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.

The Innisfil IdeaLAB & Library would like to congratulate all the students who entered the 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest. Since 2002, we have received hundreds of unique stories, celebrated dozens of aspiring local authors, and been overwhelmed by the talent in our community. 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 judge and author Lindsay Zier-Vogel for her time and thoughtfulness in reading the entries; the teachers and families of the aspiring writers for their support and encouragement; 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 2025 edition of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library's Short Story Contest.

Laura Jeffery  
Outreach and Partnerships 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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# 2025 Seepe Walters Short Story Winner

## Clouds

By: Ruqayyah Askarzada (Gr. 12)

*more* inside

### Chapter One: Loopholes

Clouds.

No matter how much they part,

They go and they meet.

Hiding their great treasure, their secret, the sky,

From prying eyes, like he did to mine.



10.27 am. Late. Again.

I groan, rubbing the sleep from my face as I roll out of bed. I didn't want to do this again. Another day, the same day, neverending. I get up, brush my teeth, cleanse, get dressed, coffee, and respect before I leave. Respect is something everyone should get at least once in their lives. I may sound stuck up when I say this, but especially the living ones, especially me.

"JAILYN!" A woman's voice screeches. My manager's, and this early in the morning too.

Irritated, I replied in the same manner, "Alright, you can scold me later!"

Heading down the stairs, and out of my apartment, I try to ignore her complaints as I push open my building door. A chilly autumn breeze brushes past me, with the faint smell of cinnamon. I take a deep breath, they always bring cinnamon drinks during autumn. And with that, I was off. Walking across the street, and to the restaurant ahead, I push open the back door with a creak. My co-workers' heads turn in my direction.

"Harper, it's the third time now. What's up with you girl?" Marilyn sighed, setting away the hat that rested on her curly locks. She slaps my back as a welcome, as she always did.

"Sorry. Alarm, again." I mutter, giving her a small smile of appreciation. It was like her presence alone could brighten the most tainted hearts, including mine.

"Always that same excuse huh? At least have some originality," Dakota says with a smirk plastered on his tanned face. A ponytail resting on his shoulders as he walks over to me, pressing a folded paper in my hand. I turned it over, eyeing him with confusion.

"Somebody at table one asked me to give it to you, I wanted you to see it before you threw it away at least. It's from her again."

I sigh, crumbling the paper in my hand as I nod. “Thanks anyway,” I reply before he taps my shoulder, giving me a smile of reassurance.

“Good luck,” he says before walking off to do his tasks.



“Great, she’s here again, perfect,” I grumble as I tie a black apron around my waist and secure my ponytail before heading out the double doors.

“Table one!” Dakota shouts as a waitress swoops in to take the opportunity. I dash to the order, placing a hand on the other’s shoulder.

“I got it from here Vi,” I assure the smaller woman with a smile as my hand slips the plate from her grasp.

“Ah, are you sure Jailyn?” Violet asks, looking up at me with eyes of caramel and worry.

I smile, “Definitely. Now you go serve the other tables,” I say as she nods, advancing towards the counter. I turn with the order in hand.

“Table one. Right,” I sigh as I approach the room’s far end. I slow down when I see an elderly woman abiding in her seat. I take another breath before placing the plate down gently on the table. Taking the paper out and unraveling it before her, I slam it down on the table with a thud. The ink from the words, *I need to speak with you* leave black marks against my skin. A quarter of heads turn in our direction, causing me to try and compose myself.

The woman at the table looks up at me, her eyes cut into angry slits as she and I share a gaze.

“As rude as ever,” she says simply, calmly, like a snake waiting for a time to strike and that ticked me off.

“I had a restraining order issued, why are you still here?” I ask sharply, as the chatter from other tables slowly rises, leaving us huddled in a world consisting of us two.

“The time’s up and I kept my word. I merely waited, and the months did fly by indeed.” She replied with her composure still intact. Her approach to this all only continued to fuel my anger.

“Enough Charlotte, what do you want?” I ask, more demanding this time, crumpling the inked paper before her in frustration.

She locked eyes with me and for the first time, I realized how tired she must’ve been. Her eyes bloodshot like she hadn’t slept for days, her withered fingers seemed to be decaying in front of my eyes, and beneath her knitted hat she stared until I succumbed and looked away.

“Justice. You will pay for the death of my son,” she stated, her eyes withering away the sleep and igniting a newfound fire. I scowled. It was always the same thing over and over again.

“As I told you multiple times, I didn’t... It was *his* fault he died.”

And each time, she glowers. Feelings of shame, guilt, and regret stirred up inside of me. Then she stood, snatching up the crumpled paper from the table.

“You will regret saying that, *Harper*,” she grumbled, stopping out of the restaurant.

I let go of the breath stuck in my throat, running a hand through my sweaty hair. Ah, I worked up a sweat from just talking to her again... This was the perfect way to start the day...

With that, I sigh, heading back to the kitchen before suddenly stumbling to a stop. A bulgy woman blocked my path. Her face fumed red, and her big hands curled into fists; it was the woman who was yelling at me this morning, my boss.

“*Jailyn Harper*,” the woman growled. I tried to swallow down the excuses I had, knowing they were of no use now.

“Regina. Boss. Hey sorry, I um—”

“I do not want to hear any more excuses. Lock up duty after your shift, no debates.”

The pent-up anger from before had quickly defused as I nodded. There was no way to escape my fate now. I glanced back up at her before walking past in shame, less shame than I already carried through, saying that phrase to Charlotte.

*It was his fault he died.* My stomach twisted in regret at the words. I hadn’t meant it at all at that moment. It was just something I said to steer her away, I said to myself, even if those same words hammered against my skull saying otherwise.

## Chapter Two: Regret

As the sun hides behind the clouds,  
You disappear as well.  
From my embrace, my hands, my light  
You were everything to me,  
You gave me life.



After the cafe was whisked of life, I did my last task of the day; clean up duty. The mop hit the floor as I sloshed it back and forth, my reflection gleaming in water, and something else.

I turned. No one else should be here with me so what was that spark? That light? I leaned the mop against the counter, investigating as anyone would do. I turned the corner. Nothing.

Perhaps my imagination.

As I headed back, the mop wasn't where I left it. I started to look, my eyes surveying the tables around me before I saw something on a table. Table number 5.

I swore that Charlotte had taken the paper, so then what was this? I drew closer, eyeing the table suspiciously as I took the unknown paper and turned it over. On it wrote one word, Latte. Latte? What was that supposed to mean? The only thing that came to mind was— and then the thought struck me.

*He loved lattes... in fact...*

The memory overflowed me like a stream. We both sat at this exact table, hand in hand. We were happy... *I was happy*. There were smiles, laughter, and cinnamon. How could I forget that he adored Cinnamon lattes? How could I forget how he—

A sudden noise broke me of that thought, and I turned to see my phone vibrating like crazy. Still in a daze, I reacted far too late when I realized where it sat. At the edge of a table, before clattering to the floor.

I rushed towards the device on the ground and turned it over. The screen cracked, just my luck. The buzzing— it seemed to be a notification for something. I clicked the phone screen awake, scanning the message I received with wide eyes. It was midnight, and the new day was our anniversary.



The wind blew a flurry of colours off the trees. Red, oranges, brown, yellows, and greens. It was an unfitting scene for the place before me. I swept my bangs away revealing the shadowed building. Funerals made me nervous... especially since it was his.

I treaded carefully across the field as if scared to wake the sleeping underneath. I hoped not to see her again. Charlotte was the least of my worries now.

I clenched the flowers in my hands, and peered down as memories swirled in the air. He gave me Blue Jays on our first anniversary, and I'm giving it to him now at our last...

*"I hope you like them, Jay!"*

His voice flooded my mind, like he was almost still here. I tilted my head upwards, coming to a stop. I can't cry. Crying now would be shameful. I didn't even cry when he—

“Jailyn!” Someone shouted, and I quickly cut off the tears as soon as they came. It was all copper coloured hair, and emerald green eyes that reminded me of him. His sister, and my old friend.

“Evelyn... hey,” I said, tightening my grip on the bouquet even more. Meeting anyone from his family was awkward. I could never tell what either of them thought of me, and that’s what scared me the most. She glanced down at the flowers and smiled innocently, brightly—something I didn’t deserve.

“You remembered,” She said softly, unable to bring her eyes to mine.

I nodded, “How could I forget.” but the words felt heavy in my tongue, like a lie... But, I wasn’t lying, even if my chest felt tight.

Evelyn shook her head lightly, her smile growing wider.

“You always kept a better track of these things than he did,” She stated, and I nodded. I didn’t know how to respond after that. Luckily, she did to clear the awkward silence.

“Well, I’m sure, he’ll be happy to see you,” she said, looking into my eyes this time. They used to hold bliss and joy. Now, her eyes only held pity and sadness. I didn’t want her pity. I didn’t deserve it.

“Alright. Have a safe trip home.” I smiled softly.

She returned it, “And you as well.”

I didn’t look back to watch her, instead plummeted forward, and towards his grave.



Graveyards were never busy, but it seemed there was a burial today. I avoided eye contact and kept ahead. The last thing I needed was the remembrance of more emotions before I broke down on the spot.

His grave was simple. Just a small, sleek, and gradient piece of stone that stood upright. His name was engraved there, and underneath it was written, “*Loving son, brother, friend, and fiancée.*” I remember when I cried over just seeing the silvery ring slide off his finger, and now I couldn’t see it at all.

“Hey... I’m back again,” I announced, in case he couldn’t hear me from six feet below. No response. People talk to each other all the time, yet regret saying things the most when they’re gone... in that moment, guilt hit me like a train.

“She— your mother— visited again. She still doesn’t believe me. I wish you were—” I pause, not bringing myself to finish the phrase. What was the point of sobbing my heart out when he can’t do anything about it... *we can’t*. We did everything together.

A cold shiver travels up my spine as I breathe in the crisp, cold air. It was like he was right here... the cold touch of his hands. His hands were always cold.

It was then that I looked up to see him. His copper-colored hair, gentle green eyes, and voice. I looked up trying to disregard the memories, however, the nostalgic sensation only grew, as did the illusion of him before me. Perhaps it was the impact of the guilt, but he seemed to be staring straight at me. And then, there was the feeling of fear that made me hesitant. It was just shock, just guilt, *just* my imagination. With that, I sigh and close my eyes for one last time before grasping the bouquet of Blue jays I held. When I opened them again, the illusion was gone, yet I picked up on his voice as I placed the bouquet on top of his grave.

*“C’mon Jay! Where is that smile?”*

*I laugh.*

*“Always at your disposal.”*

*And now it was his turn to laugh.*

*Hand in hand, we turned, danced, and ran throughout the park before sitting on a bench accompanied by flowers.*

I picked one up, turning the delicacy around in my fingers. Once more, his voice hummed through the air.

*“Do you know what these are?” He held the sky-dyed flower towards me.*

*“No, what are they?” I asked.*

*He chuckled, placing the flower behind my ear.*

*“Blue Jays for a blue Jay-lyn.” He grinned.*

*I laugh, exhaling a cloud of cold air.*

I breathe out slowly, creating a cluster of air that blocks my vision of the flower, and brings me back to this dulling reality. I sigh, placing the flower gently in my pocket before standing.

“I... miss you,” I find myself saying.

“*I love you,*” I hear him reply.

### **Chapter Three: Agony**

From the heavens above, dropping down from the sky,  
Clouds vaporizing into a clear mist that covers my eyes.  
Upon the many it was you who came to meet a simple creature like me;  
Looking upon me with sympathy  
as I walked, then struck tragedy.



It was my first year, and first finals, in university and I already messed it up. I check my phone for the time as I rush towards my salvation for the night; the campus convenience store. In the distance the illuminated open sign flickers in the dark, and the store soon appears. I sigh when I see a worker in front of the door. The jingle of keys stops my pursuit, and I watch as the worker walks off revealing nothing but darkness past the closed doors of the store.

Awesome, I arrived too late.

“Um, excuse me! You’re not closed right now, are you?” I ask, as I flash him my best non nervous, nervous smile. The man turns at the sound of my voice, and I falter at how young he was, seeing as he was just around my age. Seriously, my luck just kept on decreasing...

He pointed at the locked doors, and raised his brow at me as if I was blind, which really ticked a nerve.

“Well?” I repeat, not wanting to answer to someone who paid no respect to respond back. At my counter question, the man decides to fully face me, and I get a full view of his face.

Irritation flashed behind his green eyes, contrasting with the coppery strands of hair that cascaded down his forehead. He would’ve been handsome if he didn’t just hand me some attitude on a silver platter.

He crossed his arms, “yes, we’re closed, sorry but come back on Monday.”

I blinked. Monday? They were supposed to be open on the weekdays as well.

“Are you new?” I couldn’t help but blurt out, getting a chill down my spine as I resembled that of someone’s angry mother. The man scoffed.

“No, but you seem like you aren’t either. Tell me, are you a regular?” He counters, and I find my embarrassment being replaced with frustration.

“Yes, and so I know that you don’t close your doors at 9 PM,” I say, and the look on his face has me grinning back at him, flashing him the same mock smile he did me. Though, the man raised his hands in surrender, having been caught red handed.

“Alright fine, but since no one showed up for like an hour, I decided I could close the shop a few minutes early. Can’t blame a man for being bored,” he shrugged, nonchalant about the whole disaster he almost caused for me.

I gawked at him. “That’s seriously irresponsible,” I pointed out the obvious, and yet he only nodded and shook his head.

“Right, I got that. Then come on in, miss..” he looks at me expectedly.

“Jailyn. But, don’t call me Miss.”

“Noted, nice to meet you Jailyn.”

He smiles, lopsided, before unlocking the door and switching on the lights. I make my round around the store in search for my second, sweet salvation for the night. Bingo, an iced coffee! I brought the drink to the counter, along with a few other items that I’d lost and needed to replace, before getting a weird look from the man now behind the counter.

“Yes?” I ask him, as his gaze latches onto mine.

“Nothing, just really? You came all this way for an iced coffee?”

I frowned, “And other things, but what’s wrong with an iced coffee?”

“Well... out of all the drinks you could’ve gotten, iced coffee wouldn’t be in the top ten.”

This guy has a lot to say for being a cashier; someone whose job is to scan the items and not judge them. I counter, “Then, what’s your favorite beverage?” And at this, the man grins, a sparkle evident behind those eyes that resembled an emerald now with his evident excitement.

“Lattes, mainly cinnamon, but it’s the better version of coffee,” he answers smugly, as if proud for choosing the most difficult drink there was to make— at least, for me. I scoff as the scanner picks up my items, a faint beeping sound pulses in the background as I respond.

“Well, sorry my simple drink doesn’t please you,” I find myself smiling at this strangely enticing man.

“Apology accepted, what’s the coffee for anyway,” he asks, already beginning to bag my items, “late night study sesh?” I blink as he guesses spot on, and when I don’t respond he laughs.

“Oh so you’re one of those! Alright then, good luck on your study sesh, and hope you do well on whatever you’re studying for,” he says as he hands me a branded, plastic bag. I accept it with a smile as a thank you.

He closes his mouth, splits into another grin before he checks his watch, and turns it to me. “Would you look at that, it’s already close to closing time. Guess I have to escort you out, so I can *properly* lock up.” I laugh at this.

“Yes, you managed to hold off for an hour, congratulations,” I reply in the same joking manner. When he doesn’t reply, I tread over to the front entrance.

“Jailyn, wait!” He exclaims, and I turn at the sound of my name. “It’s, uh, Matthew by the way, I didn’t get to introduce myself earlier,” he explains with another lopsided smile.

“Then nice to meet you officially, Matthew.”

“And you too, Jailyn. I don’t suppose I’ll be seeing you again?”

“Well, it depends, are you going to keep working Fridays?”



The past was always a blur to me about how we met, but the moments about our engagement I didn’t dare to forget. Except for the questions that came hurling after... about marriage in particular, and how I couldn’t meet those rushed expectations. Each and every time... it was the same thing. I didn’t know.

Whenever we would visit, it would consist of the same things. Small greetings, and rushed conversations before relaying the main question that burned his parents’ minds. When would we get married? When would we have children? When were we ready to take that next step? And each and every time, Matthew stayed silent while we got bombarded with pressure over pressure, over pressure.

That is until one evening on our way back home, on a stormy evening to set the miserable scene of silence that filled the car. Of disappointment that weaved its way into the space.

“I want to know why, at least,” Matthew voices, breaking the serenity that soothed my frustration. And now... I took a deep breath.

“Why what, Mat?”

“Why don’t you want to set up a roughly estimated date for our possible wedding?”

I sigh. “That’s just the thing Matthew, it’s possible. I don’t know if we... if I am ready,” I admit reluctantly, turning to meet Matthew’s glance for just a moment.

I turn to catch his hands tightening on the steering wheel, and catch the sharp inhale he takes before speaking. “This might come out as harsh, but do you not want to get married?”

I gaped at him, “of course I do, but there’s a time and place for everything and...”

“Please, don’t try and give me another excuse.”

“E...Excuse? I’m saying I’m not ready Matthew, and you and your mother have to understand that.”

“Jailyn—“

“Matthew.”

I sigh, letting the silence speak for a moment. “Pull over,” I say quietly, leaning my head against the car window. “I’d rather head home another way.” This surprised Matthew as a red light filled the car, before he pressed on the brakes. I lurched forward slightly before he turned to me.

“Then... get home safely please,” he said in a quiet voice as he reached over to take my hand in his.

“As long as you don’t lock the door when I get there,” I reply with a soft smile that has him chuckling.

“No promises,” he counters before I step out of the car, and close the door. As he drives off, I open up my phone to call an Uber.



I arrived home earlier than him, which was weird. It’s 10 past 12 now, and still *nothing*. Is it my fault? What if something happened to him after we parted? The storm was brutal, so what if-?

And then, my phone began to ring. Immediately, I brought it up to my ear with a string of rushed words that followed.

“Matthew, where are you? Do you... do you know what time it is!?” I ask frantically, hearing nothing at first... until a small hum caught my attention, sounding eerily like that of incoming sirens.

## Chapter Four: Realization

All that struggle, and sweat only to make it to the top  
Where the clouds seemed to have parted  
Revealing the sun behind its wounded parts  
As it opens its heart  
To a possibility, a truth, that was long forgotten



I awoke with a start, and a sudden realization about what happened. It was all a dream. In disbelief, I rushed to sit up only to regret it afterward. My mind felt hazy, and my vision flickered to show stars at the corners of my vision. I groaned as my eyes adjusted to the dark space around me.

I guess I knocked out on the couch, I thought, and began to slowly throw off my outside clothes before my alarm started to blare. Ears ringing, I searched throughout my coat for the noise only to turn up empty. My bag perhaps?

I rummaged through the small space successfully emerging with the phone. I let out a heavy sigh at the bright light, squinted, and started to check the time. Except... There was a timer I hadn't set before, and what it wrote had chills running down my spine.

*"I'll explain everything. -M"*



My phone was buzzing with calls from Evelyn that I didn't dare pick up. Not yet, not after checking on something that seemed too crazy to be true. It was 7:30 am, and luckily this cemetery opened up early.

I ran forward, seeing other footprints as I got closer to my destination. Matthew's grave, and with Evelyn and Charlotte there as well.

"Jailyn!" Evelyn exclaimed, and held onto my arm as she shook a note eerily similar to mine.

"It's him!" She exclaimed, and I broke from my trance to hold her steady as her body shook.

"Matthew?" I answered, to which she nodded eagerly too, but what didn't make sense was how, and why?

"I need to... check something," I say, and move past the two before kneeling before his grave to dare and ask, "Matthew? Is it really you?"

We would've looked mad if it wasn't for the fact that our speech was covered by the sound of rain. I had barely noticed the gloomy clouds ahead. All I was concerned with were these signs, and what they had meant. Maybe, for a second I could just hope that Matthew was alive and well.

"We need to go!" Someone suddenly exclaimed, and I was shocked to find it to be coming from Charlotte.

"We can't, he hasn't shown up yet!" I reply over the winds and the damp leaves that flutter about.

"This was too reckless, don't you think I'd be happier if this were real? It isn't Jailyn, but just a feeble hope we all wished were true," she said, but I feared she was talking to herself when she said so.

I tried to reply, but I knew her words were the truth that I found hard to swallow, the truth I didn't want to face after all these years, but coming from Charlotte all heartbroken and *real*...

If I were to accept that truth, then maybe I'd be free...

And that's when I felt it. His cold hands over mine. His copper-colored hair, gentle green eyes, and voice all before me. It was a memory, I thought, but no it felt real. The faces of Charlotte and Evelyn were all I needed to see to know that it was... *he* was real, and he was here before me.

"Jailyn," he whispered, soft and sweet as he always said my name. "It's been a while," he says with a smile that left me speechless... or well, more than I already was.

I didn't dare breathe at the figure before me. His hands— no whole body— seemed to be translucent as if he was... not really here. Not entirely at least.

"Matthew..." his mother spoke first, breaking the silence that washed over us all.

"But how?" Evelyn questioned in a mix of awe and shock.

"Guilt," he put simply, and looked at me with a gaze I knew all too well. One I found on myself in the mirror whenever I thought about the past. It was one of burning regret and rage, for none other than yourself.

"I was guilty... guilty of dying too soon, guilty of leaving you all, and guilty of leaving this unsettled," he gestured between the three of us, before pointing to himself.

"And all because of me."

"What are you saying Matthew? Guilty for what?" Charlotte, with her harsh undertone, asked returning as she stepped forward. "You died, and because of *her*, and we all know it."

And as always, there was silence that followed, all except for the sound of Matthew's hand slipping from mine to gesture to his mother with.

"It wasn't because of her, It was because of *me!*" He yelled, and if the silence before wasn't unbearable enough, he had just the one that followed even worse.

"It was my fault for speeding that day Mom! It was *my fault* for rushing back home. It was *my fault* for not switching lanes properly damn it. It was never hers!"

I swallowed thickly, blinking away the tears I didn't even realize fell. My hair clung to my face, as did my clothes, but I didn't care.

I wasn't sure what bothered me more, the fact that Charlotte looked at Matthew with enlightenment, as if the truth wasn't said to her by me all along, or the fact that this all had to happen now, when it was too late, and *still* Matthew had to suffer for it. All because of—"Me!" Matthew repeated to his mother, turning to his sister and glancing between the two.

“You need to understand— to believe her— and because you didn’t... because / didn’t resolve this feud, I’m stuck here to make you understand,” he said with a harsh undertone that made his mother’s eyes go wide.

She turned to me yet again, but this time I stood my ground. Besides Matthew like this, I felt that maybe this was what I needed after all. Hope for him, and hope for redemption, and hope for myself.

“For my sake Mom,” Matthew insisted, and held his hand over both of their own. “Be free of this anger. Listen, for once, and just *let it go*.”

It sounded easier said than done, but with the three of them there it seemed possible. With the right crowd, it may have seemed possible, but alone with such feelings can really leave a toll.

“We were all struggling... we all felt guilty, but anger wasn’t the solution...” I say, and turn to Matthew with a small smile.

“I know that now, but Charlotte, I’m sure you know that it wasn’t fair.”

I could see a muscle twitch on her face, and her eyes became skittish, but she didn’t dare say a word.

“For Matthew, Mom,” Evelyn echoed. “For Jailyn, and yourself.”

It was then, for the first time that Charlotte looked at me with decency and a hint of regret. It was all I needed really, just to know that the weight of that guilt had been lifted off my shoulders.

“An apology won’t cut it Jailyn,” she murmured, giving my hand a soft squeeze.

“But I hope... my apology is good enough,” she said, whispering the next words rather quietly. “I’m sorry... for everything.”

“It’s a start,” I say with a small smile, and one that she managed to return.

The rain began to simmer, and the clouds began to part as the sun slowly peaked through the small space.

Matthew’s form began to shimmer, glimmering with the few sun rays that passed through which allowed me to take this all in. How real, and unnatural it all was after all.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it? We’re all bound here by the same thing?” Matthew starts with a smile that slowly loses the happiness behind it. I too offer him a sad smile that manages to reach my ears just fine.

I nod, not saying a word, but basking in this moment with him once again. And for a while it feels like it's just the two of us there before I feel his frame get lighter... or rather diminish slowly from view.

"Matthew—"

"It's alright, Jay," he mutters, and with that mischievous smile he says, "it'll be easier the second time, won't it?"

I let out a gasp at what he meant, and felt the eyes of the other two behind me.

"Matthew, you can't— *I can't* — not without you," I reply, grasping his hand desperately only to feel my fingers beginning to slip through.

"Just know I'm sorry for everything," he replies, glancing behind me before returning to meet my gaze with sorrow.

I felt my throat begin to close up, and my chest tighten at the mere thought. My own fingers began to touch each other now, and Matthew's form resembled more of the background than then his features I adored so.

In one final act to remember him, I touched his face with my other hand, and let my fingers graze through his hair once more.

Even if the space around us smelled of wet grass, there was a bit of cinnamon that caused me to smile. There was his copper coloured hair that blended in with the brown tinted leaves, and his green eyes that resembled the grassy fields that stretched far behind him. He was slowly fading, and all he managed to say in that moment was,

"Promise me you'll live a bright life," to which I replied with words I hoped he managed to hear.

"I promise."

As the clouds parted, revealing the sun behind its closed doors, it was then that I let a tear fall. It was then that I finally accepted the guilt that had haunted me for years with open arms, and couldn't help but smile.

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### Carrot Narwhal By: Rainee Li (Gr. 3)

*more* inside

Carrot Narwhal loved the vegetable smelling ocean. But with one exception. He had no friends. He didn't have any bullies either, which was a relief. When he was born, his mom tried to find him a birthday present. But she never came back!

One day, Carrot Narwhal saw a clam float to his home. When he went to check who it was from, it said "Unknown". That definitely made it a mystery. Another mystery was where his dad was. Since he was born, he always had a dad. He has a tiny to-do list in a nook by some rocks. There was only two things on his list since he was six, and now he's ten. The two things on his list were: 1. where the clam's dad was, and 2. where the clam came from.

The thing is, there's a cabbage seed inside the clam. It didn't look like one because cabbage seeds are round, and this one wasn't. The reason he could tell was because he had a secret strategy.

For some reason, he felt like he should protect the clam. It just seemed so special! So every day, he makes sure the seed is in there. He also made sure it was safe and sound. He kept it right beside his to-do list. Suddenly, he had the idea of planting a tiny farm. He actually had a whole collection of seeds, including a rock shovel. He also had a rock hoe, and he didn't need to worry about water.

Right away, he started working. He planted many things. But then he remembered the clam. It was the seed that reminded him! He quickly swam over to it and opened it. The seed wasn't damaged, like always. Of course, he still will protect it. So he dug a small hole, placed it in, and covered it up. He was really excited for it to sprout. But then, he started to worry. What if something bad happened? Instantly, he had a plan. So he decided starting that day, he would stay away until he knew it was safe.

The next day, he took a quick peek at the garden. But when he looked at the cabbage seed, there was a nice, big, unusual cabbage. Its leaves were really curved, it was mostly white, and there was a tail with cabbage leaves on it. He had a tail with carrot leaves on it, which really was similar. He could barely resist moving the leaves a bit and seeing what it was. He just felt like he had to do it! So he slowly swam towards it. He could feel his own fins shaking. Hmm... he thought. He just couldn't stop thinking about what it was! But without thinking, he swished his tail at the cabbage. The leaves became straight. He swished it again. The cabbage started moving by itself. He swished it one more time, and then something unbelievable happened. The leaves of the cabbage started to open! That was definitely unbelievable.

Then he saw the tail start to wiggle. But right before his eyes, the cabbage exploded! He managed to get all of the bubbles out of his face. But once he saw what it was, he froze. It was a baby cabbage narwhal! It was so cute! Once he calmed down from his excitement, he wanted to show someone. But there was no one to show. Anyway, he had more important things to do. Every day he would feed the narwhal, play with the narwhal, and take the narwhal on walks. The narwhal wasn't loud and crazy, so the neighbors won't get interrupted.

One day, he remembered something important. The baby narwhal didn't have a name! He completely forgot! He brainstormed all day and all night. That afternoon, he knew the perfect name. Cabby! What a cute name, he thought. A cute name for a cute narwhal. He loved it, but Cabby might not. Carrot Narwhal shook his head. He thinks Cabby will love it. And with that, he went to sleep.

The next day, he told Cabby his brand new name. When he was playing with Cabby, he heard Cabby say his first words. His first words were: "I am Cabby!" He must have memorized his new name. That was impressive. Carrot Narwhal didn't have a real name, but he was fine with it. With that, he knew he would make friends. Forever friends!

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### One Match – One New Home By: Yug Kadakiya (Gr. 3)

*more* inside

Earth was no longer a safe place to live. The air was dirty, the oceans were rising, and storms destroyed cities. Scientists said humans must leave Earth to live. People rushed onto a space shuttle called **Hope 1**, carrying only few necessary things. They were scared but hopeful.

The journey through space was very hard. Food was limited, and the shuttle shook during an asteroid storm. One night, a loud alarm rang. The engine stopped working. Everyone got scared, but space shuttle Engineer Kenen Yu stayed calm. He floated through the shuttle, fixing wires and checking bolts. He worked day and night, even he was tired and hungry.

**Hope 1** finally reached a faraway planet called **Pogo**, covered in purple grass, glowing diamond rocks and with 67 moons. The shuttle landed safely, but the engine was badly damaged. Kenen tried to repair it again, but the fuel was gone. The humans were stuck.

Soon, the aliens came to meet them. The aliens were looking like humans, totally different than they thought they would be, except for a shiny blue magical third eye on their forehead. The alien leader spoke kindly but firmly “This planet is our home, you must leave”. The human leader explained the problem and reason why they are here. The alien leader talked with other aliens and asked for their opinion and said: “We do not fight wars. We solve problems with a game. We will play soccer. If you win, you may stay. If you lose, you must leave.”

The humans were nervous, but they had no choice and thought there is no harm in trying and got agree to play match.

The soccer match began under Pogo’s bright blue sky. The aliens were very fast and scored the first goal. The humans felt tired from their long journey. Some wanted to give up. Then they looked at Engineer Kenen standing on the side, cheering them on. They remembered how he never quit while fixing the shuttle.

The humans passed the ball carefully and worked as a team. Soon, they scored a goal. The crowd cheered as the score became tied. In the final minutes, a small boy named **Guyu Guk** kicked the ball with all his strength. The ball flew into the net.

***The humans won.***

The alien leader smiled. “You showed teamwork, courage, and hope,” the leader said. “You may stay on Pogo.”

The broken shuttle stayed on the planet, but humans had found something better than a machine. They found a new home—and new friends.

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### The Great Fairies By: Ahmad Akinade (Gr. 3)

*more inside*

Once upon a time, far far away in a land called Minera, there lived four fairies. There was Ozzin the strong, Ezriella, the kind, Amrod, the wise, and Cosima, the joker. They were the protectors of their land, and the best of friends.

The fairies kept the land safe from the Darklands, and those who wanted to take over Minera. The ruler of the Darklands was the evil Ikna. Ikna wanted to rule the entire world, and Minera was the first place on his evil to-do list.

The fairies heard of Ikna's terrible plan, and put a protective spell on their land, to block the evil soldiers. This meant only faeries could enter Minera. For years, the land was protected, and no one could hurt them.

Because of the spell, the fairies didn't need to fight evil. Instead, they helped other fairies who needed them. Until one day, Ikna had a plan.

"Minions of Darkness! Assemble!" Ikna roared, sitting in his throne room. The room had skeletons dangling from chains, and ripped banners the colour of blood hanging on the wall. His minions—a group of large orcs— came running in.

Ikna stared down at the orcs, his torn deep purple cape fluttering behind him. He raised his obsidian sword with a golden hilt, and pointed it at one of the orcs.

"You! I have chosen you to be my spy! You shall be disguised with a cloaking spell, and infiltrate the great fairies!" He said. The other orcs cheered in agreement and Ikna looked pleased.

Ikna leaned back in his chair and pointed his finger at the orc. In a split second, the orc turned into a fairy, with beautiful wings, golden hair, and pointed ears. Ikna told the new fairy that he would use magic to teleport the orc.

Ikna said something and the spy disappeared in smoke. Ikna laughed evilly. In Minera, the spy made it to the gates. "Finally I made it to Minera" the spy said.

When the spy went past the guards, Ezriella heard, and went to the spy. She asked what his name was. The spy didn't know what to say so the spy said a random name. "My name is Devis".

Ezriella smiled. "That's a cool name!" Ezriella told Devis to follow her and Devis did. Devis and Ezriella made it to a temple and Devis met the rest of the great fairies.

“Hey!” Ozzin said, giving him a high five.

“Greetings,” Amrod said, looking up from a book.

“Hiya!” Cosima said, grinning.

Devis looked around, studying the area and getting ready to report back to Ikna.

Suddenly a puff of smoke appeared around Devis.

“Uh oh,” Devis cried . In less than a minute, Devis turned back to normal. No longer was he a beautiful fairy, instead he was an ugly orc. The fairies pointed their fingers at Devis and in a second Devis disappeared.

The fairies took a deep breath. “What are we going to do?” Ozzin asked.

“I have an idea,” Amrod said. “Let's go to the dark world and give Ikna a taste of his own medicine.”

“Okay!” The rest of the fairies said.

Meanwhile in the dark world castle. “You fool! Don't you know what will happen now? The great fairies are going to try to destroy us! It's all your fault!” Ikna lifted Devis in the air, and pointed his sword at him. Devis became pale and his body started to turn into stone. He screamed and his voice echoed around the castle. All the other orcs trembled in fear.

Ikna looked at the rest of the orcs and told them to guard the castle and block every entrance. In the crowd of orcs, four of them went up to Ikna.

“What do you want?” Ikna roared. One of the four orcs laughed. In a wave of their hands, they turned back into the great fairies.

“How did you get in here?!” Ikna asked, frightened. Amrod smiled.

“That's not important at the moment.” The great fairies pointed their fingers at Ikna and brilliant beams of light shot out. Ikna roared loudly and disappeared into the light, leaving only his cape behind.

The fairies returned to their home, having destroyed Ikna. Now, Minera was safe forever, all thanks to the great fairies.

## Junior Division Grades 3-6

### Let the Water Calm Down By: Leonor Lamberti (Gr. 3)

*more* inside

One sunny morning, in a little hillside, lived an old, happy wizard named Mr. Kevin. Mr. Kevin lived with his cat “Gandalf,” named after his favourite book character. Mr. Kevin was in his backyard practicing spells when he saw a tall, thin teenager coming towards him.

Mr. Kevin waved his hand, “Hello, young man, what is your name?” When the teenager approached, he said, “Sir, please help me. My name is Tom. I am heartbroken because my girlfriend and I fought, and now she doesn’t want to be with me anymore. Would you help me, please, sir?”

The wizard invited him inside for a cup of tea. Tom sat down on a soft chair by the window, Mr. Kevin sat on a pile of books, and told him, “I will give you a piece of advice, don’t swim on a swollen river, let the water calm down.” Tom got a little angry, “I walked all the way here for nonsense words! I want a love potion to change my girlfriend's mind!”

Mr. Kevin stood up and went for another cup of tea, followed by Gandalf. “I am sorry, Tom, it is not my choice to make.” Tom threw his cup at the wizard, who blocked it with a magical shield. Tom threw a punch at him, and Mr. Kevin froze his fist. Tom tried to punch again, but he couldn’t move. Mr. Kevin tied him to the chair with magical ropes. Gandalf came running and bit Tom’s ankle. Tom scared the cat, but Gandalf did not budge.

The wizard explained, “You need to calm down; you cannot force someone’s feelings.” Mr. Kevin grabbed his mystic crystal ball and showed Tom his actions. Tom was ashamed of what he had done. He couldn’t believe his eyes. He had behaved like a monster.

When Mr. Kevin released him, Tom was still astonished at how he had acted. He apologized to the wizard, who forgave him. Tom decided to take the wizard's advice and went home to let the water calm down.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

Seen

By: Harper Reid (Gr. 8)

*more* inside

I am a tiny mirror. I sit on a wall in a creaky old apartment. I never get to see the bright sunlight because the curtains are always drawn. I am forever unused, because the apartment in which I reside is occupied by a vampire. It's sad, really. Each day he stares at my glass blindly, longing to be seen. He will never see his reflection, yet he still dusts my tarnished gold frame day after day. Sometimes in his pale face, I see what I can only describe as...hope.

I've learned from conversations in the room that his name is Dustin. Of course, I can see him just not vice versa, so I know he is scrawny and tall, with messy hair. Who can blame him for that though? How should he know how to fix his hair without ever seeing it?

He's relatively lonely and seldom has people visit other than his mother. He has other vampire friends who stop by occasionally, but none seem to get too close.

Tonight, he came home looking flushed. I'm not sure where he goes during the night. A job, maybe? He doesn't regularly come home with colour on his face. His eyes are glued to his phone screen, and I wish I could peek off the wall to see who he could possibly be texting. Maybe he's made a friend. Good for him.

The next couple of days are similar. Dustin has a new warm colour on his face each time he comes home. It suits him.

It's 10:00 pm when he starts his day by sitting himself down in front of me. He tousles his hair every which way, and I'm so deeply confused because why is he sitting in front of a mirror un-reflected? It seems like he is trying to put a sudden blind effort into his appearance. Of course, his efforts go unrewarded since he can't actually see what he is doing. But still, he is trying, which is new and different. I wonder why?

After a bit more adjusting, nothing much has changed. He looks defeated, and I feel bad. I want to shout, "You look fine!" But mirrors don't have mouths for the un-reflected. A couple of minutes later, the doorbell rings and he looks as nervous as ever.

He opens the door and a girl suddenly appears. "Rosalie, I'm so happy you could make it." He smiles. A girl! This makes sense.

"Of course!" She sweetly smiles back, and as she fully enters the apartment, I realise how pretty she is. Her curly dark hair frames her face, and she has the same rosy cheeks as Dustin developed a couple of days ago.

“So,” Dustin continues awkwardly, “I was looking at movies, and I was thinking something spooky maybe?”

“I love spooky!” She replies gleefully. “Which one?”

“Anyone!”

“Deal!” She smiles, and they are both out of my view as quickly as they appeared in it.

That was eventful.

Life as a mirror can get quite boring. Especially when there’s nothing to reflect except for a sad burgundy printed wallpaper. Imagine being a mirror in the home of a human. What if I was a giant mirror in one of those big mansions, with windows and sunlight and other mirrors with whom I could reflect. But I can’t think like that. I don’t mind it here that much. Dustin and I have an unspoken bond.

Everyone spends most of their morning plopped in front of a mirror adjusting how they look. Curling their hair or pulling it into tight braids. Slathering all types of makeup and things over their face to cover up how they look. I wish I could tell people they are beautiful just the way they are. Dustin most of all. Everyday when he looks at me, he doesn’t feel seen, and must think: “How does everyone see me? Am I funny looking? I wish I could see so I knew how to fix it.” That must hurt.

After what feels like forever, Dustin and Rosalie arrive home just as the sunlight begins to warm my glass. The pair bursts through the door giggling. They are so happy together. Finally, someone to make Dustin feel seen! Dustin might call her Rosalie, but I think I’ll call her Hope.

Over the next few days, Hope comes back a lot. They spend so much time together, and I realize how alike they are. They have the same fang-y smiles and corny sense of humor.

Their care for each other is obvious. It’s 1:00 am now, and they are lying on the floor talking to each other.

“Hey...haven’t you always wondered how you look?” she stares at the ceiling thoughtfully.

“Obviously! Haven’t you?”

“Well, how do I look?”

Dustin rubs his chin. “Um... your eyes are dark brown, and... huh. I guess I’ve never tried to describe someone before. It’s hard”

She chuckles. “Fine then, I’ll go first. Your eyes are a wicked green colour. You’ve got an oval-ish shaped face and your nose is pretty pointy.”

“Pointy!” He covers his nose in shame, “I’ve never seen a pointy nose before, and that can’t be a good thing!”

Rosalie stops him. “No... I like pointy.”

“Aw, Rose, you don’t have to say that.”

“No, I mean it. Why else would I be here?”

I feel like I should be happier for Dustin. I’ve always wanted him to see himself in me, not some random other girl. But he’s happy and I’m just a mirror. It’s fine.

\* \* \*

She comes over again tonight. I notice a covered container in her hands.

“I made lasagna... I’m not a very good cook, though.” she says shyly.

“I’m sure it will be delicious!” Dustin smiles and takes the container. The two vampires talk in the doorway for a few minutes before Dustin goes to the kitchen to heat up the dinner, and Hope comes up to me in the front hallway. She peers into my glass in a way different than how Dustin does. I watch in shock as she stares directly at me and reapplies her lipstick flawlessly.

She can see herself? Oh no... she’s been lying to Dustin! Rosalie is NOT a vampire! How could I be calling her Hope this entire time when she is going to cause him to lose all hope? Dustin has always faithfully polished my frame and made sure to wipe my glass. He takes care of me, and I must not just look at him but also look out for him. I wish I could say something! I wish he could see what I see!

Rosalie puts the lipstick back in her purse and sits down for dinner with my ACTUAL vampire friend in the other room. I have to sit through the terrible dinner while all I can think about is how to help Dustin. After about an hour and a half, the two make their way toward the door.

And of course, Dustin is so sweet, he hands Rosalie a bouquet of roses, tied together with a thin string.

“I was at the store, and I thought of you... because of your name! Rosalie... roses.” He says nervously. He is so sweet! This liar does not deserve him.

“They are perfect! I love th- OUCH!” as Dustin hands the bouquet to her, a thorn pricks Rosalie’s thumb. Red, human blood oozes out of the gash. I watch as a wave of shock, confusion, then hurt washes over Dustin’s face.

“Um... your blood shouldn’t be red, right? Once vampires are fed... blood turns amber. Look, here.” He swiftly takes the flower from her hand and slices his own finger, revealing blood that flows an almost gold colour. “See? We ate the same amount... Are you not a vampire?”

“No, no I am! I just didn’t eat as much as you thought. I’m just not very hungry, I guess. You know I’m a vampire! You’ve seen my fangs!” she replies, laughing it off.

“Oh, ok!” He is so gullible! I have to do something! Rosalie bends over to tie her shoe and I start to vibrate. Putting everything I can into leaping off the wall, I start to swing. A draft of wind suddenly blows through the window, giving me the power to go flying off the wall.

As I crash to the ground, time freezes. Was this right? Dustin was happy with her, why did I have to go and ruin something good? To give myself a purpose? Rosalie is in love with him and that should be enough. But no, he would’ve found out eventually. No one should live a lie. Oh no... I’m going to break! I’m just inches from her head now, and my glass won’t survive this fall! What am I doing!

My frame thumps hard against her head before I am sent tumbling to the floor, shards of glass scattering across the floor. But my plan worked. Rosalie’s face slams against the floor, and a fake plastic fang pops out of her mouth. No blood, just some glue residue left on her actual human tooth.

“Rosalie... why?”

“I can explain, please let me explain!” she begs, tears already beginning to stream from her eyes.

Always kind, Dustin says “Fine.”

“Dustin, I like you so much, and I-I didn’t want you to eat me! You are incredible. A-and I didn’t want to lose you, okay? Please understand.”

“But you *lied*. I thought I could trust you.”

“I know, I know. But I am so, so sorry!”

“And all that stuff about describing each other - you already know what you look like! Why would you pretend?”

“Because you’re amazing! I don’t want to leave. Whether I am human or not doesn’t matter! I will be here for you, maybe not eternally, but as long as fate allows.

Dustin isn’t listening, instead he is picking up my broken pieces. “There was something I liked about this mirror. I never really knew what. Sure, I couldn’t see myself in it but a part of me felt like it saw me... stupid, I know.”

“Not stupid. What if this marks a point of our relationship where we come clean with all the lies, you know? What if I stick around and help you superglue it back together? What if that means that we can stick together too?”

“I like that idea. A lot.” He smiles but then adds, “And if we’re being completely honest...”

“What is it?”

“Well,” he scratches his neck, “I hate to say this, but I do *not* like your lasagna.”

She bursts out laughing and pulls Dustin into a hug. “Sorry! Maybe you can give me some lessons.”

\* \* \*

I hang at a slightly different angle now. Slightly crooked. To be honest, I don’t hate this new perspective on life. I can now see about two inches further into the apartment hallway when the door is open. The moonlight also reflects off me differently and there is more light in the apartment now. The dim lighting bounces off every sharp angle cracked into my glass, and to be honest, I think it’s pretty.

Rosalie and Dustin are perfect for each other - seriously, perfect. And I am proud to say that I played a part in that. If I didn’t expose Rosalie, then they would’ve gone on for so long lying to each other and never really seeing each other.

It’s 5:00 am now, and the two have been chattering all night long. When Dustin moves to the door to show Rosalie out, the pair stops in front of me.

“You know, I like how the mirror looks now. It kind of looks like stained glass!” Rosalie says.

Dustin looks at me thoughtfully, “I used to spend all of my time looking into it wanting to see myself. I think I prefer it broken. Sometimes it takes more than a mirror to see who you are.”

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### The Day My Cat Ran For Mayor By: Aliana Latorre (Gr. 7)

*more* inside

If someone told me last week that my cat, Sugar, would run for mayor of Maplewood, I would've laughed so hard I might have snorted milk out of my nose. But now I'm sitting at the kitchen table, my cereal forgotten, watching her meticulously lick her paw while staring at the TV. A reporter is announcing news that is about to completely change our lives. You might say, "Some cats stare at TV's, it's normal," but the thing is, the reporter wasn't talking about just any ordinary event, no, the new mayoral candidate was... a cat. Yes, Sugar. My fluffy, slightly sassy cat.

#### It All Started

It all started when my mom told me I needed to get more involved in the community, which at first sounded like a simple, harmless suggestion. I thought that meant picking up litter, helping an old man carry groceries, or maybe volunteering at the library- not accidentally starting an entire political movement. Sugar isn't just any ordinary cat. She's a fluffy white cat with bright orange spots as beautiful as sunsets, and she has this uncanny habit of giving blank, judging stares while I do my homework, as if to silently remind me that she is very clearly the boss in this household.

#### The Poster

One night, when I was incredibly bored and running out of things to do, I thought it would be funny to make a fake campaign poster for Sugar. I carefully drew it with bold letters that said things like, "Vote Sugar, She Cares About the Little Paws!" and added a little paw print for flair. Feeling proud of my creation, I posted it online and went to bed, expecting nothing to happen. The next morning, my phone was blowing up with messages and notifications. People were saying things like, "Finally, a candidate who won't lie," and "A cat would definitely do a better job than our mayor." Within hours, #SugarForMayor was trending, and I could hardly believe it. Mom told me to take it down before anyone took it seriously, but, of course, I didn't—and that's when everything went completely, hilariously wrong.

#### When Wednesday Came

By Wednesday, Sugar had somehow taken over the entire town. There were signs everywhere: on lampposts, in store windows, even taped to the back of cars. People had made buttons, banners, and little hand-drawn campaign flyers. The local bakery even released special "purr-fect pastries" in her honor, complete with tiny paw prints on top. Then, as if this weren't chaotic enough, the news showed up at my house. A reporter asked what inspired my cat to run for mayor. I panicked and, without thinking, said she wanted to improve

the lives of pets everywhere. Somehow, that offhand comment became her official campaign slogan.

### Sugar's Campaign Team

It didn't stop there. Soon, Sugar had her own campaign team, made entirely of kids who thought it was the funniest thing they had ever seen. My best friend, Lila, became her campaign manager, coordinating events and handing out tiny buttons. My little brother, Jack, ran her social media account, posting photos of her in dramatically heroic poses, complete with captions that made her seem like a feline superhero. Even worse, people started showing up at my door bringing their pets so Sugar could "bless them with intelligence." I was losing my mind, trying to keep track of everything, while Sugar continued to sit in the sun, utterly unconcerned.

### Votes Are Ready

Election day finally arrived, and honestly, I didn't even want to go. We all knew who was going to win, and I didn't want a crowd of reporters following me around while I tried to hide behind a tree. My mom would probably chase them off with her infamous chancletas anyway. In the end, I decided to go. The moment I walked into the room, everyone stared not at me, but at Sugar, who was calmly sitting in my arms, licking her paw as if this whole election was beneath her attention. There was a moment of silence, and then, as if on cue, Sugar meowed. The crowd went wild. People were shouting things like, "I love you, Sugar!" and "She has to win!" I just stood there, amazed and slightly terrified that so many people had come to vote for a cat. I scanned the room looking for the other electors but they all didn't show up. I guessed they all knew who was going to win.

### And the Winner Is...

The announcer tapped the microphone and asked for silence. He carefully opened the envelope containing the votes. "And the winner is... Sugar." The room erupted. Confetti, cheers, and a few "meow" imitations filled the air. I couldn't believe it, my cat, the one who slept most of the day, had officially been elected mayor.

### My Cat Is Mayor

When I got home, I braced myself for my mom's reaction. I fully expected her to be furious, but she wasn't. She was standing there wearing a shirt that said, "Sugar is my cat!" with a giant picture of Sugar on it. I blinked. "MOM? You're not mad?" I asked. She laughed, a little exasperated, and said she wasn't mad at all "it was funny, annoying, but still funny". Honestly, I was just relieved I wasn't in trouble for getting my cat elected mayor.

### Sugar Gets Famous

It didn't take long for Sugar's fame to completely explode. Our porch was soon covered in tuna cans, cat toys, and handwritten notes from fans. Reporters called nonstop, asking for interviews with "Madam Mayor," which was ridiculous because Sugar only meowed in response. Somehow, everyone acted like she was giving incredibly serious political statements. Merchandise popped up everywhere: shirts, stickers, mugs, even a giant pillow shaped like her face. My mom suddenly became Sugar's unofficial manager, scheduling appearances and setting up a "snack table" that Sugar mostly ignored. And me? I couldn't even walk to school without people asking, "What does Sugar think about the new dog park?" My life had gone from ordinary to completely chaotic, all because my cat was now the most famous mayor Maplewood had ever seen.

### Sugar's First Day at the Office

Sugar's first day at the mayor's office was... unpredictable. She knocked over pens, chased a paperclip across the desk, and took a nap on the stack of important documents like she owned the place which, technically, she did. Every time someone tried to speak to her, she meowed, stretched, or batted at a mouse-shaped stress toy. By lunchtime, the office was covered in shredded papers, half-eaten snacks, and an audience of staff who had learned the hard way that the mayor's schedule revolved entirely around naptime and snacktime.

### Sugar Solves a Town Problem

Then an unexpected crisis arrived: the town's giant statue of the founder had been completely covered in a swarm of pigeons, leaving residents frustrated and confused. The mayor's office was in chaos until Sugar arrived. She strutted right up to the statue, stared at the birds with absolute authority, and let out a single commanding meow. One by one, the pigeons scattered as if they understood her perfectly. The townspeople cheered, calling it a miracle, while I stood there, speechless and in disbelief. I didn't know she could be this powerful as mayor—she wouldn't even lift her paw for anything else, but somehow she saved the day.

### The End... For Now

After weeks of fame, naps in the mayor's office, and solving pigeon crises, life in Maplewood started to settle down well, as much as it could with a cat in charge. Sugar still demanded snacks on schedule, sat on every important document, and occasionally stared at me like I was her assistant rather than her owner. The town had learned to love their fluffy mayor, and honestly, so had I. Some days, I still wake up half-expecting reporters at the door or a new crisis for Sugar to handle, but most days, we just curl up together and watch the world go by. And really, having a cat as mayor? It turns out, it's the purr-fect way to run a town. I even ended up buying some merch: the pillow! And honestly, I have my reasons: it's extremely cozy.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### The Harbour of Secrets By: Shani Shpilsky (Gr. 7)

*more* inside

The bell rang, signaling the entrance of tourists. Marella looked over her sketchbook to observe the customers, before returning to her drawing. It was of the ocean, because so many of her memories originated from there. Building sandcastles with her siblings, sunbathing with her mother, and listening to the calming waves with her father. Those days left with her siblings and mother, but Marella could never leave the ocean.

The sketch she was working on was okay, but she needed to see the ocean to really get the waves right. She slipped out of the shop quietly, wondering if her father would mind. He ran the shop, and Marella occasionally doodled on her sketchbook in the corner, keeping him company.

She jogged to the beach, the sky getting darker with every step. A deep fog settled, obscuring Marella's vision. Days like this reminded Marella of the day tragedy struck, the day that permanently altered her life. The day that her older sister, Mira, had gone to the beach, and never come home. They never even found the body.

The officials said that she had drowned, but the harrowing guilt had settled over Marella that day, like a stormy cloud that hovered over her and never left. The guilt of not being there to help was suffocating, so Marella buried herself in drawing. Her chest tightened, as it always did when reminded of her sister's absence. Marella dug her heels into the sand, hugging her sketchbook to her chest. She looked out into the ocean, at the waves she would never conquer with her sister, and at the horizon she would never scale alongside her. Maybe that was why Marella drew so often, so that she could try to stitch her heart back together.

The storm clouds were brewing overhead, the wild waves crashing into the sandy shore. The wind was so ferocious, it almost seemed like someone was talking. Wait- was that music? Marella whipped her head around, and strained her ears, trying to pick up something other than the wind and ocean. She heard it again, faint and far away, but there nonetheless. The music sounded upbeat, but distorted in a strange sort of way. It felt wrong.

Marella left her sketchbook on the moist sand, and started walking towards the music. It was foggy, so it was hard to tell where she was going, but Marella followed the noise, wondering what it could be. She paused, feeling cold water drench her shoes and socks. She didn't know that she had come *this* close to the water. The music got louder and louder, cheerfully egging her on. She cautiously took a couple steps, and was appalled by the lurid sight she had suddenly stepped into.

The fog had thinned, allowing her to see clearly. There was a dock, and music blasted from somewhere Marella couldn't pinpoint. There were people bustling around the dock, and floating, brightly coloured stands were positioned along the wooden dock. The dock was huge, and it seemed to go on forever, and the entire chaotic scene was illuminated by large, crooked lampposts that glowed a sputtering, warm yellow. Marella cautiously approached the dock, her steps drowned out by the commotion. She inspected a bright green tent, and noticed that instead of selling items, the merchant sold little bottles filled with smoke.

'No-please. Let me return it. Please!' A man's voice boomed. "I didn't mean it, really! Please! PLEASE!"

Marella turned and saw a bearded man pleading with someone in one of the booths. She sensed the desperation in his voice, and it made her shiver. Two hooded figures appeared, and grabbed the collar of his shirt. They ignored his pleas, and dragged him further into the harbour. Marella was shaken, but what could she do? She turned back to the green tent and stretched out her hand, trying to touch one of the bottles. But before she could touch one, she was interrupted by the shopkeeper.

"Don't touch those." The shopkeeper said, head resting on her palm. "Secrets like those tend to stay."

"Secrets? Is that what the smoke in the bottles are?"

"You're in the Harbour of Secrets." she said, not facing Marella. "So, duh, they're secrets."

"How does that work? And how many secrets do you have?"

"Ugh, I hate children" The shopkeeper muttered under her breath, before resuming in her normal tone. "Unsaid secrets are released, people find the secrets, and we sell them here. Now if you're not going to buy anything, then leave."

"Wait, do you know what happened to my sister? She went missing two years ago, and-"

"So you'll buy a secret, splendid!" The shopkeeper said, finally turning her cold blue eyes to Marella's face. She couldn't tell if there was a hint of sarcasm in her voice or not. "Might I warn you, though. We don't pay in cash here."

"I'll do anything, just-please. I have to know what happened to my sister"

"Perfect, I'll show you where we keep most of the secrets right away." The shopkeeper grinned.

She opened the door, and stepped out of the vibrant stall. The shopkeeper fixed her short hair, and headed deeper into the harbour in a quick stride that made Marella have to jog

to keep up. They walked for several minutes, and Marella felt butterflies doing twirls in her stomach. She would finally figure it out- the truth, for real. The shopkeeper stopped abruptly at a large tent. The noises seemed to blur and dim, and an ominous cold feeling crept into her stomach. Marella's excitement wavered for a moment, but she shrugged it off.

The shopkeeper pushed aside the fabric cover, and pulled Marella inside. The air was cold and stale, with rows of shelves lining the cloth walls. The shelves were filled with glass bottles, all containing smoke of various shades. The tent was scarcely lit, the only source of light a flickering lantern on a wooden table in the center. The shopkeeper ushered her next to the table and then started sifting through the shelves, muttering to herself.

The shopkeeper eventually settled on a midnight blue bottle, and turned it in her hands, before turning to look at Marella with all traces of boredom gone. "This is what you are looking for. But all secrets come at a cost. Would you do anything to obtain it?" She spoke with an eagerness that sent shivers down her spine.

"Anything." Marella replied breathlessly.

She was about to accept the bottle, when she felt a sudden rise of nausea. She doubled over, gasping, and cold water splashed her face, soaking her pants and socks. Wait-water? She pushed herself up, and was met with the feeling of warm sand. The water was cool to the touch, but not unpleasantly so. Marella looked down at the water, and felt her body freeze. For as she stared into the ocean, not a single reflection stared back.

Something shifted next to her, a body. "Mira?" She whispered.

A girl sat next to her, with matching olive skin and green eyes. It was Mira, but wrong. Marella couldn't place it, but something about the light in her eyes was wrong. As if she was missing something.

"Marella," Mira started, in a tired voice. "You shouldn't be here."

Marella reached out to grab her arm, but her fingers went through. She gasped, and pulled her hand back. "They say that you drowned."

"People say a lot of things. That doesn't make them true." Mira said, turning her eyes back to the ocean. She seemed distant, lost.

"I can figure out what happened, I'm so close. And then I can save you! We can go back home, and be a family again"

"Marella, you can't trust her." Mira said, turning her eyes back to face Marella. But there was a hint of urgency in her voice. "She doesn't take money. She takes people. I would know..." Mira trailed off, her wistful eyes staring into Marella's.

“No, Mira, we can go back home. We can escape, we can do it together!”

“Don’t you get it? There’s no going back for me. But you still have a chance. Goodbye Marella.”

And then Mira disappeared into a puff of smoke, evaporating into the air. Marella screamed, and screeched Mira’s name out. But it was no use. Her sister was gone. The water swirled around her, completely submerging her. *Let it drown me.* Marella thought. *And then maybe I can join my sister.* Marella sank to the bottom, and blacked out, the water washing away her tears.

Marella awoke to a *drip drip drip*. Her head rested on the cold, all too familiar planks of the harbour. She lifted her head groggily, and immediately locked eyes with the cold, calculating ones of the shopkeeper.

“You passed out,” She said calmly. “Are you ready?”

Marella almost wanted to say yes, to join Mira, but that wasn't what she would have wanted. She would have wanted her to escape. “I changed my mind. I don’t want the secret”

The shopkeeper smiled, as if expecting her to say that. “Honey, you really don’t want to know what happened to your sister? Why she left you? You think that you have a choice, but these secrets, they follow you forever. Like a shadow, one that never goes away. The truth is never free, but the price is nothing compared to the suffering that will surely follow if you ignore this.”

“No, I can’t! I won’t!” Marella screamed, turning around and sprinting out of the tent without a second thought.

She ran through the docks, adrenaline pumping through her veins as her lungs burned like fire. She didn’t know if the shopkeeper was following her, but she didn’t care. Marella kept running, on and on, until the music was barely heard. And then she saw it, the end of the harbour. There was nothing but a wall of fog, Marella turned, and saw the shopkeeper waiting expectantly at her.

“Why did you try to trick me? Why are you even here” Marella asked, although she wasn’t sure why. Why would the shopkeeper answer her, and what would prevent her from telling lies?

“You came with me on your own accord. I simply told you the price that you would have to pay. And as for being here, well, I bought a secret from here, a long time ago.” But that doesn’t matter. You have nowhere left to run.”

“No...I still have one more place to go.” Marella said, and took a step backwards, into the fog.

She didn't know if it was the right choice, but she kept walking, one step at a time. The music grew fainter and fainter, and she heard the ocean's waves. She was doing it! She was escaping, and as Marella took her final step, the music faded, and was replaced by the roaring wind and crashing waves. Marella felt her breath catch painfully in her throat, and she collapsed to the sand, choking back tears. She grieved for Mira, and it tortured her to know that she was really, really gone. No hope in sight.

It killed Marella to know that she had escaped while her sister couldn't, and she continued to grieve for the rest of her life, because Mira never truly left her. Marella drew the ocean, but never the harbour, and in the silence, she swore that she could hear the same cheerful music, joyful but wrong. She never returned to the beach at night, because she knew that the harbour was waiting. But Marella didn't need the truth to feel complete. She had learned what secrets cost, and she wasn't willing to pay the price.

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### The Last Broadcast By: Charley Fisher (Gr. 8)

*more* inside

The room was dimly lit from the glow of monitors showing live footage from around the city. Fires burned in the distance, smoke rising like the tension in the broadcast room slowly fading on the final act of a crumbling society.

Elliot tapped his earpiece,  
"Is this signal live?"

"Yes sir", came the voice on the other end.

Elliott took a deep breath and stared into the camera lens

"Okay" he muttered to himself "let's make it count".

Instantly, his voice boomed into thousands of homes, underground bunkers, resistance hideouts, and perhaps even into the enemy's strongholds.

"This is Elliot Rain, and this is the truth they didn't want you to hear."

He launched onto a diatribe against the regime, words strong enough to slice through years of information. With passion and precision, he laid bare their lies, their manipulations, their crimes. His commentary wasn't just information, it was defiance, broadcast in real time.

"They thought they could control everything," Elliott said, "but they were wrong! You can silence one voice, you can imprison a thousand, but you cannot make an entire city of people forget who they are!"

At that moment, Elliot received a ping on his feed. A wave of approval poured in from around the globe, converted messages, digital claps, and flags of support. His words were not falling on deaf ears.

And then the message came in: The towers have fallen, the regime's signal is down. Elliot froze, blinking. Then a slow triumphant smile spread across his face.

"They tried to make us immune to hope," he said looking straight into the camera one last time. "But hope always finds a signal."

Then the red light faded to black ...

It was a normal day in New York City, there was nothing moving, nobody outside. So maybe it wasn't such a normal day in New York City.

The sun was out, everything was still and calm. It was like it was paradise waiting to happen, but it felt like this paradise happened before and then ended in tragedy.

Elliot was just leaving work, heart pounding as he took in the deserted streets. The city was eerily pristine, everything green and lush-strangely so. Considering it was supposed to be winter. The silence pressed in, unnatural and thick. He wandered through the empty city, not a single soul in sight. Not even an animal. Not even a bird in the sky.

He stopped in the middle of the street and shouted, "Hello!?"

His voice echoed off the surrounding buildings, swallowed by the hush. No answer. The quiet gnawed at his nerves, but he forced himself to stay calm. He returned home, the feeling of being watched prickling at the back of his neck.

He made himself some mac and cheese, the microwave's hum was the only sound in the apartment. As he waited for his meal, he watched the baseball game, time crawling by. Still, the streets outside remained empty. He tried to reason it out, that maybe everyone was at the game. But that didn't make sense, nobody in his neighbourhood even liked baseball.

As he got ready for bed, Elliot peered outside again. Unease settling deeper in his stomach. That's when he saw his elderly neighbour, Leslie. She was standing motionless on the sidewalk. A chill ran down his spine. He opened the window, and a cold gust of air shoved him back.

"Leslie!" Elliott called out through the window.

Silence. He tried again, louder this time, "Leslie!" Still nothing. But then a strange sensation, as if her voice pressed against the inside of his skull. Leslie's head twisted around slowly, unnaturally, until her eyes met his. Her lips parted, and in a voice that was both a whisper and a scream, she spoke, "Get out, they are watching."

Elliot started to breathe heavily. Everything went blurry, the room was spinning, so many things were swimming around in his mind, he tried breathing slowly, but that just made it worse.

His chest tightened, and he grabbed his head in agony. A powerful scream of pain left his body, but he heard no sound. Then everything faded to black.

The next morning, Elliot woke up with a wicked headache and a bruise on his hip. He remembered everything vividly, but he couldn't put together how he got these bruises and a possible concussion.

So he called Leslie next door. He dialed the number and it rang and rang and rang, then suddenly it stopped. Elliott heard static on the other end. "Hello?", Elliott said, his hands shaking. He waited what felt like forever for a response, then the line went dead. He knew something was wrong, but he didn't want to go over there after what happened last night. So he decided he would dig up more about Leslie. He searched up his neighbour's name and her address. It showed that she had died 26 years ago, in a car crash and that nobody had been living at that house since.

"But that doesn't make sense." Elliott whispered to himself.

He continued to search, he found out which hospitals she had been to and which retirement home she went to. He decided to call the retirement home. "Hello, this is the New York State Elders Home. How may I help you?" a young woman's voice cracked over the phone "Hi, I am calling about an old resident of yours" Elliot said, still looking at his computer for more information. "Of course, could you tell me the name of the resident?" the woman said in a distracted tone. "Yes, her name was Leslie Clifton" Elliot said, as he watched the city passing by out his window. The woman went silent and the line dropped. Elliott thought that was extremely strange, but kept looking for answers. He found a mental hospital that she went to. Looking through the website of this so-called mental hospital, he read about where they send their patients for extra precautionary rehab treatments, and the address. He contemplated going to the hospital to ask questions. But Elliott thought, what if they made him into whatever Leslie is or was.

Elliott got his duffel bag and threw in his phone charger, snacks, black clothing, and some water. His plan wasn't to ask to be let in, he was going to break in. Get what he needs, and get out without getting caught.

Elliott knew he wouldn't be able to do this by himself. So he called the one person that he could trust, the one person he did everything with, his best friend Jason.

"Hey, Jason." Elliott said, shaking.

"Hey Elliott, how are you?" I haven't seen you in what feels like forever!" Jason replied.

"Yes, we can get to that in a second, but I need you to help me." Elliott interrupted.

"Ok, what do you need?" Jason asked, confused.

"I think you already know what it is." Elliott grinned

"Oh, I get it now!" Jason laughed.

"Ok, meet me at my work building in twenty minutes." Elliott whispered.

Jason packed his bag, changed, grabbed something to eat, and then got in the car. When Jason arrived, he parked his car and texted Elliott. He saw him walking out towards the car, his face in utter shock and confusion.

"Elliott, are you ok?" Jason asked, concerned.

Elliott didn't flinch, not even a head turn to show he was paying attention.

"Drive," Elliott said slowly.

"What's going on, Elliott? You're scaring me," Jason whispered, trying to pay attention to the road.

"I can't tell you, I just need you to drive me to this address. Elliott hands Jason a piece of paper.

"When we get there, you need to stay in the car and wait for me to call you,ok?" Elliott said, blinded by rage and anxiety.

"No Elliott, you aren't going in there alone, I can't let you get hurt." Jason's tone changed, as his worry intensified about Elliott's safety. He locked the doors and grabbed Elliott's arm.

"Elliott, please don't do this, you don't know what they do to people in there." Jason said, his eyes welling up with tears.

Elliott looked up from the floor and met Jason's gaze. His eyes went from fear to concern. Their eyes locked as Jason continued to cry. He looked away to wipe tears from his eyes. "Hey, look at me, it's gonna be ok. I will be fine, nothing's going to happen." Elliott said, his eyes welling up along with Jason's.

"I know, I know, " Jason said, looking down at his lap. His cheeks, glowing red.

"Why are you blushing?" Elliott asked grinning, looking Jason up and down.

"I'm not what you are talking about!" Jason yelled.

"Ok, whatever you say!" Elliott smirked.

He closed his eyes and started to laugh. When he opened them eyes, Elliott was gone. Jason looked around, confused; his breath got heavier, getting out of the car, "Elliot!?! " He yelled, but there was no response. Dropping to his knees in despair, the cold pavement scraping against his skin causing them to bleed. He looked up into the sky with his ice blue eyes, tears rolling down his face.

"Why?!" Jason screamed and sobbed at the same time.

Elliott felt bad just leaving Jason alone, but he had to find out what happened to Leslie. When he got closer to the building, he heard screams that chilled his spine. Elliot opened the door to the warehouse ever so slightly to see what was going on, but all he saw was flickering lights and an excessively long, creepy hallway. He slithered through the door and looked around and didn't see anything except a set of doctor's scrubs. He put them on and walked down the hallway, coming to multiple metal doors with a slot almost like a food or mail slot in each one. Elliott was extremely curious, and he tried to resist, but couldn't. So he opened the slot and saw a small woman staring at the wall. Her hands were dry, and her nails were bleeding. Elliott looked at the wall she was staring at. The white wall was covered in blood, and what looked like writing. So he continued down the hall and door after door they were all the same. Creepy staring, and bloody finger tips. He knew what they were doing; they weren't making them better. It's almost like they were being held captive, maybe they were being quarantined? Maybe someone was that scared of these people?

Eventually, he found an office at the end of the hall, and there were medical files with details on operations done on patients, and almost all of the people he had seen were under the influence of body scanning and it looked like there were holograms created of them. Making it look like they had gone insane. Elliott gasped as he stepped back in disbelief. He couldn't believe that his elderly neighbour was forced to do this.

Elliott ran out of the office, overwhelmed with emotions. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes as he ran down the empty hallway. He finally made it to the car, where Jason was still waiting for him. He got in the car and slammed the door

"Drive!" Elliott screamed.

"Where to, boss?" Jason said while slamming on the gas pedal.

"The news office, I need to make a broadcast!" Elliott said in a panic, trying to find his phone.

"Ok, we are here, go! " Jason said.

Elliott entered a room dimly lit from the glow of monitors showing live footage from around the city.

He tapped his ear piece "Is this signal live?"

"Yes, sir," came the voice on the other end.

Elliott took a deep breath and stared into the camera lens

"Okay" he muttered to himself "let's make it count".

## Intermediate Division Grades 7-8

### Checkmate

By: Aamaal Akinade (Gr. 7)

*more* inside

The first thing I notice about the manor is that there is no gate. I could tell there used to be one. Two small patches of the ground were slightly discoloured, and the grass along it looked uneven. I park in one of the many spots, my laptop shaking in my hands. After a quick checkup in the mirror, I head to the front door.

At first glance, only a simple doorbell seems to be there. That too surprises me. I've been to plenty of mansions, but none are as...simplistic as this one. I ring the bell, expecting some secret security measures to pop out, but nothing happens.

The door opens shortly after, and a tired woman appears. She looks old, but you could tell that she isn't. Her age is mental, not physical.

"Miss Gwendolyn Price, I presume?" she says. I nodded.

"Just Gwen, please."

The woman sighed. "Follow me, Gwen." She leads me through the winding halls of the mansions, and it is breathtaking. The furniture and such is simple enough, but the architecture is simply gorgeous.

She leads me to a parlour, and a lady is sprawled out on the couch. Her long brown hair is curled into rows, and she wears a glamorous, deep purple dress. She waves her hand, and the woman who escorted me leaves.

"Sit," she says, her voice low and quiet. I quickly sit across from her and open my laptop.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Ms. Lacroix." I offer my hand for a shake, but she doesn't take it.

"You're the reporter they sent?" she asks. I nod, and she eyes me. "You're free to go," I stare at her, mouth open.

"I haven't even started my work!" I say. She laughs ingenuinely. She isn't smiling and looks cold as ever.

"And?"

I wasn't having it. It is my only chance to prove myself. I settle on the couch. "No," I say.

She looks at me and smiles. It doesn't reach her eyes, but she seems more amused than upset. "Fine. I don't see the reason for this piece, though. The world has made up its mind on me," I sigh in exasperation.

"That is true, Ms Lacroix, but I have a job to do." She shakes her head.

"Humour me then. Show me how brilliant you are, Gwendolyn." Calling me by my full name throws me off, but I got myself ready.

"So, Ms Lacroix, I'm supposed to get a full, unfiltered view of your life. I'm to be exposed to the good and the bad. Though I'm not sure there is much good."

She stands up abruptly. "You'd be right about that. She pauses for a moment, then continues. "I'll take you on a tour...shall I?" I join her, and she leads me around the house.

"Why is everything so...basic. I've been to my fair share of mansions...none are as extravagant, yet as basic as yours." She gives me one of those fake laughs again.

"I'm trying to be more simplistic. Minimalistic, if you will." Now, it's my turn to laugh.

"Right. A huge mansion and servants are very simplistic." She looks at me.

"I'm being serious. I've lived quite an interesting life. Now, I'm old, and dying, and really don't care." I look around and consider what she's saying.

"All right. Tell me more about your career then." Her hands trace patterns on an elegant vase filled with bamboo sticks.

"Not much to say. I did it, and then I didn't. It's what got me here now, but it's cost me much in life aswell" Her voice takes on a delicate tone, but it's still commanding and powerful.

"You're not giving me much to work with here," I say.

"And I told you to leave," she fires back. We stare at each other for a while, and I give in.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

The next day, I arrive at the same time, laptop in hand, determined for material. The woman at the door escorts me to a study, where Ms. Lacroix is playing with an expensive-looking chess set.

"Gwen," she says. "Come join me. This is an invigorating game. I sit across from her, playing along. "This board was handcrafted for me," she says, twisting the Queen in her fingers. "It's amazing, don't you think?" I nod.

“Beautiful. Now, your name is Théa Lacroix, born on February 2nd, 1960. You’re 65 years old. You’re an actress, your prime being in the 90s when you starred in several hit movies, but you’ve had a successful film almost every year since your first. Those are the only *facts* I know about you. The only facts the public knows. Tell me more.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Facts. They mean nothing when everyone has an opinion. I know what you’re going to say. So spit it out.” It’s impressive how composed she is.

“They say you’re a diva. Cold. Ruthless. That you’ve done horrid things to your competition to get roles. That you’ve always demanded more. Never treat anyone with kindness or mercy. You’re only a good person when you’re playing a character on the screen.”

As I say the words, I wish I could take them back. I wait for a reprimand, but instead, she gives me the first real smile, even though it’s small.

“And now I’m here, dying of heart disease. What goes around, comes around, I guess.”

“Exactly! If you’re dying...don’t you wanna change the narrative? Show the truth, get rid of the lies?” I say, pressing for more.

She puts the queen down and picks up a pawn. “Who says they’re lies?”

I’m confused, but not enough to knock me down. “Fine. So it’s all true then? All the rumors The scandal?”

Thèa laughs. “I never signed up to be a role model,” She puts the chess piece down, and looks me dead in the eyes.

“We all have skeletons in our closets, but they only care about the ones in Hollywood.” She picks up the king. “I assume you’ll be back tomorrow,” I nod, taking it as a sign to leave.

I come back prepared after that, ready for her mind games and twisted words. I’d done more digging last time, combing through every obscure article, every public sighting, until I finally found something.

“Who’s Eddie?” I ask after being led to the library. It’s a different chess set this time—made of glass instead. Her head snaps up when I say it. “How?” she asks, calmly.

I sit down across from her, picking up a frosted rook. “I do my due diligence. So...tell me more about Eddie Raye.”

“He was a guy I used to know,” she says carefully, but not breaking her power.

“A guy with an obituary. What happened?” She laughs.

“He died. Like I will soon. Like you will eventually. Though I do hope it takes a while. I rather like you.”

“I’m flattered. But you know that’s not what I was asking.” She shakes her head.

“Very persistent, aren’t you? We were in love. For a long, long time. It was wonderful,” she says wistfully, picking up the king.

“He was a nice guy. A very nice guy. And...he died. Like most do.” We were finally getting somewhere. I had something, anything about this elusive woman.

“And then...” I prompted.

“I got pregnant, we got engaged, he got shot. End of story.” She puts the king down sharply.

“I’m sorry,” I say, but she shakes her head with a soft smile.

“Don’t be. Death is natural.”

“And the baby?” I ask. Théa laughs again, but it’s back to the fake one.

“Up in B.C, gently nursing her hatred for me.” That ended the day.

After that, we make actual progress. I come back every day, like clockwork. And every day, like clockwork, Théa has a new chessboard. I’m unsure how many she actually has, but it seems to be an endless amount. We meet around the mansion, sometimes in the bedrooms, by the pool, in the gym, etc. It’s like every day, she is trying to show me something else. And she does. Not everything, but she tells me more than she did before. Slowly, piece by piece, we unravel the scandals, the rumours, and I see the truth. She’s truly questionable. And yet I like her a little more every day.

A few weeks after our first encounter, we met outside, in her huge backyard. I don’t think you can call it a backyard, since she basically owns the whole forest that flows out from the neat green grass. She brings out another chessboard, each piece carved with precious wood, and painted to look like a different plant.

“So, why are you still here, Gwen?” she asks, pushing down her sun hat. “You’ve surely got more than enough info.”

I smile. “Oh, I do. But I quite like your company,” I respond, my eyes wincing in the sun.

“Let’s play then.” I nod, and we begin our chess game. And then it all goes wrong.

Théa is about to get me in check when it starts. Her breathing becomes tight and sharp, and she clutches her chest.

“Théa? Are you ok?” I say, getting up and walking to her. She grimaces.

“Ambulance,” she mutters, and I fumble for my phone.

Late that night, I sat in the chair across from her hospital bed. “Go home,” she says. “I’m fine. It was minor.”

I shake my head. “Who’ll stay with you?” She laughs and winces.

“I was fine before I met you, and I’m fine now.” Reluctantly, I leave.

“I’ll be back first thing tomorrow,” She nods.

“Goodbye, Gwen.”

The next morning, my doorbell rings. “Coming!” I yell, juggling a cup of coffee. I open the door, and a solemn-looking man stands there.

“Gwendolyn Price?” he asks. I nod.

“I’m sorry to inform you that Ms. Théa Lacroix passed away this morning.” I freeze, and the cup of coffee falls from my hands, the cup shattering.

“Oh” is all I can say.

“You’ll be contacted with more details regarding the funeral and reading of the will. Were you good friends? Family?”

I shake my head. “No. I barely knew her,” but even as I say it, I know I knew her better than anyone else.

A few days later, I head to the funeral. It’s on a bright sunny day, and the drive to the cemetery is peaceful. It’s at the end, when the same woman who escorted me every day comes up to me.

“Madame left you a gift.” She says, handing me a black bag. I begin to open it, but she stops me.

“Not here. At your home.” She walks to her car, and I can’t help but wonder what will happen to her next.

When I get home, I open the bag. I gasp as I pull out a gorgeous chess set. It must be made of diamond, as every piece glitters and oozes wealth. A small note is tucked in the fold of the board:

*“It’s a shame I left you so soon ...especially as I haven’t told you all my truths. But I hoped to leave a piece of me with you. Every move reveals a truth I sidestepped. Play... and you’ll see.”*

I spend the next few days playing chess by myself. Often, when certain moves are made, the square opens, and a small note reveals more about Théa. Finally, I write the article.

*The Life Of Théa Lacroix*

*An Op-Ed by Gwendolyn Price*

*Théa Lacroix was known as many things...cold, ruthless, hostile, and a diva. To me, it was very simple what she was. She was just an ordinary person. She lived, she loved, and she made mistakes. But as a wise person once told me, 'We all have skeletons in our closets, but they only care about the ones in Hollywood'*

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### The Shadows Come at Night By: Laura Forgrave (Gr. 12)

*more* inside

Every child in Ennberg is taught two things as soon as they are old enough to go out on their own: be home before dark, and never become a musician.

“Why, Mama?” Theo asked.

“Because the Shadows come at night, you should know that by now!” his mother admonished.

“But why can’t I become a musician?”

“The Shadows crave music. And what the Shadows want, they take. Now, run along and bring your father his lunch. He’ll be hungry from working in the fields all day.”

As Theo ran off, through the stone walls into the fields of grain beyond, Theo’s mother hoped he would stay this young forever, and would never have to know the full truth. How could she possibly explain it?

But time waits for no one, and as trees dropped their leaves, and snow covered the grassy hills, and new green sprouts once again burst forth from the frozen ground, Theo grew. And as the little boy became a taller boy, he heard whispers of a world hidden within their own. The village elders talked of a Before, but comments were quickly shushed, with sharp glances at the children listening nearby.

“If only we still had ...”

“Remember what happened to Martin...”

And once, when Theo was on the cusp of thirteen, a young woman disappeared. Martha had been a weird sort, quiet, but she was a master at the fiddle. Although people pretended to ignore her, everyone smiled a bit more when she played in the village square. Yet, when she disappeared, no one formed a search party. She was never mentioned again. When Theo demanded an explanation, all his mother would say was “Sometimes sacrifices are necessary to keep the Shadows at bay.”

Something had happened. Something was happening. Every night, the Shadows came, and every night, their horrible moaning chilled Theo to the core. Some nights banging and crashing sounds kept everyone awake. But what did it mean? Why were there Shadows in the first place?

Theo and his friend Henry discussed these events as they worked the fields outside their village, but they didn't know enough to even form educated guesses, and they quickly turned to other, more interesting topics, like the upcoming archery competition, and the flute Henry was making out of an old piece of wood.

That night at dinner, Theo excitedly told his family about the flute. "Henry even says that I can try it out tomorrow!"

Theo's father clicked his tongue in disapproval. You know the rules, Theo. Be home before dark, and -"

"*Never* become a musician," his mother finished.

"But we're just playing around!" Theo protested.

"The Shadows crave music. They hear the noise and sometimes, when silly little boys who should know better are out at dusk goofing around with a flute, the Shadows take those little boys for themselves," Theo's father said pointedly.

"We won't be silly, Father, don't worry," Theo promised.

Late that evening, Henry finally finished his flute. He couldn't wait to try it out, so despite his better judgement, he snuck out of his house and down the darkening street into the mist beyond.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Henry was gone. Theo roamed the fields for days, but he could never get farther than the forest on the horizon before he had to turn home. After all, he had to be home before dark. That was when the Shadows came. And slowly, Henry faded from memory, or at least, the memories of everyone except Theo. In Theo's mind, Henry remained, taking the space reserved for memories of best friends, gone but far from forgotten.

As summer turned to fall and the crisp winter wind once again returned from the mountains to the north, families huddled around fires and stoves, fearing the long nights of darkness ahead. The Shadows moaned louder and for longer during these black nights. Sacks of grain and vegetables were carried into cellars, and the town gates were closed and barricaded with heavy logs. No one would leave the safety of the village until spring. It was on one of these cold winter nights, with Theo having just turned fourteen, that he finally worked up the courage to ask, "What really happened to Henry? Did the Shadows really take him? Why are there Shadows anyways? I think I'm old enough to know."

His mother stared into the fire, the wrinkles of worry and fear on her face visible in the glow of the flames. His father answered first. "The Shadows long for music. And when they

take it, who are we to stop them?" His mother sighed. It was time he knew the truth, or at least what she understood of it.

"He deserves a better answer than that, I think. You are almost a man, Theo, and we are stuck here until spring. It is a good time to tell you our past, or rather what we remember of it. You see, there was a Before. A time of magic, many long years ago. My grandfather told me that they had machines that could fly, and potions that could cure almost any sickness. But different villages became angry with one another, and they fought with powerful magical weapons that destroyed the world and the magic within it. Some humans did survive the war, but without magic, they could not live as they had previously. Many built small villages like ours, and started over."

"Are the Shadows the remnants of magic, left over from the war?" Theo asked, intrigued.

"Perhaps," his mother responded. "That is what my grandfather thought, anyways. Remnants of magic, turned evil, who live in darkness and are set on destroying beautiful things, like music. But the war was so long ago, no one really knows. My grandfather said that his grandfather's father was a little boy during the war, one of the survivors. This all happened a very long time ago."

"Why don't we talk about it? Why don't we try to recreate the magic?" Theo wondered.

"At first, many people did try. But all those people mysteriously disappeared, and soon, people stopped trying. When I was very young, the villagers decided that we would no longer talk about the past, that talking about it would only bring more harm."

"So that's what I've heard elders muttering about," Theo realized.

"Exactly," his father agreed. "Now, I hope your mother made the right choice in telling you this story. Learn from it, and don't come that close to music again. No more playing around with flutes, or any of that nonsense."

Theo nodded and agreed, and his parents, satisfied that their job was done, moved on to other topics.

But Theo did not forget about music and magic. That night, and almost every night thereafter, he dreamed about the Before, and all the wonderful things they must have had. Secretly, in his room late at night, he carved wood, sewed leather, and tried to make both music and magic. Maybe music was magic, if music was what the Shadows sought. At lunch, when most went home to eat, Theo would run even further into the fields and test his instruments. Yet Theo was sensible, and he never played music after dark.

Until one hot summer night, with Theo well into his seventeenth year, when he lay restless on his bed, tossing and turning, sleep evading him. He had just finished a beautiful wooden flute, sanded until it was as smooth as driftwood from the river. It was like the one Henry had made, and Theo had poured his heart and soul into the instrument as he mourned his best friend. Theo couldn't wait to test it the next day. It was in this weird land between sleep and consciousness when Theo heard his name.

"Theoooooooooooo....Theoooooooooooo...."

Theo stirred, confused, and rose, opening the shutters just a crack. A cool breeze flowed into the room, but he couldn't see anything in the dark mists of the night.

"Theoooooooooooo.....Where are yooooooooou? Come oooooooooout!"

It almost sounded like Henry's voice. But that couldn't be possible. Could it?

Theo closed the shutters and lay back in his bed, determined to go to sleep. He was tired. He must be hearing things. Everything would be fine in the morning.

But the voice continued, relentless in its quest to find Theo.

Eventually, Theo gave in.

He rose from his bed and opened the shutters all the way, still seeing nothing but darkness. With a final glance back to the warm comfort of his bed, he crawled through the hole created by the open shutters and out into the blackness of the night, following Henry's voice.

"Theoooooooooooo....Theoooooooooooo...."

The voice continued as Theo followed it down his street and through the town to the closed city gates. As it was summer, the gates were not barricaded with wood, but they were firmly sealed with a heavy iron bar, the kind that would take at least two men to move. The voice continued, sounding like it was just on the other side of the wall.

"Theoooooooooooo.....Theoooooooooooo....."

Theo moved closer to the gates. Maybe he could just peer through a crack, and see whoever was making the noise. As he approached the gates, he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder.

That was the last thing he noticed before the world faded to black and he fell to the ground.

\* \* \*

When Theo awoke, he took a moment to realize he was not in his own room.

He looked around, frantically trying to figure out where he was. Then he saw Henry standing in the corner, unmoving, like a ghost or vision.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!” Theo jumped back, holding his hands up in surrender. “Ghost, evil spirit, whatever you are, leave this place, and leave me and my late friend’s soul in peace!”

“Theo, it’s me, Henry! I have so much to explain to you!”

“Henry died on a dark night, four years ago. Who are you, and why have you taken on his body?”

“This must be a bit overwhelming, but it’s really me! I’m the same Henry who snuck into the baker’s with you to steal some sweet bread when we were eight, the same Henry who promised that you could try out my flute when we were thirteen. I never died, I just came to live here. I’m part of a special group of Shadow fighters now. We fight the Shadows to keep the town safe.”

“Henry? It really *is* you?” Theo asked, his eyes widening with the shock of this revelation.

“Yes, I’m so glad to see you!”

Theo finally took a moment to look around. “Wait, you live alone in a cave now? What do you do at night?”

“At night, we fight the Shadows,” a deep voice answered. Theo spun around, startled. “And Henry doesn’t live alone,” the voice continued as its origin, an older man with a graying beard, stepped out from a side passage of the cave. “He lives with me.”

“That’s Martin, the leader of our group,” Henry explained. “And you will recognize Martha, the woman who disappeared shortly before I did. Martha?” Henry yelled into the shadows beyond. “Where are you?”

“Sorry, sorry, just getting everything ready for tonight,” she replied as she entered from a different side passage.

“I know you probably have a lot of questions,” Martin acknowledged. “But we only have about an hour until the Shadows come. You slept for quite a while. I’ll try to explain your most pressing concerns before we leave.”

Theo had so many questions. “How did I get here?”

“We have these small darts that put people to sleep. A leftover from a bygone age. We couldn’t just walk into the village and openly recruit you to join us. We’re all presumed dead. We wanted you far away before you saw Henry alive, so no one would hear you if you screamed. Anyways, time is short. Have you heard of the Before?”

“A little,” Theo answered, still confused.

“Good. The Shadows, as far as we can tell, are remnants of the war, who attack the village every night. Some are physical beasts, like giant wolves, while the most dangerous ones are made of nothing but thick mists, yet can attack like a powerful human. We fight with traditional weapons, like swords and bows, and we also have the sleep darts, as well as certain noises that scare off the beasts. The moaning of the Shadows that you’ve heard at night? That’s us, scaring the Shadows away. The real Shadows are silent, and that is what makes them so dangerous.”

“But why me?” Theo had to ask. “I’m no warrior.”

“Sadly, my dear friend Bridget passed two nights ago. She was killed by a mist Shadow, one she bravely held back while the rest of us were focused on fighting a huge beast on the other side of the village walls. By the time we reached her, it was too late.” At this, Martin’s eyes filled with tears. Martha continued the story.

“We need four people to hold back the Shadows. It is not as bad in the summer, but still, Martin and I barely held back the Shadows on our own while Henry left to get you.”

“So I did hear your voice last night!” Theo exclaimed, turning to Henry.

“It was Henry all right,” Martha confirmed. “Don’t worry, you aren’t losing your mind.”

“The Shadows keep getting worse every year, and we don’t know why. I’ve been fighting Shadows for over four decades, and this is the worst year yet. That’s why we needed you,” Martin said. “We choose people who love music, because they have already chosen to be different from the rest of the village, and are more likely to be willing to do something even stranger by fighting shadows. Unfortunately, because people who create music go missing, the townsfolk now believe that the Shadows crave music and take those who create it. Yet the Shadows don’t want music, I don’t think. We use instruments to make noises that scare them away. What the Shadows want, I don’t know, but their drive for violence is an endless battle we fight every night, and every night, the battle gets harder,” Martin shook his head, as if clearing his mind. “Now, I can’t waste time wondering at the mysteries of the Shadows. We need to head down to the city gates.”

The others rushed around, packing bags and donning weapons. “You don’t need to do anything tonight,” Henry promised. “You can just watch and learn. My first night was a little rough, but I know you can do this.”

\* \* \*

It was just after dusk and the city gates were closed by the time they reached the walls. Martin, Martha and Henry spread out around the circular village. "You'll stay with Henry tonight," Martin explained. "Everything should be fine, but take this, just in case," he added as he handed Theo a bow and a quiver of arrows. "Henry mentioned that you were pretty good at archery."

Theo accepted the weapon with thanks and moved to join Henry in front of the gates. "The Shadows will come soon," Henry explained. "Just a few small ones at first, then more and more, until you're ready to collapse from exhaustion. As the sun peaks on the horizon, they all fade into nothingness, and then we go home, sleep, and prepare to do it all over again."

"I'm not sure I can do this," Theo replied, "but I guess I have to try. And, I'd rather be in danger with you than safe but alone." They had talked on the walk over, and caught up on four years of lost time in the way in which only best friends can manage. It was as if Henry had never left.

The first Shadows arrived, wolves with pointed teeth and hatred in their eyes. Henry shot them easily as they ran, one by one, from over the distant hills, and as the arrows dug into their skin, they faded into mist. The Shadows slowly came in greater numbers, wolves and strange beasts with the strength of a bear but the dexterity of a deer, who easily sprang away from Henry's arrows. Henry pulled a horn from his pocket and blew, making the moaning sound that had kept Theo awake for many long nights. Upon hearing it, the beasts turned and ran, back over the distant hills and into the forest beyond.

It was close to halfway through the night when Theo saw his first mist Shadow. It was a thing of terror, humanoid but not human, there but not there at the same time. Arrows passed through it and it ignored Henry's horn. It was eventually slayed with a strong swing of Henry's sword. As Henry tired, Theo helped him keep up, shooting arrows at the lesser beasts. But the beasts just kept coming, and they soon found themselves pressed up side by side against one half of the city gates.

"There's never been this many before," Henry panted. "I don't know what's happening."

Theo was terrified, but he tried to keep a brave face. "We can do this. It's not that long until sunrise."

WHAM!

With a tremendous crash, a huge bear-like beast broke through the other half of the gates, and ran down the street beyond into the village.

Henry's eyes widened in terror. He drew out a whistle, blowing three quick blasts. "That will tell the others to come help. Come on, we need to stop it!" They took off running after the giant beast, Henry slaying others with his sword when they tried to pass him. The bear turned right, and then turned again, following a path as if it was seeking something. All the other Shadows behind Henry and Theo were also following the same route.

"Are we heading towards my house?" Theo said in disbelief as they turned onto his street.

His question was answered as the beast started pounding at the wooden door of his home, breaking through it with a crash. Henry and Theo raced in as it ran directly for the bedroom of Theo's parents, who had been woken by the city gates breaking open. They cowered in fear under the looming giant beast. Henry quickly slayed it, but five more crowded in to take its place. It felt like all the Shadows had followed them to this house. But why?

Theo's mother realized, despite her terror, that her son, who she had presumed had been taken by the Shadows, was alive. "Theo! You're back!" she said with relief and joy.

With her hope, the Shadows were pushed back. Only a little bit, and only for an instant, but Theo noticed. Then his father saw him. "Theo! You're alive!" The Shadows were pushed back again, a little further this time.

Something in Theo's brain clicked. The Shadows could be repelled by hope! "We can do this!" he yelled, as bravely as he could. "The Shadows fear hope. If we think positively, maybe we can hold them back until sunrise!" His parents looked at him skeptically, but Henry, in the way only best friends can, immediately understood.

"We make a great Shadow fighting team," he screamed. "And we are NOT afraid of you!" The Shadows fell back a few feet.

"This is my home, not yours," Theo shouted. "I can keep it safe from Shadows!" At this point, Martin and Martha arrived, both badly wounded and actively fighting Shadows. They immediately noticed the Shadow-free circle around Henry, Theo and his parents.

"What did you do?" Martin asked incredulously.

"The Shadows fear hope," Theo explained. "Yell something confident and hopeful, and they'll back off."

"You really figured out a way to defeat the Shadows?" Martha asked, impressed but disbelieving. The Shadows near her were pushed back a bit.

"See, that's how it works," Henry said enthusiastically. "We can do this!" The Shadows were pushed back even further.

As night turned to dawn, the four Shadow fighters walked the streets of their village, pushing the Shadows far, far away. Theo's parents, and other villagers, joined in, and the last of the Shadows were pushed through the city gates just as the sun crested the horizon.

"We did it. We really did it," Henry said, turning to Theo with a smile.

"Everything makes sense now," Theo commented. "Since people have been talking less about the Before, and fearing music more, there has been more fear, and less hope, so the Shadows have gotten worse. My parents were very fearful after they thought I was taken, so the Shadows went to their house. Now that we know hope can drive the Shadows back, they shouldn't be a problem anymore."

"But the Shadows always come at night," Theo's mother responded, not understanding. "It's the way the world is."

"The Shadows *used to* come at night," Theo corrected. "But we can stop them. Together."

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### Final Flight

By: Alina Kotchetkov (Gr. 12)

*more* inside

The sound of the violin filled the air with its rich, melodious melody, as my fingers danced between the strings, the bow swaying back and forth under the gaze of the bright hospital lights. I was lost in the music, not even noticing the incessant beeping of the heart monitor or the rolling of beds and heavy machinery down the hallways. At the final note, I shifted my gaze up to look at my little sister, struggling to sit up in her bed. Considering all the pain she must have been feeling, it was astounding how she could manage a smile bright enough to light up the night sky.

“Wow! You’re amazing Matteo! Did you write this song yourself?” She beamed.

“You like it? This one is called *Aria Della Vita*,” I reply, returning the delicate wooden instrument to its case.

“Aw, how sweet of them to name such a beautiful song after me.”

I looked over at her, glancing at the mess of IV tubes intertwined with her arms. Cancer had taken everything from her; it had eaten away at her body, stolen her independence, and now threatened to finally consume her life. But the one thing it couldn’t take away was her smile. I gazed at her bright eyes, flecked with sparkles of sunlight on open water, as she giggled, lighting up the entire room. After everything she’d been through, her laugh was still warm like the colour of autumn as the leaves started to fall, and I felt my heart ache for the years she would never be able to live. For the life I would have to live without her.

“Quite the concert you were having just now,” the doctor remarked as she walked in. “Must be pretty special to have a performer like this one all to yourself!”

“Yep! Guess not everyone can be as lucky as me,” she grinned. Ironic, seeing as she was the one tethered to the bed.

The doctor laughed along with her, checking over her vitals. She seemed to come in less and less as of recently, and although I avoided thinking about it, I was starting to anticipate the day we would have to leave this room for the last time.

“Matteo, could I talk to you for a second?” she said, turning to me. I tried to read her tone, noticing she was trying to keep it light in front of Aria, but I could tell there was a hint of something more somber underneath. She pulled me out into the hallway, where her expression finally fell. “I’m so sorry, but... it doesn’t look like Aria’s going to make it.” The lump in my throat was threatening to choke me, and I fought down the urge to throw up. I was trapped in a room with a glass ceiling, floor, and walls. Beyond the smooth surface, a furious

cloud of grief swirled around in a violent, thrashing storm, threatening to shatter the walls that surrounded me.

“Are you absolutely sure? Is there nothing left to try? Anything at all?” I pleaded, my voice breaking on that last word, trying desperately to grab on to that last sliver of hope that was keeping the walls up. I looked through the frame to see Aria to see her fiddling with her chemo cap, the one I had knitted for her when she first had to go into treatment. She was so innocent. She didn’t deserve any of this. How would the news destroy her when she found out?

“I’m sorry Matteo. The cancer has spread to her lungs and is spreading rapidly. She fought as hard as she could, but sometimes... things just spiral out of our control. I think the best thing we can do now is to make her comfortable in her final moments.” *Final moments.* These words echoed around my skull as I racked my brain for any kind of emotional explanation. I’ve considered every possibility hundreds of times, trying my best to prepare myself for the worst, but even with all of that, the pain of my splintering heart was still too much to bear.

I looked back into the room. Aria was now fiddling with the violin case. It had always been her favourite instrument, and she made it her mission to master its art after she had fully recovered. I added that to the list of dreams and promises she made to herself that she would never fulfill and I broke down just outside the door.

On the drive home, I could feel the emotions welling up inside of me, and it took every fibre of my being to stop the tears from flowing. But I would not break in front of her. I made a vow to be strong for her, and I would honour that until my final breath. Aria was sitting in the passenger seat, watching the landscape outside as it zoomed past her in a blur of trees and road signs. I wondered how she was holding up after finding out. If I could barely even keep myself from falling apart, how on Earth was she taking it herself?

“Hey Matty, what’s the craziest dream you’ve ever had?” I gave her a puzzled look and asked her what she meant. “Like, have you ever wondered what it would be like to fly? To see the world beneath you, the rush of wind past your body, the freedom to go wherever you want instead of being pulled back down to the ground. I think that’s my biggest dream.” She paused, and continued: “Do you think I will be able to do that when I die?” Oh god, what was I even supposed to say to that? I swallowed hard and wrenched my eyes back to the road. I hadn’t said anything for a minute before the silence started eating away at my insides. “I don’t know,” I whispered quietly. “I don’t know.” Neither of us said anything for the rest of the trip, and only when she finally fell asleep did I let the tears slip out, and I cried hard for the first time in many years.

Our parents had died five years prior. She was seven, and I was thirteen. I won’t go into the details, but long story short, alcohol was involved, someone was going too fast, and

there was a huge crash. None of them survived. Since then, Aria and I have been living alone in the old house. After a while, I'd become a sort of replacement parent to her. Not that I minded. Despite our age gap, she was my best friend, and not a single day was dull when she was by my side. I spent countless evenings hunched over her homework with her while I pretended I understood math better than I really did. On weekends, we escaped into the woods behind our house, hiking until her legs got tired and she made me carry her on my back. I packed her lunches, built pillow forts with her, and played my violin for her when the nights felt too big. She was my only family left, and on the night we cried each other to sleep at the news of our parents' deaths, I swore that I would do everything to protect her until the day that I die. But could I protect her now? Against something infecting her body and consuming her from the inside?

Aria spent the majority of the following week anchored in her bed, only leaving periodically to go to use the bathroom. I came to her several times per day to bring her food and check on her health. But with each visit, I could see her growing fainter and weaker. Her cheekbones were pressed tightly against the skin of her face, and her small figure seemed to fade with each breath she took. It didn't help that her appetite was all but gone. But despite the loneliness and sorrow she must have been feeling, I found myself slowly withdrawing from her. The dark, angry cloud of grief was beating hard against the glass, and I could see fractures forming from the stress all around my glass box. So, I turned away. I numbed myself to the feelings, refusing to acknowledge the storm writhing around right in front of me. I felt listless around her, conversations felt awkward and robotic, my visits would get increasingly shorter, and I often felt myself avoiding facing her in her room. At every sight of her, I had to fight the sharp reminder of the void I would be living for the rest of my life. But whatever I did, I refused to reveal my true pain to her. I would smile at her and consistently reassure her that I was okay, and she didn't need to worry about me. If she was forced to fight for her own life, I wouldn't allow her to carry the weight of my heart breaking on top of everything else.

"Matteo, do you remember that lookout point?" Aria asked, laying back with her head on her pillow, arms folded behind her. She looked so... carefree. I wondered how she could be so calm when our entire world was crumbling around us.

"Of course I do, that was our favourite hiking spot for years," I replied. There was this one nature trail in the Haliburton Highlands that Aria and I would visit every month or so. We'd hike up for hours through the twisting trees, branches and dead leaves crunching beneath our feet. The damp, earthy smell of pine, wildflowers, and decaying wood filled the air of our ascent, at the summit, there stood our lookout point. It was a stretch of open stone surrounded by a ring of trees that hung over the edge of a vast escarpment. There was a metal railing built around the edge of the rock, and one of those coin-operated binocular machines bolted to the ground. And the view from the top was unlike anything we'd ever laid eyes on before. There was an immense valley that rose up into a towering cliff face, with trees clustered together around the landscape. Hundreds of feet below, the crystal waters of the

river carved their way through the Earth, and if you brought a camera, there was a good chance you'd get a master shot of birds soaring through the open expanse of air.

"That's probably my favourite place on this whole planet. I remember the time you brought your violin and played at the top. The music echoed throughout the entire valley, and by the time you finished, those two birds landed on the railing right next to us." she said.

"A cardinal and a robin. Yeah, I remember. You thought it was like magic. That my violin could summon birds. I guess that would be pretty cool." I replied.

"You know, that moment was so magical that it was the reason I decided that I wanted to learn to play the violin." She added.

I turned my head to look at her, and she pushed herself up against the headboard to look at me more clearly, the corners of her mouth turned up. Despite her withered frame, her eyes remained just as bright as that day up the top of the escarpment. They twinkled like two flickering candles in a vibrant sea of amber.

Her words melted my heart, and I felt the familiar sensation of a crack forming inside of me. "I'm glad I could be your inspiration." I said. But I didn't deserve to be anyone she could look up to. "Why'd you think of that moment?" I followed up, trying to change the subject.

"Well, I've been thinking about death a lot, and-"

"*Don't* say another word about it." I cut her off, the words coming out harsh and cold. I snapped my mouth as I realized what I had just done. I looked at my sister, horrified, and watched her shrink against the bed frame. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." I tried to say, but my voice faltered as I saw her eyes turn wide and frightful. I retreated out of the room to the safety of my own and leaned against my door, gripping at my hair with my shaking hands. I started hyperventilating, panicking about lashing out at Aria. It wasn't her fault. She was the one in that situation, not me. Who was I to get angry when I was the only one she could depend on now? I couldn't even talk to her now without the fear of slipping up again. How pathetic. She was the one in that bed, bright eyed and cheerful, and I was becoming a shell of myself just by being in her presence. In trying so desperately to be her strength, I was unravelling into something fragile, frightening, and unfit to protect her.

By the next week, I was completely falling apart. With each passing day, more and more cracks seeped into the glass walls, and I could feel the grief begin to slime its way through, clawing desperately through the crevices to drown me alive. I would be awake for hours at night, wrestling to shut off my mind and plummet into the darkness of slumber only to be jolted awake by violent nightmares I would have no memory of once I had woken up. Simple tasks, like showering or going out of the house took immense, overwhelming effort, and eventually I stopped leaving altogether. As long as we had food delivered, I wouldn't need

to set foot outside the safety of our home. When I wasn't with Aria, I was holed up in my room, listlessly collapsed on my bed. My lifeless eyes were surrounded with profound, sunken circles hollowing out my eye sockets, my muscles were numb and nonfunctioning, and the hopelessness in my heart drilled deeper and deeper into my consciousness until there was nothing but a dark abyss. I blamed myself every minute of the waking day for not dying instead of her. I should have been the one struggling to breathe, not her. I should have done something, but I was too helpless to do anything but sit there and mourn. If I had been stronger, and if I had been there for her, maybe she wouldn't be suffering right now. It should have been me. I should have died instead.

I was back in the box, surrounded by a network of fractures twisting through the walls. The angry cloud outside seemed thicker, darker, *stronger*. It had been building up its strength in the time that I'd been weakened, and I watched in horror as it slammed itself against the walls again and again and again. I heard a sickening crack as the glass finally gave way, shattering into thousands of crystalline pieces. The storm was upon me, enveloping me in the thrashing darkness. The air grew heavy, thick as tar, filling my lungs until each breath burned. The darkness pressed in from every direction, crushing me with impossible strength, curling around my wrists and throat like living smoke. I tried to push it away, but the storm poured into every crack, every hollow space I'd tried to keep sealed. Memories flashed through it, shattered and distorted as faces, voices, moments I'd buried deep, whipped past me in violent spirals. I was sinking now, dragged under by the weight of it all, my thoughts blurring as the deafening roar swallowed me whole. The storm raged to consume me, until there was nothing left but the cold, endless dark.

Just as I succumbed to my fate, something warm cut through the dark. A hand reached through the storm, slicing like a blade to reveal a crack of light. I curled my hand around it and pulled. The pressure around me eased as I rose, the roaring storm dulling into a distant echo. Light filtered back in, thin at first, then clearer, until the weight in my chest loosened and air finally filled my lungs. When I broke the surface, gasping and shaking, I was back in my bedroom, grasping the thin, bony hand of my sister.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, her face riddled with fear. I didn't answer her. She had walked all this way, in that state, to come help me. The realization settled heavily in my chest as I held her hand. I could feel her trembling, feel the effort it had taken for her just to be there, and shame washed over me in slow, suffocating waves. She wasn't supposed to be the one pulling me back. Yet there she was. Fragile, frightened, and still choosing to help me, while I sat there shaking, trying to remember how to breathe. Her legs collapsed as she fell to the ground, and I leaped out of my bed to catch her. She weighed nothing but a feather. I held her in my arms and stroked her shoulder gingerly. The walls I put up to shield her from my emotions finally came tumbling down, and I felt tears well up in my eyes.

“I’m okay now, thanks to you.” I smiled, and for the first time since that car ride, I cried. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I was supposed to stay strong for you. I was supposed to be there for you. You don’t deserve to die. I should be the one in your place,” I sobbed, tears streaming down my face. I held her tightly against my chest, revisiting all the moments I wasted with my pathetic excuses. I wasn’t being strong for her at all. I was just running away from my own emotions, and in the process, I ran away from her. Aria wiped at her own eyes, and replied, “Matty, I never blamed you for anything. You’re the most important thing to me, and you don’t owe me anything. I mean it when I say I’m the luckiest girl alive. I may not get to live as long, but the life I’ve had has been filled with more love than most people ever get. And I’m so glad,” Aria said, her voice starting to break, “...that I got to be your sister in this life.”

“Me too, Aria. Me too.”

I held on to her tightly in her final hours, feeling her breath drawing fainter and fainter until finally, it faded into nothing. Then, I felt my eyes growing heavy as the light and sounds of the outside world dissipated until everything went dark.

When I came to, I was lying down in the middle of a musty dirt path, dead leaves rustling beneath my body as I got to my feet. I looked around, noticing an unmistakable earthy smell wafting through the air. *Pine, wildflowers, and decaying wood.* I walked up the path through the tunnel of trees, and sure enough, at the very top was the stone plateau, rising above the rest of the world. I climbed up to the top and looked up to see a sky full of stars like scattered moondust in the sky. I had never been here at night, and the sky was unlike anything I’d seen before. It was lit up like glittering diamonds in the sunlight, and the moon, a ghostly bluish white, gleamed with an ethereal tone, reflecting its glow in the rippling waters below.

A crow landed on the railing, its feathers swallowing the light like a void given shape. I cautiously approached it, when it spoke.

“Hello Matteo,” the sound reverberated around my ears, and I felt a fear unlike any I had felt before in my life.

“Who are you?” I asked, planting my feet firmly on the ground. I felt a shiver travel up my spine, but I refused to fold.

“I think you know the answer to that.” it answered.

“Why did you take her?” I demanded. “It’s not fair. She was young and healthy. She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“You’re right. It’s not fair. But this is the way things are. Everyone has their own set existence on your planet, and you choose how you want to live with the time you are given. And when your time is up, I will bring you to the next life.”

I clenched my jaw, feeling a bubble of rage boiling up inside of me. “But you can give her back. She had so much left to live. Just give her a little more time.” I pleaded.

“I can promise you she will be happy in this next life. She was a kind soul.” it replied. I began to protest, but it cut me off. “And what have you been doing for her in her final weeks?” it boomed. “I have been watching you, and I am thoroughly disappointed. You were supposed to support her, care for her, and make her feel loved. Instead, she was filled with the dread and sorrow of losing her brother as he slipped away and buried himself in his own, self-pitying thoughts.” I stepped back and looked down, the guilt spreading through my body like ink bleeding through water. “Life cannot exist without death, and death not without life. I understand your pain, Matteo, but being missed so much is the price for having been loved so deeply. You cared for her, and she carried that love with her until her last breath. It will be hard but know that she will have peace.” The bird looked me in the eyes, and I noticed they were filled with tiny dancing lights, like its eyes were lit up with the very soul of the universe. “Death isn’t the end of life, Matteo. It is simply the beginning of the next chapter.”

I stared at the bird, its bright, kind eyes giving me solace. “Could you just... let me say goodbye? One last time?” I asked.

It tilted its beak up in consideration, before flying off into the distance. When it was out of sight, a voice echoed throughout the valley, “We will meet again, Matteo. At the end of your road.”

“Matteo!” a voice exclaimed from behind me.

I whipped around to see Aria standing there, her body rejuvenated back to full health, like she hadn’t ever been sick in her life. She was wrapped in a flowing white dress, pure like the stars up above. The moonlight silvered the delicate strands of her dark hair, and her eyes caught the blaze like the water down below. “You’re here, you’re here! Isn’t this such a wonderful dream?” she asked? I looked down to see her clutching my violin in her hands.

“Yeah, Aria. It is.” I choked, fighting to keep the tears back. “Remember how you played the violin here? I found it, so you can do it again!” she chirped. I took the wooden vessel of music into my own hands and smiled warmly at her. “Anything for you, Aria.” This would be my final performance to her, so I promised to make it count.

I drew the bow across the strings, and each note spilled into the night like a shimmer of mist blowing through the air. The wind carried the sounds through the trees, stirring leaves that whispered back in soft harmony. The music echoed through the valley just like that performance years ago, and the world around us stilled at my final note. I set my violin down as Aria rushed over to give me a hug.

“I love you Aria. I love you so very much. More than you could ever know.” I felt the stinging of tears fighting in my eyes.

“Don’t be sad Matty! It’s okay! It’s just a dream. I’ll wake up and give you an even bigger hug when I see you in the morning!” She beamed.

“Of course, Aria,” I said, sniffing between words. “Uh huh. I’ll see you then.” my voice breaking. I pulled her closer and held her in one last embrace. I glanced up to notice two birds flying overhead. A cardinal and a robin. I turned around, expecting to see them perched upon the railing, but instead, there stood two people I hadn’t seen in a very long time.

“Mom! Dad!” Aria cried, running toward them. They walked towards us, intercepting her in their arms. Such a beautiful dream. We walked towards each other, their faces warm against the cool night air. Mom was wearing a red blouse, and Dad a black suit with orange accents. They wrapped me in a hug, and the four of us were together again for that brief moment.

“I missed you so much,” I whispered, pulling back from the hug. My mom brushed her hand against my cheek. “Take good care of her, okay?” I asked.

The two of them smiled and dad replied, “She’ll be just fine. We won’t let anything happen to her for as long as we live.” It was time for me to let them go. “I love you. I love you all so much.” I said. I stepped back towards the path and turned around one last time. The three of them had disappeared, and flying off into the distance were three birds: a cardinal, a robin, and a dove.

“Goodbye, Aria.”

The house seemed so empty and cold without her presence. Like a void had been left behind with her departure. I spent my time picking my life back up: working on my college applications, reconnecting with old friends, and working on my own health at the gym. I still go back up to the lookout point every now and then, imagining Aria flying into the sky like she’d always dreamed of doing. I hoped she was okay. I knew eventually I would join her. Her, Mom, and Dad. But for now, they’d have to wait. I would keep going for them, and one day, I’d join them having lived a life full of everything they deserved.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### The Trials of Scorpion Isle By: Lauren Baldassi (Gr. 9)

*more* inside

*In glowing, bioluminescent caves,  
Monsters and creatures will measure your fear,  
With stalagmites, stalactites and wild waves,  
So only the brave will find treasure here.*

*Underneath the shoreline, covered in sand,  
Scorpions shall emerge, they'll steal your health,  
Perhaps a protector, their stingers grand,  
So risk-takers only will unearth wealth.*

*On the highest point of the rocky cliff,  
Your precious jewels are many feet deep,  
And you must have your wits about you, if,  
Valuables are what you want to keep.*

*The riches and golds will be worth your while,  
But, can you make it, on Scorpion Isle?*

The briny sea air is thick on this island, the deep blue churning with the wind and incoming storm. We're finally here, on the land with claims of boundless riches and treasures; Scorpion Isle.

"I've spent sleepless nights studyin' Sir Alexander's work from his seafaring, and I've come up with a map." Says the expedition leader, reaching in his jacket pocket. He pulls out a small black sack. "Findin' this map ought to be as easy as findin' an ant's eyeball on a beach," he retorts, grabbing the map from the sack, and with the flick of his wrist, the paper unfurls.

I move closer to read it. The paper is covered in his messy and blotchy handwriting, and I wonder if he was bombed when he charted this. The section labeled to the northeast is covered in jagged lines, starting with a small peak reaching a crescendo labeled "**THE ROCKY CLIFF**". The section by the west side is a collection of dark arcs in the base of a mountain, "**THE CAVES**". At the top of the paper, to the northernmost point of the island is a long flat line labeled "**THE SHORE**".

He rolls the map closed. "I betta not see none of ye slackin' off on this trip. Creatures here will eat 'cha alive! 'Safest place to look is the northeast cliffs, and bear up, ye scum, for anyone who travels with me will get a large portion o' the booty I find!" A part of me doesn't understand why he wouldn't just want to search the caves first, though it isn't worth the trouble to argue. I watch as everyone moves to stand by him, but if the legend is called, "The Trials of Scorpion Isle," it has to be in an order –

“... what about Helena?” My name startles me back to reality. “She hasn’t agreed to come with us, Solomon.” My friend Elisabeth tells the lead explorer, “Are we leaving without her?”

Solomon purses his lips for a moment. “O’ course not. I was just wonderin’ why she’s makin’ faces when we’re about to go get loot.”

I feel the tension in my forehead too late, and relax my eyebrows. “Well, it’s n-nothing... I just believe the legend is scripted in order,” I tell them. “I want to travel first to the caves.”

“Alone? If ya sure, Helena,” he turns his back to me, and I feel helpless. I try to tell them that I take back what I said, but I can’t get a single word in over Solomon’s thick accented commands.

“Wait!” I shout, and he faces me again. “I will travel alone to the caves, but... I ask you to *rediez-vous* by the shoreline.”

“...Fine.” he finally says, and his eyes narrow, giving me an unspoken warning: this defiance will show in how much gold you receive from this loot. They walk off, and for only a moment, Elisabeth gives me a sorry glance before she fades in the misty distance with everyone else to trek to the highest cliffs.

With a small compas in hand, I force myself to walk, and I don’t let myself wonder what happens when I enter the caves.

\* \* \*

Fresh mud filters through my nose, causing me to cough. Before I entered this cave, I created a torch. I lighted some driftwood with magnesium I brought, and it acts as my lifeline in the dark. I walk carefully in fear of falling into the icy stream rapidly flowing to the right of me.

I repeat the legend over and over again. I feel a tinge of hope when my voice begins to echo, a sign the cave has opened up to a larger space. “In glowing, bioluminescent caves, monsters and creatures will measure your fear – “

I feel something squish under my foot. I put my torch over my boot and...

I scream so loud I hear it reverbrate through the air. I’ve stepped on a huge insect glowing an electric blue. I’ve dropped my torch into the water and the flame has been snuffed out.

The creatures are bugs. *I’m not going to make it out of here.*

Suddenly, thousands of glowing blue dots illuminate in the cave ceiling, casting an otherworldly glow. I see that the stream beside me has flown into a large basin of water,

surrounded by huge crystals and vines. The air around me feels humid. Is this a glowworm cave?

I look around for treasure, but from my peripheral I see a lengthy, sinewy monster approaching me. I feel a scream build in my throat. "Hello," it says, and its voice sounds so coarse my hand instinctively rubs my neck. For a second, I wonder if it's afraid of me, before I smarten up and reach for the small blade in the pouch of my belt.

"Now, now, you can ssssheathe your weapon. You won't need it for thissss trial." it whispers, extending a webbed hand to me. "Come on, sssssshake my hand."

I put the knife back into my pocket, and I tentatively grab its hand with my own. I feel a slimy residue on its hands, and I swallow back down bile threatening to rise into my mouth. "You don't have to sssstay and chat ssssince the cave exit isssss ahead, but that meanssssss you'd take your chancesssss through the pathssssss in the dark. Ssssssoooo... leave or sssstay?"

"I'll s-stay," I stammer.

A grotesque smile twists its face. "Good, I'm ssssssooo glad." It pulls me by my arm to two small rocks by the ledge of the water and makes me sit on one. It sits across from me. "My name issssss Kyra. Tell me about yourssself...why are you here?"

"My n-name is Helena, and, w-well, I'm here for treasure," I mumble, and it cocks its head as if to ask me, *Why alone?* I feel words begin to spill out of my mouth. "I'm alone because the expedition team I came with all went to the mountain cliff. I told them it would be s-smart to go to the caves, and then I tried to take back what I said, but they kept talking over me, and I had no choice but to go alone..." I catch myself forgetting what I'm talking to, a gaunt monster with a hungry stare.

"I'm sssssssory to hear that. That doesss sssound like quite the predicament," It frowns. "Then, why did you come here? What doesss the treasure do for you?"

"...I-I'm not sure. It's been cold here, and dark, and..." I stare up at the creature. "...scary. I thought that maybe I would find treasure here but I haven't found anything. I wanted to prove to them that I could do things and I should be taken s-seriously, but I don't think this was worth the t-trouble." I find myself again forgetting that I should be terrified, but Kyra stares at me with an almost empathetic expression.

"Are they really your team, though, if you feel like you alwaysss have to prove your worth to them?" Kyra steps off of the rock they were sitting on, and they crawl into the water. I feel a strange urge to ask them to wait, and I realise I've grown a connection to a serpentine demon.

I feel a current pick up underneath my feet, and I quickly climb onto the rock. A faint purple glow emanates from the water. As glowworms on the ceiling glow brighter, a young girl

emerges from the basin, a small amethyst gemstone shimmering in the centre of her forehead.

“I believe I’ve gotten to know you well enough for you to get to know me,” The girl says, and I realise that this is Kyra, in a beautiful human form. My mind ceases to work. “I’m a shapeshifter, the gemstone in my forehead is an artifact from the underwater ruins of Meuros that allow me to take on many forms.” I have to grab onto a nearby stalagmite to steady myself. “I think that maybe I can help you with my story. If you want to stay and listen, of course.”

I feel myself nod before I can stop myself. “Good. When I was younger, I lived with my sisters in Thalaria, the mermaid coves. I felt unsatisfied under the water, so when I heard about an artifact that would allow all of my siblings and I to explore the surface freely, I dreamed about leaving. I told them about the stories, but I would get ignored, and I felt them brand me as the reckless youngest daughter who only wanted to rebel against her father. One day, I had enough, and without a word of goodbye, I left.”

“The trials of Meuros were perilous, and after effort, I found a piece of the ancient artifact to connect to me. I fulfilled my dreams of escaping confinement, however, I soon became bored of living nomadic life, and wanted a place to make home. One day, when I was swimming in a mermaid form searching for a place to rest, I saw a frightening looking sailor approach on his boat. He was covered in battle scars. I thought he wanted to hunt me, but then he shouted at me to wait and said he wanted to talk to me. He was an adventurer wanting to learn more about the ocean. We exchanged information and he told me about a small island rumoured to have enchanting caves... I realised how kind he was after I got to know him. The monsters you see in your path are oftentimes blessings in disguise. He is the reason I found this sanctuary.”

“Treasure can only be found if you're willing to find it, and sometimes the path to success is littered with horrors you have to face. You should go to the shore next, as the rest of your crew has already searched the rocky cliff. The scorpions underneath the sand won't hurt you, but they protect something both valuable and metallic. Find this treasure for you, Helena, even if it means doing it alone. Prove it to yourself.” With a wave of her hand, boulders shift and outside light floods through the cave.

I feel my heart jolt at the word “metallic”. The treasure is at the shore. I don't even have time to thank her; I'm already running to the exit.

\* \* \*

I see my team before they see me. When Elisabeth finally notices me, she walks towards me. Exhaustion seeps into her eyes, her hair dirty, wet and matted. “Helena... I was...worried about you.” she says between huffs of breath. “We didn't...find anything... up there.”

“I didn’t find anything in the caves either, so the treasure is here somewhere.” I look around, to the piles of sunbaked driftwood, or the washed-up seaweed, and to the blue waters beating on the shore. The sand is freshly wet from the rain.

Solomon approaches us, and I see his eyes widen. I know he’s surprised that I made it out. “Helena, ya didn’t find the treasure, then... Well, blow me down! The loot, it’s here! I’ve done it!”

He rushes us around the sand dunes, and we all start looking in a clearing of sand where Elisabeth saw stray scorpion stingers. I dig with a sort of newfound hope as Solomon cheers, telling us of how much gold we’ll all have. I can’t even think about telling him to *belay* because I can taste the excitement, too.

“I feel it! I feel somethin’ metal!” He says, and he pulls something out of the ground. His screams of delight turn into screams of terror when hundreds of black scorpions crawl over what he just retrieved from the ground, their stingers sharper than needles. I scramble away from them, crawling on my back.

“Avast! All of ye!” He shouts at us, and I still. I hadn’t realised that everyone else had run away from the scorpions as well. “It seems as if ye have forgotten the legend... *Risk-takers only will unearth wealth*. This is the booty, the jewels and goblets and gems! Whoever gets up and takes the *wealth* these scorpions are guardin’ will get 25% of it to themselves!” More scorpions emerge from the ground to protect whatever was buried. “I’ll give ye thirty seconds... before I go alone and cut ya share by a quarter!”

*They won’t hurt you*, Kyra’s voice replays in my mind, and I slowly stand up. I take a shaky step forward. I’ll show them I can do this. I keep walking until the black swarm of stingers is just below my feet. I reach for the object and I shut my eyes.

*Underneath the shoreline, covered in sand,*

My fingers gently close on the object.

*Scorpions shall emerge, they’ll steal your health,*

They won’t hurt me.

*Perhaps a protector, their stingers grand,*

I lift the object up from the ground.

*So risk-takers only will unearth wealth.*

I hear someone gasp. I did it, I got the treasure! I open my eyes, my heartbeat racing, and I look down at my hands.

The scorpions have fallen, revealing an old corroded shovel. I drop it into the sand...I've failed. I look back at Solomon, who kicks sand, groaning. He mutters something about how this was a useless effort, and I feel shame gnawing inside of me.

"I'll be at the boat," he says with his back turned away from me, "anyone who wants to stay searchin', we'll wait a good 10 minutes for ya. But there ain't nothin' here anyways." He walks off into the distance. The team walks with him, holding their heads down. Elisabeth lingers, and reaches to give me a hug.

She whispers frantically to me, "Helena, he'll give you a silent goodbye if you don't come back with us now..." Her voice fades out for me. They were going to abandon me here with no way out? "He won't wait..." She urges me to come with her, but I wonder if she stood up for me.

"Did you do anything to stop him?" I ask her, and she looks away from me. I can't believe she wouldn't even... *try*.

"He was certain. It wouldn't end well for me to argue. Please, there was nothing to find at the rocky cliff..." she insists, when I notice something scrawled in the sand.

### **GO TO PEAK OF MOUNTAIN WITH SHOVEL, FIND GOLD.**

A small scorpion uses their stinger to add the period. Are the scorpions... writing?

"...the ground was all hard, and none of our shovels would work..." she rambles on, and I grab her shoulders.

"Elisabeth, what if we use the old shovel to dig? What if *that's* the wealth? Maybe it's like a key –"

"*Helena!* I'm sorry, but this... *won't* work. I have to go. Answer now: leave with me, or stay here."

### **CLIFF GROUND ONLY SOFT WITH SHOVEL. IT IS MORE THAN APPEARANCE.**

I see more words scratched into the sand, scorpions piling by the broken sentence. I remind myself of what Kyra said to me back in the caves, *Find this treasure for you, Helena, even if it means doing it alone. Prove it to yourself.* "No...I need to stay.

Elisabeth runs off towards the small sailboat we all arrived in. Her shrill voice calls her crew to wait, and I pick up the rusty shovel in my hand.

### **THERE IS TREASURE AT THE ROCKY CLIFF.**

The scorpions retreat back into the sand, leaving me a final message. I set off alone, but this time I don't hesitate. I walk, and I don't look back.

\* \* \*

I'm out of breath when I reach the rocky cliff. Towering spruces stand tall against the cloud covered sky. I see the pitiful patches of dirt where my old expedition team dug for treasure.

I drive the old blade into the dirt and it slices through the ground like butter. The scorpions on the shore were right; *The ground is only soft with the shovel, and it's more than its appearance.* I lift the dirt and throw it on the ground by a tree stump, pushing with my body weight, fighting exhaustion to dig and reach this treasure.

I finally hear my blade hit against something hard. I put my head through the hole I've dug, and I see it, a small wooden chest with a patina keyhole and key tied to the chest using hemp string. With hands shaking from excitement, I lift it up, taking a sharp inhale when I feel its weight.

I drop it on the ground, and I think I've done it this time, I've reached treasure. I slice the string apart, and pick the small key in my hands. I carefully place it through the keyhole and...

**CLICK!**

The key works! I worry that I've found an old box of someone's cast-offs, but when I lift the lid of the box I see sparkling, glistening gold. Jewels and amulets, goblets and bracelets, and thousands of small shining coins. I'm in disbelief. I run my hands through the chest, picking up a handful of golden coins and watching them slip through my fingers back into the chest.

I didn't need to let myself be ignored, or to follow what another person says to be successful. I made it. Sometimes, the hardest paths are the ones you take alone, and sometimes, the hardest paths are the ones that lead you to great treasure.

## Senior Division Grades 9-12

### Six Strings

By: Sofiya Yumaguzhina (Gr. 11)

*more* inside

My name is Bennet Braxton. I'm a high school student that goes to a relatively run-down school in northern Ontario. Although I am not a studious student by any means, I still somehow pass my classes. And today, like every other weekday for the last six months, I readied myself and headed to school.

That's the story my teachers tell: "Bennet doesn't try." "Bennet is lazy." They're not exactly wrong, but it's not the whole truth either. Truth is, when I'm not dragging myself through math homework, or scribbling half-finished English notes, I'm at home with my guitar. Six strings, chipped paint, frets worn down from years of practice. I've spent more hours bent over that instrument than I have over any textbook, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

The problem is, school doesn't give you credit for late night riffs or the chord progression makes you feel like you've just cracked the code to the meaning of the universe.

I shuffled down the hallway to my class. Hood up, earbuds jammed in with a melody playing I plan on learning tonight. My school looked the same as always, cracked tiles, flickering fluorescent lights, kids dragging themselves from one class to the next like zombies. I kept my head low. Teachers like to say I don't "apply myself" which is their polite way of saying I was a screw up.

In history, I stared at the clock, tapping my pencil to the rhythm of the riff stuck in my head. Mr. Hechler yapped on about Confederation while I scribbled chord diagrams in the margins of my notes. At this point, I could probably write an entire album in the space meant for Canadian politics.

"Mr. Braxton," Hechler barked. "Could you enlighten us about the Manitoba Act of 1870?"

I blinked, processing the question, "Uh...it was about Manitoba?" A few kids snickered.

Mr. Hetchler sighed, "As I thought. Try to stay with us."

At lunch, I slipped into the music room. It was the only place that felt alive in this school. Instruments leaned against the walls, old sheet music littered the floor and shelves, and the faint smell of varnish hung in the air. I thought I was alone, so I pulled my guitar from its case and started strumming.

I didn't play anything fancy, just a simple tune I'd been working on as a warmup. Something soft, almost like a confession in notes. The kind of thing I'd never be able to say out loud or even put into words if I tried.

"Wow." a voice said.

I nearly dropped the guitar. Standing in the doorway was Mrs. B, the music teacher. She was holding a stack of music sheets, eyes wide open.

"I didn't know you played." She said, stepping into the room.

I shrugged, trying to play it off. "Just messing around."

"That didn't sound like 'messing around.'" She smiled. "Bennet, the school talent show is next week in the cafeteria. You should play."

My stomach dropped. "Yeah, no thanks. "

"Think about it," she said gently. "Sometimes music is meant to be heard."

I spent the rest of the day pretending like her suggestion hadn't rattled me. Me? Playing in front of the entire school? I could barely make it through math class without wanting to disappear. But still, the thought stuck with me. Even as I sat through science, watching the equations blur on the board, I kept imagining what it would feel like. Standing under the stage lights, guitar in my hands, my music filling the room. The idea scared me yet also felt thrilling.

At home that night, I sat cross legged on my bed, guitar balanced on my knee. My fingers moved automatically, chasing the melody I've been sculpting for weeks. Every note carried something different, something I couldn't say out loud. By the time I looked up, hours had gone by and my hands ached, I've realized I wanted people to hear it. I just didn't want to admit that to anyone.

Talent show night came quicker than I expected it. Mrs. B had somehow signed me up despite my protests. I stood backstage, palms sweating, guitar strap digging into my shoulder.

The cafeteria was transformed into a makeshift concert hall. It was full of strings of lights, folding chairs, and a microphone, standing like an executioner's post at the center of the stage.

"Next up, Bennet Braxton." Mrs. B announced.

My stomach twisted. Should I call it quits? No no, I can't do it. I was ready to turn around and leave but my legs carried me onto the stage despite my protests. As I walked onto

the stage, I swore I could hear every whisper, every judgment. Then I sat down, closed my eyes, and let my fingers play the familiar melody.

The first chord rang out, shaky but nonetheless real. My fingers moved from muscle memory, sliding over the frets. At first, I was hyper aware of the silence, dozens of eyes on me. But slowly, the music drowned it all out.

Every note felt like a fresh breath of air, like telling a story I didn't have words for. My hands burned, my chest pounded, but I kept playing, pouring everything I had into those strings.

When I finished, there was a moment of silence. Then the room erupted in applause.

I stumbled offstage, head still buzzing, heart racing. Jonah, the new kid I barely knew, slapped me on the back.

"Dude, that was insane! Why didn't you tell anyone you could play like that?"

I chuckled, breathless. "Guess I didn't think anyone cared."

"Well, they do now." He grinned.

For the first time, I believed it.

The next morning, the school was the same run-down mess it has always been. Lockers dented, lights flickering, cafeteria reeking of oversalted fries and bleach. But something in me shifted. People nodded at me in the hallways, teachers gave me looks that weren't quite disappointing anymore. More than that, I felt lighter. Seen in other words. Like maybe being "not very studious" didn't mean being nothing.

I still wasn't going to ace math or suddenly become student of the year. Not like I was planning to anyways. But I had something that mattered more than a report card to me.

Music.

And today, like every other weekday, I readied myself for school. But somewhere between ringing bells and the fading notes, I think I was learning in my own way.