



# CURWOOD SAGA STORIES

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# **A Tree's Life** by Kayla I. Duckert

Grand Prize Winner

*Kayla I. Duckert – Junior Divison, 12 years old, daughter of Tim and Marsha Deckert of St. Johns attends 6th grade at E.E. Knight School in Elsie*

“Cheep...cheep...,” I hear a young bird cry. “Chirp!” another answers. I yawn and open my eyes to a beautiful spring morning.

Rays of sunlight filter through the treetops, giving the forest floor a polka-dot look. From the ground, green shoots are poking up, which will soon become everything from ferns to flowers.

This breathtaking view is better than any other spring I've been alive. (And that's a good 348 years!) Of course, I say that every year.

I yawn once more and look around me. Spotting my best friend, I shout “Hi, Keona!” Keona turns and her eyes grow wider. She smiles and at the same time sighs. “What!” I exclaim, involuntarily glancing up to make sure none of my branches are broken.

“No, not that,” she says, “When I didn't see you, I thought you'd been logged. I guess I was surprised to see you alive.” “Well, I'm still here whether you like it or not!” I said. Keona grinned.

Her bright smile did little to take away the disturbing thought, though. Every year our mighty forest shrinks because of the human's need for our wood. Oak wood makes beautiful, long-lasting furniture, so the humans are always cutting us down, or in tree terms, logging us.

Trying to change the subject, I mentioned the weather, which is always a good topic for a tree conversation.

Keona noted the early spring, and I replied, “That probably means we'll have an early winter.” We continued to talk, and soon night fell. I fell asleep, snoring softly (or so my neighbors tell me), until the next day began.

“Ugh! I'm soaked!” came the sharp cry of Lora, a young sapling. I blinked, yawned, then listened as the older oaks gave Lora a piece of their mind for waking them. Soon they turned away, intending to snatch a bit more sleep while the gray fog still lingered around them. Hurriedly, they closed their eyes, savoring the last bits of night.

Several days passed like these; me chatting with Keona and the other trees around me, and with squirrels running up and down my trunk, birds building nests, and other animals walking by. Spring turned to summer, and the days grew long and hot. My leaves grew large and green, filling the gaps between my branches. Acorns started to grow on my branches, which the squirrels and blue jays loved immensely.

One day, I woke up to a heavy rain, pouring down like every cloud held an ocean within its fluffy walls.

Suddenly, I heard a very faint, “Sierra!” Knowing it was Keona trying to tell me something, I tried to shout back. “Keona! Can you hear me?”

Her answer came back through the sheet of pounding rain. “Be prepared for a lightning fire! Pass it on!” Like a thick curtain of velvet, the dense rain muffled her answer, making it sound distorted and far away.

I spun around to tell my next-nearest neighbor, a lively hickory named Tom. “Tom!” I called out into the darkness. Although I could not see him, I could hear his deflated response. “Huh?” Tom said. I figured that the rain had dampened his mood as well as his leaves.

“Be prepared for a lightning fire! Pass it on!” I shouted to him in response. “OK,” Tom mumbled as he began to call to his neighbor.

Luckily for us, the storm passed quickly, and there was no fire. However, even if there had been, the rain would most likely have put it out.

Soon two weeks had passed, and no more storms came. Eventually, the forest dried out again, giving our branches a break from the heavy water.

Then came a tragedy worse than squirrels, blue jays, and winter combined. Through our ‘pass it on’ way of communicating, the whole forest soon knew about a family that had come to camp.

Campers often meant trouble. Although most were fine; they came in, went out, never really bothered us; every once in a while, one would leave a campfire unattended. Those were the ones we had to watch for. By being

careless, they could send a whole forest up in flames.

Anyway, a family had come to the forest one beautiful day in the middle of the summer. The family consisted of a mom, a dad, and two teenage squids. (I figured it wasn't squids, but kids. Obviously, our method of talking could be improved. If you'd ever played 'telephone,' you'd know what I mean.) The trees near their campsite kept the family under close surveillance. And for about a week, all went well.

Then the fateful day came when the family left after breakfast for a hike. The only problem with that was that the family had cooked their breakfast over a fire. Apparently, they didn't think that the fire was a big deal, that it would just burn out after awhile. But as soon as they had gone, the wind picked up, and the fire swept out onto the dead grass around it.

From where I was, it was just another lovely summer day. The only problems were the squirrels, their tiny nails tickling me as they scurried across my branches. Keona was talking to me about the blue jays last year, and how hopefully they wouldn't be as bad this year. But I was only half listening to her. I could hear shouts from across the forest, shouts of pain and fear.

I guessed the fire was coming before I heard about it. (Another defect of our system, it's pretty slow.) It was beginning to get hotter than a typical summer day, and a large black cloud was appearing over the forest that didn't look natural.

The wind carried the fire my way, not away as I had hoped. All throughout the forest, shouts rang out as huge trees were engulfed by the blazing fury in mere seconds. It moved quickly, covering ground faster than a deer could run. And with each foot it gained, it grew stronger, faster, fueling on the innocent trees it overtook.

The air began to get thick, and took on a fiery-red hue. The world around me filled with ashes, and all I could feel was the terrible heat.

It felt like it would never end, and I would be burnt to a crisp. The flames lapped at one side of my trunk, and at any moment, I knew I would meet my end.

Then suddenly, it stopped. Cool, wet, rain hit my curled leaves. It was so refreshing. But when I looked up, I saw no clouds. All I could see were flying, buzzing, human machines. I really didn't care, as long as it was water. The machines circled the forest, spraying down water from huge tanks.

A few days later, I could look around me and see almost nothing but black. I had only been on the edge of the fire, and hadn't been hurt too badly. I couldn't say that for some, though. A good half of the forest had been wiped out. The others that had survived the blaze felt the same as I; extremely grateful to be alive, but sad that so many had died. Keona also survived, as well as Tom, who was beginning to return to his cheery self, Lora, who still hates water, and many others.

As time passed, the forest began to rebuild itself. The grass and ferns sprung up again, and new trees began to grow where their elders had fallen. The deer and squirrels came back from their run to escape the fire, and the birds rebuilt their burnt nests.

Then fall came and everything took on a brighter color. I turned a brilliant yellow, but others turned everything from red to brown. Squirrels and blue jays were busy collecting acorns to sustain them for the winter, and the birds began to migrate.

My leaves remained slightly curled from the heat of the fire. Keona had a scar where a jumping flame had leapt at her. Others had blackened limbs or scorched leaves, painful reminders of the terrible fire.

Fall passed quickly, and the days turned even cooler. Soon snow began to fall, covering the forest in a blanket of white. Finally it was time to rest again. A whole year had come and gone so quickly. Before I knew it, I had slept through another winter and had woken up to a beautiful spring once more, (which was by far the best I've ever seen).

# Champion of the Ring

by Miller Lantis

Elementary Division – 1st Place Winner

*Miller Lantis, 11 years old, daughter of Christopher Lantis and Amy Lantis of Corunna, is in 5th grade at Elsa Meyer Elementary School. She wrote "Champion of the Ring."*

It was a cold snowy day in December, but I was still going to the barn. I have been riding since I was five, and I was not going to stop now, even on a cold, below freezing, blizzard day in Michigan. I am sorry, I have not introduced myself yet. My name is Sara McEven, and I am a twelve-year-old girl who just loves horses. I have been riding everyday since I was five, rain or shine. I have one dark bay Quarter horse gelding, named King of Images. I call him "King" for short.

As I ran from my mother's small, gray, mini-van I yelled behind me, "Pick me up in an hour!" I then entered the warm, sweetly-scented barn, and I was greeted by a chorus of horse neighs, and a distant sound of hoof steps coming from the indoor riding arena. I automatically went to the first stall on the right, and a dark bay horse was staring back at me. This is my horse, King. I gently slid open the door, and as I walked in the stall, I was gently nuzzled by King. I stroked him for a moment, running my fingers over his dark bay muscular body.

I then jogged out of the stall to grab the brushes and grooming supplies to clean him. There was hardly anything to clean, but I knew King enjoyed the nice soothing feel of the brushes. I groomed him for fifteen minutes, and then started to put on his tack, such as a saddle, pad, and bridle. Once I was done with this process, I led King to the indoor riding arena, with all the nice white walls, and soft brown dirt. I led him to the middle of the arena, and hopped on.

At first I did all my exercises, such as bending the horse's head around, and riding without stirrups to make my legs stronger. I was then ready to practice. I was riding Western today, a slow pace that cowhands or cowboys usually ride. I clicked King into a slow walk, a barely moving speed. King automatically put his head down, like any good, obedient horse should do. After a couple trips around the ring, I clicked King into a nice, slow, prodding trot. We worked on trotting for most of the time, and once I felt pleased with it, I pushed King up to a slow, rocking lope. The beat of the loping was like a second heart-beat, constant and never missing a stride.

After an hour of practicing, I led King back into the stabling area, taking off his tack and making sure he had food and water. Once I was done with this, I kissed King good night, and left the barn.

I entered the cold, snowy, outside looking for my mother's mini-van. I soon spotted it, but it was camouflaged in the silvery blizzard. I hopped inside the warm, heated van. "How was practice?" asked my mother.

"Good," I replied. I quickly turned on the radio. I really did not like to talk to my mom about horses. She was a city girl. She preferred skirts instead of jeans, or a noisy city instead of a green pasture.

By now we were turning into our driveway to our big cattle ranch. We had horses here, but they were nothing like King. They were strictly working horses, and nothing else. We also had 200 acres, and we usually farmed wheat there. We were regular cowboys as people say, with a regular farm life.

I was now entering our large log cabin, and I was instantly greeted by my father, Rick McEven, rodeo superstar. That's right; my father is a national rodeo superstar. He tried to get me hooked on rodeos too, but it was impossible. I disliked the bumpy, non-constant gaits of the rodeo. Then, one day, Jimmy, one of the cowhands, showed me Western. I loved it from that day on. Dinner that night was the same as always, fried chicken and mashed potatoes with the cowhands. I then watched a little T.V., mostly the horse channel. The T.V. went on to commercials, and it advertised the biggest horse show ever, Congress. I yelled for my mother and father to come in here, and they came zooming around the corner. "Can I please go to this show?" I asked in my super sweet, little girl voice.

"Sure," they replied, calming down now from the thought-to-be death experience. So I then went to bed, dreaming about Congress, and all the work that was ahead of me to win the biggest show, where the best horses go.

I woke up the next morning, and had my daily cup of hot chocolate. I then waited for my mother to take me to the barn. I soon heard a thump, thump, thump coming down the stairs, and my mother appeared in the kitchen doorway, looking like a sick dog. "Sorry, I cannot take you to the barn today." Sneeze. "You will have to wait until," sneeze, "tomorrow," said mother.

"Fine, I will take myself." I replied sourly. Before mother could disagree, I sprinted out the front door, and out into the winter storm outside. The snow whipped around me forcefully, telling me to go back inside. When I almost gave up to defeat, and was ready to return back inside, I found my answer.

The golf cart.

I rushed off our porch and into the whiteness, making a bee-line to the golf cart. I sat down onto the ice covered seat, and quickly turned the key. Turned right on, just like a charm. I turned it around, and started speeding down the driveway. I then hit a patch of ice, and the golf cart went skidding. I was dumped out, and I felt a pain shoot through my arm. I was in pain so much pain, that I gave up all hope of getting up until spring. Then a dark figure appeared before me in the blizzard.

Father.

I knew I was in trouble, so I just lay there in the snow, pretending I was dead. He seemed to buy it, but I was not sure, so I stuck out my tongue for effect. He scooped me up like a stack of potatoes, and carried me back up to the house.

Once inside, I heard my mother crying. My father joked, "She was playing possum." I then knew that my whole act outside did not work, and I knew my acting career was over. So I walked over to my mother, gently enclosing my arms around her. Once I did this, she started to calm down, but was still a little bit depressed. She told me she thought I died from the cold and the golf cart accident. I told her I was alright, but when I released the bear hug I gasped. They seemed to hear. Man, parents have ears like hawks when they want to, I thought. My dad gingerly grabbed my arm, and examined it.

"Broken," he grumbled.

So I spent the next whole day in a small, white, crowded doctor's office, mostly whining to my parents that I was fine, and wanted to go ride King. But they would not allow me to go, even though I tried to escape a couple of times, only to be caught by the fellow nurses. Finally, after the two hours of waiting, I was called to be waited on. I slowly went down the hall, followed closely by my parents. So this is what it felt like to be a prisoner, all alone, and not trusted. After we walked a few yards, we were soon in front of the doctor's room. I made one final attempt to escape, but my father caught me, and I was picked and carried against my will to that dreaded room. "Hello Mr. and Mrs. McEven. Sara still detests me, as I can see." a sly, hissing voice said.

It was Dr. Gru, my life long enemy.

It all started out in 2nd grade when I would not take my flu shot. Seven nurses had to hold me down, while Dr. Gru punctured my skin with that dreaded sharp needle. He won that battle, but I was still looking for revenge. It is hard though for a twelve year old girl to try to trick the smartest guy in the town, with sixteen diplomas!

Dr. Gru slyly walked over to me, and took my arm forcefully, hurting me. "Ow!" I exclaimed loudly.

"Silly girl! That should not hurt!" he said kindly, obviously acting nice in front of my parents. Then he flashed them a nice smile, exposing all of his pearly white teeth. I was just about to say a mean, nasty comeback, when I remembered my parents were in the room. Dr. Gru then took my X-ray, confirming that my ulna was indeed broken. So he put a cast on my arm, and said to my parents that we will be right out, and he escorted them to the door. Once he closed the door, he turned right around and gave me a look full of venom. He said in a sarcastically pleasant voice, "I am afraid you cannot ride anymore, not for two months, when your ulna will finally heal." Then he flashed me a smile, a fake one that could easily be tuned upside down with my next comeback. I stood right up in his face and retorted, "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer." I then flashed him a fake smile and ran out of the room. The last thing I saw was Dr. Gru standing there, in shock. I was right, that comeback did turn his smile upside down. I think I finally won a battle.

The next two months was torture, brutality, and cruelty. I was not able to ride at all. All I pretty much did was go to school, and watch T.V. I was bored out of my mind, usually thinking about King. Finally once the two

months were up, we went back to the doctor's office to take the cast off. When we were there, Dr. Gru did not say anything to me, probably still in shock from the last visit, when he was defeated. He took the cast off, and quickly walked out of the room to wait on another patient. He was definitely scared of me now, I thought cheerfully. But then he came back into the room, wearing the most pleasant smile I have ever seen. Dr. Gru then announced, "Looks like Sara needs her annual flu shot." A look of horror speared across my face as he came closer with my worst enemy, the needle. I would usually jet out of the room by now, but I could not lose once I got that small taste of victory. So I held my ground, and took the shot. The shot felt like it was the worst one ever, but I forced a smile on my face. "Thank you dearly for caring about my health, Dr. Gru." I replied sweetly between clenched teeth. My parents and I then exited the room. I once again won a battle.

Once we arrived home, I quickly changed into my barn clothes. My mother then drove me to the barn, telling me how greatly she appreciated Dr. Gru for taking care of my arm. I just nodded my head, keeping my opinions to myself. Once we pulled up into the barn driveway, I jetted out of the mini-van, and into my second home, the barn. I practiced for two hours everyday for three months.

By this time it was the time of the big Annual County Fair Tack Sale. I went to it every year. This year I was going to buy a new Western tack set. So I entered the large white tent, looking for a Western tack set.

It was then that I saw her.

She was rich, powerful, and beautiful. She had long, shining blond hair, and beautiful deep blue eyes. She owned one Quarter horse mare named Queen of Aces, but everyone called her "Queen" for short. They were a beautiful pair in the show ring.

It was Hailey.

Hailey was the popular girl at our school too, and she was nice to only the popular people, which did not include me. She was strutting near me, so I quickly ducked behind one of the tables. Once she passed, I looked around just to make sure none of her popular friends were around too. Once the coast was clear, I hopped right back up, and went shopping again. I then saw the perfect Western set ever! It was a nice tan saddle, with silver accents all over. It also had a matching bridle. I bought it in a heartbeat, and carried it all the way back to my mother's van, where she was waiting inside to leave. She loved to shop, but not for horses. I carefully loaded it in the back seat, making sure it was all buckled up in the backseat, caring for it like a little newborn infant. My mother then drove me home, with me commenting every minute to be careful with my new saddle in the back. Once we arrived in our driveway I sprinted out of the car and raced to the back of the trunk. I whipped out my saddle, and hauled it into the house to show father my beautiful Western set I bought.

When I showed him, he was amazed. He commented that I had a good eye for tack, and that the tones will match King's coat perfectly. After I exhibited my new tack set, I hauled it up the stairs, up to my bedroom. I then gently set it on my tack holder, and when I went to bed that night, I admired the saddle and bridle all night, seeing a faint glow come off the silver accents.

I woke up the next day, excited that I would be able to use my new tack on King today. I carefully grabbed the saddle, and tip-toed down the stairs. Once downstairs, I loaded the saddle in the van, and had my daily cup of hot chocolate in the van, ready to go whenever my mother woke up. She soon appeared in the doorway of the garage, looking like she still was sleeping. She has never been a morning person like my father or I. She climbed/stumbled into the car, obviously not fully awake. I asked if I should drive, afraid that we may crash since she could hardly keep her eyes open. "Too young to drive," mother yawned. So we pulled out of the driveway, almost taking out the garden. But we made it alive to the barn, which was a huge relief.

I grabbed my saddle and lumbered to the barn with the big heavy saddle in my arms, with a heavy bridle on top. Once I got inside I heard the usual horse music. A few neighs, and the distant sound of hoof beats. I walked into the first stall on the right, and lifted up the latch, and entered the stall. King was there, sniffing the new saddle and bridle in my arms already. I carefully placed the saddle on his back, and he seemed to puff out his chest and say, "Look at me!" I then carefully slipped the bridle on him. I grabbed the reins and led King to the big, indoor arena, excited that I finally get to try my new saddle. As I was leading King, a voice boomed behind me, "Where are you going with that nice saddle little missy? Looks too fancy to practice in."

“Just breaking it in sir,” I replied shakily. There was a stiff silence in the air, so I moved on to the indoor arena. Once inside the arena I mounted King and started practicing. I first did the walk, making sure King’s head was nice and low. Then I did a trot making sure he was nice and slow. By the trotting phase I forgot about the encounter with the mysterious voice, and started to relax again. I then loped for the last five minutes, making sure I sat still when I loped, and did not flop around like Jell-o.

When I was done practicing I led King back to the stabling area. When I was half way to the stall I heard that mysterious voice again, but this time it was more gentle and calming. “Nice horse you got there. Nice movements and speed,” the voice said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Quarter horse?” the voice questioned.

“Yeah,” I replied once again.

The voice then asked more questions, usually about King. I answered all of the questions, almost getting bored with all the questioning. Then the voice asked me the strangest question ever.

“You want a trainer?” the voice asked.

I was overwhelmed, and said sure. I then got enough courage to turn around, and look at the voice. The voice belonged to an old man, with baggy clothes, and western boots. His face looked like a pig, with squinty eyes and a big round nose. He had wiry, white hair, and a wrinkly old face. He then introduced himself as Tim, and I introduced myself as Sara. We then just nodded at each other calmly, and traveled our separate ways, saying nothing more that needed to be said.

That night I thought about Congress, I went over my check-list of everything I had:

Awesome horse (King)

Glamorous tack

Enemy (Hailey)

Trainer (Tim)

I had everything I needed to win Congress, except one thing. Fun. Well, I thought, I will just have to wait until Congress to find out. So I went to bed that night, dreaming about Congress as usual.

I woke up from my deep slumber the next day, so excited about having a lesson with my new trainer. I woke up father this morning, because he is a morning person and will not fall asleep when driving me to the barn. Once at the barn I quickly tacked King, and headed to the indoor arena. I saw Tim standing in the middle of the ring, ready to instruct me. First, Tim told me to ride with no stirrups, so I had to grip with just my legs. He said this exercise will make my legs stronger. So I did this exercise for two hours, until he finally told me to practice my trotting. Then Tim left.

He came back two hours later, holding a Subway sandwich in his left hand, and a Pepsi in the other hand. He then said through a mouth full of food, “Okay, you may now go.” So I stopped King, and dismounted. My legs were wobbly from riding so long, and I practically had to hang on King for support as I exited the arena. I slowly and clumsily untacked King, and gave him an apple. I then heard a small car horn outside, and noticed it was my mother. So I walked out of the barn, and almost tripped into the van. I was so tired from riding, that when I got home, I stumbled upstairs to my room, and went to bed.

The next time I woke up it was morning of the next day. I groggily got out of bed, and lumbered to my calendar to see what I had planned today. Nothing today, but something that was on Saturday caught my eye. Congress! Congress was on this Saturday, and I totally forgot about it! I then was wide awake, and I jumped out of bed to quickly get dressed. I literally ran and jumped on my father’s bed to awaken him. He slowly got up, but in a bad mood because I awoke him so rudely. I then hopped in the car and father was soon in the car with me. He drove me to the barn, silent most of the way.

Once I arrived at the barn, I raced inside to see Tim and tell him about Congress on Saturday. He nodded and thought about it for awhile. Then he said, “Pack your things in the trailer outside, and go get King. We are going to Congress.” With that being said, I jettied to gather my tack, and get King.

Once I got all my things packed, and loaded King into the new, slick, white trailer; we were ready to travel to

Ohio for Congress. Tim lumbered toward me, and got into the truck. He then fired up the truck, and we were off to the biggest moment of my life.

Most of the ride was quiet, and Tim instructed me to be calm and confident when I showed. We then arrived at Congress. Congress was housed at a huge white building that seemed to say, "Only the best can show here." I was amazed at this huge structure, and stood there paralyzed with amazement. Tim grabbed my arm, and pulled me to the huge white building. Once inside I was yet amazed. Everywhere were cowgirls and cowboys. The smell of leather and horse odor surrounded me, like a huge blanket of comfort around me. Tim was still holding my hand, plowing me through the crowd, because I was still too overwhelmed to move. Tim dragged me through the entrance way, all the way back to the stabling area. Once back there, I was dragged to the unloading dock to get King. Once I spotted my dark bay gelding, I was awakened from my trance. I ran over to King and flung my arms around his majestic neck. He whinnied quietly to me, sounding like he was scared of this new exotic place. I led King to the nearest stall, and I quietly coaxed him to calm him. Once he was calm, I was just about to exit the stall, when I bumped into a thick sturdy wall. I looked up and it was Tim.

"Time to show," was all he said. I knew right away what to do. First I polished all the silver accents on my tack, making sure they were shining like stars in the night sky. I then got on my show outfit. My show outfit was a bright red, sparkling outfit with a white cream hat to top it off. I then put my hair in a tight bun, and applied ruby red lipstick to my lips, which matched my outfit perfectly. Then I went into King's stall and brushed him one last time, making sure there was not even a speck of dirt or dust left. When I was done I tacked him, and then stood back to admire my work. He looked handsome and regal in his glorious saddle and bridle with the silver accents. His coat was a dark brown color, looking like a smooth, creamy, dark chocolate. As he walked, his muscles rippled under his creamy brown coat. I looked over everything one last time. I looked in the mirror, and for the first time in my life, I liked what I saw.

I then led King through the maze of stalls, when I finally reached the arena. I then mounted King, and rode in the huge arena. I held up my chin, and smiled. I was ready.

Once I entered the arena, I lined King up in the middle and I spotted a flash of pink.

It was Hailey.

Queen and Hailey looked extraordinary. Hailey had on a pink outfit, with diamond accents. Queen was a beautiful golden color, looking like the color of pure gold. I was starting to get nervous, when the judge suddenly announced we were to walk. I clicked King into a nice, easy, smooth walk. I then suddenly noticed all the lights around me and the eerie silence as we all walked around the ring. I started to get scared and nervous, but then I thought of home, and I felt safe and calm again.

Then tragedy struck.

Hailey and Queen were in front of me, when Queen bucked and threw Hailey off. Queen then raced around the ring like a race car. I thought King would get scared and buck too, but he just kept on moving. Hailey was picked up off the ground and escorted to the stands.

The judge then announced for us to trot. King easily went up to a trotting pace. It was slow and smooth, just like the judges like it. We then loped, and then lined up in the middle. Once in the middle, a speaker started to announce the winners. "First place..... Sara McEven!" at first I thought I did not win, and thought that I did well for my first year, but then the speakers announced the name again, and I realized it was me. I was overwhelmed, and surprisingly I was able to click King into a walk toward the judge to claim my prize. Once I was by the judge, he handed me a big bronze horse trophy that on the bottom declared "Congress Champion." Once the trophy was in my hands, I held onto it like my own life was in my hands.

Everywhere there were flashes from thousands of cameras in the stands, all wanting to get a photo of the Congress Champion. Questions were thrown at me like cannonballs from the stands, and there were thousands of clicks from the thousands of cameras. I just sat in the saddle, amazed at my accomplishment. The only thing I noticed was the cold, hard, bronze trophy in my hands. Suddenly people from the crowds started pouring down from the stands into the arena. Everyone started mobbing King and I. King was surprisingly calm though, like he was ready for this his whole life. Then, above all the voices, a voice boomed, "Get away from my student!" A path

was then cleared, and down the path lumbered Tim. He grabbed onto King's reins, and helped me dismount. Once I was on the ground Tim said, "Let's go home." And then we simply went home, already starting to train for next year.

## Epilogue

Sara McEven lived on to be the greatest horse showman ever, never giving up her love of horses. King was the only horse she had ever shown. All her life, Sara's life long enemy, Hailey, was jealous of her for winning Congress. Tim became Sara's life long trainer, until he died at the age of 79. Sara passed away at the age of 67, but her handsome gelding still lives on today through the memories of being a great champion, and great horse.

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## **Grandchildren** by Kaylea Aurand

2nd Place Winner

*Elementary Division – Kaylea Aurand, 11 years old, daughter of Lora Aurand and Kurt Aurand of Corunna; attends 5th grade at Elsa Meyer Elementary School. She wrote "Grandchildren."*

It was a warm fall day when Isabella came home from school and started fighting with her older brother, Matt. Her mother had enough of them and sent Isabella to her room. She never started the fights, but always got in trouble. Her mother, on her way out of the room, was mumbling about how they were like piranhas in a fish tank. She tried to tell her mom about how she did not do anything, but she never listened to her. So instead Isabella sprinted to her room in anger and flopped on her bed.

She was thinking how her life was so horrible as if she was a fish out of water. She was sobbing then, all of a sudden, she had this tingly feeling. She traveled to this world, a world which looked like her world, but older. The rooms and the whole house looked aged. She was creeping sneakily throughout the house; she was a black cat wandering through the house looking around corners and digging through things that looked a lot like her things. She spotted her clothes, Barbies, and some other toys she didn't recognize. It's like it was only yesterday, oh wait, it was yesterday.

This was very confusing for Isabella because one minute she was on her bed thinking her life was horrible, but now she was in this world that looked like her world, but aged. She looked in the last room, the room that used to be her father's room when he was still alive because she heard some noise. Slowly looking into the room, she saw a group of people. She quietly pulled herself against the wall as if to hide. Breathing hard she sneaked another peek at them; it was almost like they were looking straight through her but didn't say anything.

Soon Isabella found out that they couldn't see her, so she walked right into the room searching and examining everyone and everything in the room. She was waving her hands in the faces of the people, but still no response. There was one last place she had to check out, the attic.....

As she crept up the stairs to the attic, she had to keep swatting spider webs out of her face. The spider webs were like rain on a windy day. It's like a light bulb went on in her head, she couldn't believe she didn't think of it before. Look through the pictures!!!!!!

Then she thought one more thing, "Was this a dream?" she quietly said to herself.

Quietly talking to herself, "Yes, yes, yes!! It had to be." So at that second she pinched herself hoping she would wake up.

Instead she yelped in pain, "Owww"

It must not have been a dream because that really hurt. Searching through the old rubbish she found many things, but nothing she was looking for. Finally she found a chest. Thinking it was full of pictures, she opened it..... nothing, oh wait. There it was sitting right under her nose, an album with tons and tons of pictures of her brother, all of her family, and herself. Isabella had just gotten an idea. She was going downstairs and study the lady, the lady that reminded her of someone, but she could not put her finger on it. She could almost taste it. She

sat down to think and slowly stood up and started to look through crates and piles of things. Looking, searching, and examining all this clutter, she knew it was her house, but not quite.

Suddenly, she heard the phone ring and raced downstairs like it was the Olympics. In that second, she realized it wasn't her phone to answer, it was the lady's. After that mistake, she went back to the attic when she heard the doorbell ring. The ring was an alarm going off in her ear waking her from her dream. Walking downstairs for the second time panting like a dog, she looked at the man in the doorway. He looked familiar too, but again she couldn't put her finger on it. Going back upstairs to the attic for the last time she noticed something.

It was a picture just the corner sticking out. She gently pulled on it.....

"A picture of me!" she screamed.

She looked at it; it was all torn and yellowish. A picture of the lady played over in her head. It had the same eyes as Isabella, same nose and mouth as Isabella. Exactly! That lady was Isabella, and that man was Isabella's brother. Everything was coming to her at once. She was trying to stick it all in her brain at once, like blowing a balloon too big. It was so overwhelming for her she began to get dizzy, she had to sit down. It was all coming together but one thing.....

What about the children that were there playing with her older self, and the unrecognized man about the same age as her? Then she heard herself call.....

"James, can you come here."

It must be the cutest boy in school, James Hall. At this point she had a big grin on her face thinking that it was him. She looked at him seeing some sort of resemblance, but she still needed to find out who the kids were. As soon as old Isabella came into the room with the kids she said.....

"He is here."

The kids came running out as her brother was calling them each by name, Anne, Maria, and Kyle.

They all shouted, "Hi Great Uncle Mike."

Then that means she is their grandma, she has grandchildren? It seemed kind of disturbing at the thought of having grandchildren.

Saying to herself, "I'm on a roll," (she had been figuring out everything about this strange woman). She saw the grandchildren playing with her, and when they were leaving Anne stopped.....

She whispered, "Grandma, I had the best time in my whole life."

That made Isabella look at life in a different way, like to look at the positive not the negative. At that second, Isabella had a big grin on her face like the Cheshire cat. It was almost freaky. The children had finally left the old camphorating house. Finally, Isabella had time to think about what happened throughout the day. First, she had no clue on what was happening and why she was there. Then she was putting the puzzle together, that was her house but old, and she was the grandma? Lastly, this was the future and life was not so bad. Isabella remembered this, this is how she came to this world, and she was going back to her world. She had mixed emotions about it; she wanted she wanted to stay but she missed her family.

She closed her eyes and waited to be back in her bed, but that didn't happen. Then she opened her eyes and was lying on the floor with her bed on her right and her Barbies on the left. She crawled up on her bed and soon her mother stumbled in over her toys. She was telling her that her brother told the truth and had gotten in trouble. Also her mom was going to listen to Isabella more. Then Isabella burst out with joy. She tried to explain all that had happened and all she could make out was, "I love you and I figured out life wasn't so bad." All the rest was a blur. Her mom said in a kind motherly voice, "Alright honey, you can come out of your room now."

Every time she would get in trouble she would learn from it and not get mad. Twenty years later Isabella had three beautiful children of her own. She was like a mother bird, strong and bright. Isabella had a lovely life from that day forward and never thought bad of life again even when her husband died. Eighty years later Isabella's grave sat next to Jame's beautifully with two birds perched on them.

# **Helen and I** by Anna Sophia Heidt

Junior Division -1st Place Winner

*Anna Sophia Heidt, 13, daughter of Brian and Denise Heidt of Owosso, is in 8th grade at Corunna Middle School.*

## **CHAPTER 1: THINGS THAT ARE JUST A MEMORY**

It's been five years since I saw her, but I remember Helen like I had just seen her yesterday. She was five years older than me, and a head taller. She was pale, skinny, and had curly blond hair down to her shoulders. Her deep blue eyes always twinkled, and her smile was dazzling. She was the best friend I could have ever asked for, but she was a foster child, so she couldn't stay forever.

The first day I met her, I was about five or six. We had just moved into our new house, and my brother and I were playing on our huge play set, when Helen and her brother, Trevor, came on the sidewalk. Her brother was shorter than her, with brown hair, and small brown glasses.

Our huge play set caught her attention, and she said hello to me. I said hello back, and asked her if she wanted to play with me, and she, of course, agreed. It turns out that Heather also just moved to the area, and she lived just two houses away. This was terrific! I was new to the neighborhood, and I already had a new friend. I would have Helen for a friend for three glorious years.

## **CHAPTER 2: THINGS THAT ARE MEMORABLE**

One of the first memories I have of playing with Helen, was when we played capture the flag. My yard is shaped like an L. My play set is on the long part, the corner is occupied by a magnolia tree. On the short part, there are bushes, and a very small rock garden. We were playing boys vs. girls. Helen and I on one team, Trevor and Fritz on the other. For territory, we girls had the front yard, with the rock garden, and a quarter of the long part of our L shaped side yard. The boys had the rest.

Helen and I hid our "flag" (it was really just a stick) in the bushes. We finished hiding the flag way before the boys could decide on a hiding place, so we peered through the bushes, and saw them hide their flag by the gate leading to the back steps. Soon, the boys shouted that they were ready, and I got into position to run. Helen would guard our flag, while I went to retrieve the boys' flag. Soon, Trevor went over the boundary, and there was my chance. I knew I was faster than my little brother, so I ran for it.

My dark brown hair whistled in the wind, my caramel eyes shone. I almost reached the boys' flag, when my little brother stepped in front of me. I know he doesn't like it, but he looks as if he's from China; you know, dark brown hair, brown almond shaped eyes, and round face. I skittered past him, and snatched the flag. Trevor was in "jail", so I had a clear shot home. My legs were pounding; my chest aching. Helen was cheering me home. With one last sprint, I crossed the boundary, and sailed into my territory. I was safe.

## **CHAPTER 3: THINGS THAT ARE FUNNY**

Sometimes, boys can do things that are so funny, you can't forget them. One of these incidences was when Trevor dressed up as Sleeping Beauty.

For my 6th birthday, I received a princess costume kit. It had the skirts and the tops of Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Snow White. I wasn't very interested in it, because at the time, my favorite princess was Belle. So anyway, my brother had just received a little pup tent from Mom and Dad. One day, Helen and Trevor came over, and we decided to play dress up. My brother and I brought out all of our old Halloween costumes, and we dug in. The first costume I put on was my old Belle costume, complete with the crown. Helen was Cinderella, Fritz was Tigger, but Trevor didn't dress up. Well, after Helen and I put on our princess costumes, we obviously decided to play princess. The boys retreated into the pup tent Fritz set up, and they played in there. After a while, I got curious to know what was going on in there. So, I went right up to the tent, and looked into the netting covering one of the windows. Inside, Fritz was still Tigger, but Trevor was wearing my pink Sleeping Beauty costumes. You could see his shorts and his shirt through the costume, and it didn't fit very well. When he saw me, he tried to cover up the costume, but failed miserably. He had a look on his face that could make anyone burst into a fit

of giggles. I ran away, laughing. To this day, seeing Sleeping Beauty anywhere reminds me of the time we played dress up, and Trevor dressed up as Sleeping Beauty.

#### **CHAPTER 4: THINGS THAT MAKE YOU SICK**

When you are little, you aren't that daring, and you know what is right, and what is wrong. Being a pastor's daughter, I know what is right, and what is wrong. One of these moments was when the ice cream truck came by our house.

Helen and I were playing soccer in my side yard, when we heard jingling. Helen looked around, and squealed with delight. It was an ice cream truck, coming down the street. Helen looked at me, and told me to go and get some money from my dad to buy ice cream. I ran into the house, but then stopped. My dad was at the church, so he wasn't there, but on the counter, was his brown wallet. I looked at it, wondering if there was any money inside. Then, I got a feeling in my stomach that I get when I know that I'm not supposed to be doing something, but I am. Later, my dad would say that this was the laws that God put into our hearts, in other words, our conscience. I knew that my dad would probably be very angry if I took the money, so I ran back outside to tell Helen. Helen was in our yard, and the ice cream truck was parked in the road, ready to take our orders. She looked at me with wide eyes, and I shook my head. I knew it was a wrong thing to do, and I didn't care if Helen was angry at me or not. She talked to the ice cream man, and then the ice cream truck drove away. I then told her that I didn't think it was right, and that I had a bad feeling if I did. She nodded, and confessed that she felt the same way. Afterwards, we always asked my dad for permission to do anything, so that we knew that it was OK, and so we wouldn't have that sinking feeling in our tummies again.

#### **CHAPTER 5: THINGS THAT ARE COLD**

Have you ever had a chore that you don't want to do? For me, it was clearing away the snow on the cars. It was nearly Christmas, and every kid was on Christmas break. One morning, I found myself shoveling snow off of my mom's Bravada. Fritz was doing the mini-van. We had just started, when Helen came over to play with us. My dad told her that we were busy at the moment cleaning cars, and I was so mad. Why did I have to shovel away the snow now? Why couldn't I play with Helen? Suddenly, Helen said that she wanted to help me. My heart soared. Soon, she was right there besides me, shoveling snow off of my mom's car. Things were fine, until a snowball came out of nowhere, and hit me in the face! The snow was cold, and immediately melted when it hit my face. The snow was a hard snow, not light and puffy, but sharp like a knife. My cheek stung like it was being poked with a thousand needles. Trevor was laughing, but not for long. I gathered up some snow, packed it in a tight snowball, my bare hands making a thin cover of ice on the ball, and hurled it at Trevor. I was always a good shot with a snowball. It hit him right on the nose. Now, it was on. Helen and I against Trevor and Fritz. We grabbed snow off of the cars to make snowballs. We whipped snowballs all over the place. I got another hit on the cheek, a hit on the arm, another on the leg. Trevor didn't look much better, and Fritz looked like a snow boy come to life. Helen's back was covered in snow, her face flushed, her eyes sparkling. In a matter of seconds, the cars were free of snow, and we were covered. We tramped into my house, and peeled off our hats, gloves, snow pants, coats, boots, and scarves.

My dad was at the stove, making his famous papa bear hot chocolate. It was sweet and chocolaty and so rich, that if you labeled it on a scale from one to ten, it would be a fifty. No store bought packaged hot chocolate could even compare to my dad's. There was a fire in the front room, so with our steaming mugs, we tramped into the front room, and sat by the fire, talking and laughing like this was never going to end.

#### **CHAPTER 6: THINGS YOU FIGHT ABOUT**

When you have friends, you have to fight. It's in your nature to fight. Now sometimes, you fight with your friend only once. That was how many fights I had with Helen. Only one.

It was summer, and I was eight years old. Helen was thirteen, and we had all of the neighborhood kids over to play with us. My brother got out the hose, and ran water down our slide, just like those big waterslides you see at Michigan Adventures, except miniaturized.

Now, you must understand that at the bottom of the slide, instead of water, there was mud. After about three

goes down that slippery slide, you got pretty dirty in your bathing suit. I kept going down, and down, and down, until I was covered from thigh to heel in mud. Helen was smart, and brought a bucket of water up with her to wash off her legs in. That was when the trouble started.

When she wasn't looking, I poured the water on my legs, and then put some on the slide to make it even more slippery. Well, you know by then Helen had climbed back up and saw what I was doing, and she was so mad, I thought steam was coming out of her ears. She screamed at me, and told me to get my own water. I was in shock. I always shared my things when Helen came over, like MY easel, MY clothes, and MY toys, so I thought that it was OK to take the water. Her comment insulted me, so I was determined not to play with her anymore; and with that, I slid down the slide, and went to play with Trevor.

After everyone went home, I began to think about why Helen was so angry. She was the one lugging up the water. I saw her struggling with it when she was climbing up the ladder. She was the one who had the idea, and I just took it, without even asking. Now I understood, and felt so bad, I wanted to cry. I went outside, to walk over to Helen's house and tell her how sorry I was, when there she was. She was on her bicycle, right outside my house. I told her how sorry I was, and how I never meant to upset her, and as it turns out, she was over here asking for me to forgive her for snapping at me. We made up, and Helen rode home. The dispute lasted for fifteen minutes, but to us, it seemed like hours.

## **CHAPTER 7: THINGS YOU DON'T ANTICIPATE**

When you have a friend, you can have them for a very long time. You could also have them for a few minutes. My friendship with Helen was coming to a close, but I didn't know it yet.

One day, Helen invited me to her house to play. I accepted, and was eager to go. I had never been to Helen's foster home before, so I was anxious to see what her room looked like. When I rang the doorbell, she was there to meet me. We walked into the hallway, with ceilings so high; I could barely see the base of the chandelier that hung from it. We were told by Helen's foster mom that we couldn't go upstairs. I was disappointed, but I had a good time anyway.

Helen and I played Sorry in the basement, Hide and seek on the ground floor, and did crafts on the kitchen table. Before I left, Helen wanted to show me. We ran to the basement, and there were two suitcases. One labeled Trevor, the other Helen. She told me that she would be moving to Texas soon, but not to worry. With the reassurance that she wasn't leaving yet, I skipped home, planning our next adventure.

## **CHAPTER 8: THINGS YOU LOSE**

My first day of school was the last I saw of Helen for quite some time. We had just finished putting up a swing on my magnolia tree (it was really just a stick hanging from a rope), when Helen's foster mom called and said that Helen needed to come home. Helen hugged me, and said goodbye. I waved as I watched her go, and then went into my house, not knowing she was leaving for Texas that night. The next day, I went to school, like normal. Then I waited for her to come and play, like normal. She didn't come. At first I thought that Helen wasn't coming today, but would come tomorrow. She sometimes did that, so I wasn't worried.

I waited for days and days. After two weeks of waiting, I knew Helen wouldn't be coming over anymore. For weeks and weeks, I was quiet. One moment, I would forget about her, the next, I was drawing her picture, and writing notes to my parents saying, I have gone to look for Helen, Love Anna. Of course, I never ran away from home, but I wrote hundreds of notes like that, only to crinkle them up, and to cry on my bed. I would treasure everything that Helen had touched. Before she had left, Helen gave me a box of stickers that I had stuck on my bed. Every night, I would stroke the stickers until I dropped off into sleep.

I drew more and more pictures of her, and wrote more and more notes until I couldn't stand it anymore. I thought to myself that I was going to run away any moment. I packed backpacks full of water bottles and cookies, only to empty them once more. I was miserable.

But as with all things, time healed me. With school, I found happiness with my friends, at home, in books. My life was happy again, but my heart never truly mended. Nothing truly mends, but it heals.

## **CHAPTER 9: THINGS YOU FIND**

It had been three years since I had seen Helen, and I had given up hope about seeing her again. I was a girl who liked to go to camps, both fun and educational. That year, my mom had signed me up for a camp at a hands-on museum called Impressions 5. I haven't been there for a while, but the place was magnificent.

There was a bubble room, where you could be inside a gigantic bubble. There was the heart room, where you could walk in a model of a heart. There was a light room, where you learned about prisms. I loved it there.

My mom had signed me up for a robotics camp. I loved robots at the time. Well, my mom works for the government, so she is very busy. The museum held an after camp daycare, so my brother and I stayed afterwards and played with the kids. On the first day, I was just walking around, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked, and there was a girl, with straight gold hair, and a nametag that read "Sabrina." She smiled, and asked, "Do you remember me?" It took me a few minutes, but there, standing in front of me was Helen! I was shocked. There was Helen! After all of the times I had cried in the night, all of the times I had written those notes, here she was, older, and taller, but still the same Helen I knew. She had new interests. She had friends in her camp. She had long, straight hair, but she was still the Helen I knew, deep inside.

The rest of the week, we ate our lunches together, talked about our lives, and just enjoyed each other's company. I told her all about how Fritz was surviving Kindergarten, and how I had missed her so much. I told her all about the notes, the pictures, and the crying. She never got tired of me. It turns out that Helen had been adopted by a person who worked at Impressions 5. Her new name was Sabrina Brown. I liked her new chic name, but I missed her old name, her real name, Helen. Trevor was adopted too, but he didn't change his name. Some things you leave the same. Helen, Sabrina now, loved to design clothes. She was always crafty with me back at home, but now she had taken it to the next level. I was anxious for the end of the week, and I came sooner than I had expected.

I never saw her after that, and I don't know where she is. I didn't ask her for her address or phone number, but I don't feel as sad now. I know that she has a family, and that she and Trevor don't have to move to new foster parents anymore. The first time I said goodbye, I was crestfallen. Now, I am content.

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## **The Voice of Ritual Cave** by Denae Hummel

2nd Place Winter

*Senior Divison Daughter of Dennis and Patricia Hummel of Perry, Denae Hummel attends 9th grade at Morrice High School. She wrote "The Voice of the Ritual Cave."*

They use to call me Jodee Olivia Yves. My initials spelled Joy, and that was what I was known for. I brought joy to everyone around me with my voice that sounded like a chorus of songbirds. People loved me. I loved me. My life was as perfect as it could be.

But they took me away. They stripped me of my identity, my freedom, and threatened to strip me of my life.

They called me Gold, and refused to allow me to utter a single whimper. I don't know who they are, nor do I care much.

They call this castle-like prison D.D.T., and they call us their 'guests'. They seem like dignified and honorable merchants and mages, but the raw and bloodied skin on my wrist has been choked by shackles and tells a different story about my kidnappers.

In the dark of the dungeon, I could hear sobs. By the sound of it, a boy no older than me projected the sound. He could cry all he wanted; it wouldn't do us any good. I would rather feel nothing than give them the satisfaction of seeing me in as much pain as they were trying to inflict. In fact, if I am optimistic I could even smile...

Light burst through the bars of my cell. In walked a shadowy figure, with a staff in one hand and the keys to my cell in the other. "Gold?" he called. "Are you still alive?"

I refused to answer. That was not my name, nor would it ever be. I spat on the ground to show my disgust.

“Well, your thoughts are still going like a hive of bees,” he stated. Typical mage, looking into your thoughts without your permission. Ever since a group of them overthrew Queen Bella, they have been nothing trouble. They have taken over the country, using magic as a weapon for obedience.

“Yet, you are incapable of getting angry at us or angry at anyone for that matter,” he teased. It wasn’t funny. “You can’t even get sad, or feel any emotion other than joy and happiness.” Even though my eyes burned from the new light in the room, I could see him frown as he searched through my thoughts. “It seems none of this has occurred to you.”

I saw him unlock my cell, walk in, unlock my wrist from the shackles, and replace them with a bracelet all in one swift motion. No human could move that fast! Or maybe my mind was just moving extra slow... He used magic on me!

“This little piece of jewelry will restrict your ‘make everyone happy’ magic.” He told me. The power he had over me was sickening. Then he lifted me off the dirt floor of the dungeon. My blonde hair looked almost brown with dirt and was knotted horribly. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t fix the ‘I can feel cheerfulness or neutrality’”.

As he led me out, I tripped repeatedly. “First, we will clean you up. Then we will feed you, since you look like a living skeleton. Finally, we will have you meet your roommates.”

I was thinking of refusing to eat, but my stomach rumbled in protest. The man let out a cold snicker. “I don’t think your body liked the idea of a hunger strike.”

I blushed a bit, and tripped again. I hadn’t spoken since they sent me in the dungeon, a few days ago. I took a deep breath. “What is your name?” I asked.

He smiled. “I am called Silver.”

I tripped for the ninth time, due to a bit of shock. This was the leader of the rebellion against Queen Bella. He was older than I had imagined. His gray hair was spiked and his ice blue eyes showed cruelty and greed. “My little Gold, you have much to learn about life,” he said. “Lesson number one, don’t trust anyone. Especially don’t rely on the man who takes you out of the dungeon for no reason.”

After going to the baths, the kitchen, and getting a small pink dress from the tailor, they shoved me into a room of eight girls. Most seemed paranoid and scared to death. One had a tear streaked face and the girl across from her had a burn on the right side of her face.

I was led to my bunk and Silver left. The room was so small, that the three bunk-beds covered all the walls. The bunks were three tall and lined up corner to corner. By the looks of it, I was filling it to the maximum capacity. I sat on my bed and smiled a little. This was better than the dungeon. I had people to talk to, a bed to sleep on, and a light through the little windows near the ceiling.

“Why is she so happy?” I heard a girl yell angrily.

“Poor girl, she is probably a joy spelled girl,” a brown haired girl responded, softly. She was the girl with the scar on her cheek. I couldn’t help but wonder how it got there.

“Does that mean she can’t feel anything but joy, Luna?” The tear faced girl asked the brown haired girl. “How is this possible?”

“It is the same way Ellie only feels anger,” Luna explained. She jumped off her top bunk and walked up to my middle bunk. “Hello, I am called Luna,” she told me, although I had already guessed it. “Luna May Solaric. It is nice to meet you. Welcome to hell.” Her blue eyes held a steady glare, and she was dead serious.

“Uh...” I debated if I should tell them my real name, or the one the guards had given me. I figured I would tell them both. “I am Jodee but...”

“They ‘changed’ your name to Gold,” the red haired girl next to her stated. “They do that to make it easier to think of you as an item rather than a person”

“Ellie...” Luna warned, but the girl’s anger didn’t stop and neither did her rant.

“They treat us as... as ... as dolls meant to be tortured and thrown away! They pretend you be your friends and then send you to Ritual Cave...”

“What is the Ritual Cave?” I asked. Everyone stopped talking and stared at me.

“Poor girl, she has no idea...” Luna whispered.

I saw tears of fury swell in Ellie's eyes. "It is cruel... unbearable... immoral..."

"We hear screams come from the cave every night," the burned girl said, slowly.

"Those that go in..." a small blonde girl started to say, but was choking on her words. I saw small tears form in her eyes.

Ellie spat. "They never come out."

Luna looked to the floor. "They send everyone there eventually," she whispered

"Why?" I asked. Luna sighed.

"That is a story for a different time. Now it is getting late. We should all go to sleep," she told everyone. She was older than all the girls in the room, so my guess was that she played mother most of the time to this group of near children. She was only sixteen, but she must have felt pressured to keep everyone calm and peaceful among the horrors of this place.

"If anyone can sleep, that is," a black haired girl added.

They blew out the lamps and everyone crawled into their beds. I tried to sleep, but the mattress was lumpy.

Subconsciously, I knew I should be petrified, but I was not capable of fear. I looked up at the bunk above me, and pulled my blanket close to me.

For being in hell, it was intolerably cold.

I was awoken to screams. Not the screams from Ritual cave; those were faint and I had slept through them. These were from a strangely familiar voice.

"No! Please, have mercy!" Luna cried. I opened my eyes to see two guards rip her from her bed. She clung to her bedpost, hoping to resist whatever waited for her.

"Shut up, little girl!" the female guard shouted. "Or do we need to give you another scar for disobedience?"

"What are they doing?" I asked the girl on the bunk below me. She had tears streaming down her face. She had gone pale and was trembling.

"They are... g-going... to send her... t-to... Ritual Cave," she stammered. I knew I should be at least a little alarmed at all this, but my joy-spell stopped my fear, my anger, and any pain I might have felt at seeing her go. Although I did feel like I should help my friends. The joy spell didn't affect the fact that I had morals to keep. Ellie jumped out of her bed and tackled the male guard. "She is not going anywhere!" she howled. The man threw her off, but she kept on fighting, using anger as her fuel. I jumped down from my bunk, planning on helping Ellie.

Then a blue substance was released into the room. The air turned neon blue, and this new gas filled my lungs.

Time slowed and my body grew heavy and clumsy. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late.

Luna was gone, she would be the first of many to be banished and never return.

•••••

At the dining hall, I decided to get some answers. Although everyone was still shocked by what had happened to Luna, life would go on, and my life might depend on understanding what exactly happened to her. I asked Ellie why they wanted all of us here.

"They are going to train us to be charmers," she stated bluntly. She was avoiding giving me full answers, meaning I would have to pry them out of her. I opened my mouth to start another round of inquiry, but Elli stopped me short. She sighed, "Get comfy, this is going to be a long story."

It was oddly quiet around us, especially since there were about three hundred boys and girls in the room.

Everyone was silent as if death itself had just rang the doorbell. I wondered how they all got here. Were they kidnapped and taken here, or did they come willingly? Never mind, they were abducted because no one would be willing to come to a place where you heard screams every night. How in the world they managed to take so many people without being caught?

"Are you listening?" Ellie snapped. I turned to her and she started the explanation. "We will start with what you know. This is all Silver's fault because he is a power hungry, heartless, soulless..."

The girl with the burned face jumped in. "Do you know how he overthrew Queen Bella?" she asked. I shook my

head. There was a giant cover-up and everything was hush-hush. All that was known was that the Queen's body wasn't fit for an open-casket funeral.

"He gathered the eight strongest magicians, now known as the high magicians, and cast a spell on a dragon. He turned a dragon into a human." She tried to clarify. She must have gathered from the confused look on my face that I didn't understand. Ellie interjected.

"Back in the day of Queen Bella, there were many well known dragons. They never attacked a human, and in fact, tried to help us whenever possible. The most famous of these dragons were the Gemini, the two black dragons that lived in what we now call Ritual Cave."

"There are dragons in Ritual Cave?" I exclaimed. No wonder we heard screaming at night. I would be scared too if I had to face a dragon. No, never mind, my joy-spell wouldn't let me feel fear.

"There were dragons," Ellie corrected. "Now there is just one."

"They use to protect the land, as long as we treated them well," Burned Girl said.

"But Silver used his magicians to turn the female dragon into a human with the strength and power of a dragon. Then he used this magic mask-like thing to brain wash her into doing whatever he asked!" Ellie exclaimed.

"Alright, so explain to me why they keep sending people into the dragon's cave." I inquired.

"The remaining dragon lost its companion. It is one pis..."

"Angry," Burned Girl finished, before Ellie could go on with some colorful language. "And it has every right to be. The other dragon has been used and abused, and it is probably afraid we are going to go after it next."

"Scared? Yeah right!" Ellie exclaimed. "It has destroyed several villages so far. The only reason it stopped was because that one girl started to sing."

"According to some people, Queen Bella used to go daily and sing to those dragons. That is how they recognized her, and she got to be extremely close to them," Burned Girl replied. I should really figure out her name...

"In order to keep the power of the dragon for themselves, Silver and his magicians kidnapped people like us to sing in that cave. That way, he would never have to release the female dragon," Ellie explained.

"But the dragon always realizes that it isn't Queen Bella..." interjected Burned Girl.

"And murders the charmer who is singing, or so the theory goes. Thus why all the screaming and the need to constantly replace the old charmers," Ellie rolled her eyes. "But Monica here is obsessed with the specifics of all of this," she said, pointing to Burned Girl.

"Does the dragon kill you when you exhaust yourself, or after a specific time? Or maybe he kills you the moment you miss a note!" Monica said.

I quickly changed the subject. "How do they get away with kidnapping all these people?" I asked. They looked at each other, then at me.

"There is a reason they kept you, and everyone who comes here, locked up in the dungeon for four days," Monica said slowly. "This place is spelled. After about four days..."

"No one remembers your existence," Ellie finished.

•••••

It was hard for me to get my mind around the whole "charmed castle" thing. So back home, my parents, my younger sister, my friends, my teachers, and everyone that I know had... forgotten me? All of them were affected by the spell and disregarded the fact that I had ever been. That was enough to make me lose the happiness I was known for and make my stomach want to give way.

But what I didn't know was that everybody should have forgotten me. All of them did, but one person.

From the day he was born, Luke had immunity to magic. He was unable to use magic, and it was impossible to use magic upon him. He had never been affected by the existence-wipe spell, like everyone else in the country. Yet because no one remembered these children, he was unable to do anything, until now.

The screams of Luna reached him, loud and clear. How, you may ask? It is because Luna had a secret gift not even she knew she had: Telepathy. She knew her brother, Luke, had immunity to magic. In one last desperate attempt, she cried for his help telepathically. She left one last message: Gemini.

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One week went by, and no one was taken, meaning Luna was still alive in Ritual Cave. I, on the other hand, wasn't going to be much longer because of my constant escape attempts. Every time I tried, I got lost and taken back, where they threatened to beat me. For some reason they never did, and according to Monica, it was because Silver wouldn't let them.

"He won't hurt you, Ellie, or that Eli guy because you have emotion-spells," Monica explained. "They think if they put the joy-spelled girl, the anger-spelled girl, and the sorrow-spelled boy before the dragon, they can control the other one as well".

"How does that work?" I asked.

"Because if you can give, then you can take away," Ellie clarified. I had learned in this last week that Ellie never gave full explanations.

"What?" I asked, prompting more information.

She sighed, frustrated. "If you can make people happy then, with enough practice, you could also take away all the happiness within them."

"By taking away the dragon's emotion, they hope to control it," Monica said.

"That is unkind. That poor dragon," I said, matter of factly. My head said that I should be sad for the dragon, but my heart was happy that they had a reason to keep me alive.

I sat on my bunk, humming a little tune. The charmer training included singing lessons and dance. They were nice to us during those classes. Come to think of it, they were always nice to us, unless we disobeyed them or they were hauling us to our dooms. Overall, they were pretty decent people, other than the fact that they were greedy and power-hungry...

"You really shouldn't be trusting people so much, Gold," Silver said, walking in. I saw the anger in his eyes, and my mind froze. Suddenly, my heart got overthrown by my head that was screaming RUN!

I tried to dart around him, out the door, but he grabbed the back of my dress and yanked. He pulled so hard I started to choke. "I heard about the latest escape plan. You think you are so smart? Well guess what, there is a new joy-charmed girl in D.D.T., and she is more cooperative than you. There is no more use for you. It is time to put you to better use."

I struggled and tried to fight back, but the collar on my dress was cutting off my oxygen. My head felt heavy and I started to see spots in my vision.

He finally released me as soon as he opened a portal and shoved me inside. It was a big white room, with three other girls in it. There were no doors, windows, or escape routes. I realized that the portal was closed and I was trapped.

"Welcome, Jodee, to the Charmer Training Camp," a female, almost robotic voice said. I turned around to see the owner. She was a little less than six feet tall, with waist length purple hair with rainbow beads strung onto each strand. She had an elaborate mask on, in the shape of dragon wings. "I am Celeste".

Suddenly it came together in my head. This was the female dragon of the Gemini! But... why was she here?

"One in six people live through this training." She said. "There are four of you; most likely none of you will live. Should you die, I will exterminate you for failure. Then you will be dead. Twice."

I giggled. I liked her already. I could see that if it were not for the mask, she would be a happy person. We would get along just...

"Stop smiling!" Celeste ordered. She gave me an evil glare. "I hope you die first."

•••••

Soon she had us training. We did some dance, some singing, but mostly we learned some ancient language.

Every word had to be pronounced perfectly and you had to be able to sing a language you didn't naturally speak. I lost track of time, and the world outside had unknowingly lost me.

I was a fast learner, a beautiful singer, but a horrific dancer. I was, and still am, a clumsy creation with no balance or flexibility. I was never cut out to dance, and Celeste wanted to make sure I never did.

"This room is spelled. The first person to mess up dies," she stated coldly. "You repeat the dance until someone goes to meet their maker."

Poor Melissa didn't make it through that section, and Celeste was angry that I wasn't the first to die. There were many more lessons like that, from dance to singing to the language we were learning. Only by pure luck did I survive. Soon it was just me and Nina.

That day, I danced with grace and skill I didn't know I had, and I did my best to ignore the thud as Nina hit the ground. I sang an ancient melody to keep her cries from my ears. By the time I had finished, her body had already been spelled away.

Celeste smiled. "You lasted a good deal longer than I anticipated. Now it is time for your real test," she said. "Don't fail, or you will wish you were never born."

•••••

I stood on a white marble floor surrounded by purple walls. I must have been teleported here, because this was the old palace of Queen Bella. Just as I should have expected, Silver was in the room, staring out a window.

"I didn't want to do this to you, Gold," Silver said. "Joy-spelling you is something I will regret for the rest of my life."

My eyes got wide. I felt him in my head, rummaging through my thoughts. The deeper he went, the more it hurt. Soon I felt like hundred of fangs were biting my skin. I screamed.

As I passed out, I saw a tear drop from his eyes. "Help us, Gold. Save us from the dragon, my daughter."

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As I awoke, I realize two things. One, I knew how to use the language I had learned from Celeste to remove joy from any living being, along with a light spell, and a few other random enchantments. Second, my body wouldn't move. I heard a low growl.

"You are here to spell me," a low voice said. "I should kill you now and save the trouble later".

I thought fast. "They sent me to spell a dragon, but I am here to find a friend".

"Who are you looking for? Let me guess, Genevieve? Amy? Luna? Kayla? Elizabeth? Or maybe you are looking for a boy like Eric or John. Alex? Bane?" the voice asked. I got to my knees. "They are all dead, so leave now." I turned to face the voice.

I felt the joy-spell shatter as I faced the dragon of which the voice had come. I shook from head to toe in fear and felt tears fall down my cheeks. It was over fifteen times my height and was as black as obsidian. Its dark eyes stared right into me, and I wanted to do nothing more than bawl.

I took a deep breath and reached for the pieces of the joy-spell and put it back on myself with my newly found magic knowledge. "I was looking for Luna."

"Well, I have been looking for my sister for over seven years!" it howled.

I decided to take a risk. "I know where Celeste is," I told the dragon.

The dragon swung its tail and threw me against the blue-crystal wall of the cave. "Her name is Ini!" he cried. "All of you claim to have met her in your little training camp that no one knows how to get back to!"

He was right of course. I had no idea how I got to the training camp, much less how to get back. I was doomed.

I got myself up off the floor, and did my best to keep the joy-spell in place. "You are obviously going to kill me," I choked. I smiled, yet tears fell down from my eyes. "Just be swift."

The dragon went to swing its tail, yet just missed as someone threw me to the ground. As I looked up, I saw what looked to be Luna's twin brother. They looked almost identical in appearance, including having the same scar on his right cheek. I could see sadness in his eyes.

"You are not Luna, which means she is..."

"Dead," I finished for him, so he wouldn't have to. The dragon threw its tail at us and we both dodged. He grabbed my arm and ran off into one of the unknown caverns. The dragon stayed in the main cavern, content to let us starve to death.

We sat down and for a while, neither of us spoke. Then Luke finally piped up. "Luna... she was in here, wasn't she? The dragon... he..." He stammered.

"She was in here, yes. The dragon... all it wanted was for Silver to release his sister." I tried to explain. "Instead,

Silver mass slaughtered innocent girls by sending them to capture this dragon.”

His bottom lip quivered a bit. “My sister, Luna... I think I understand the dragon’s anger...”

I decided this conversation should go no further. “My name is Jodee, and I am joy-spelled,” I explained, even though my joy-spell was quickly fading. Luke gave me a shocked look.

“Jodee...as in Silver’s daughter?” he asked.

I laughed a forced laugh. “No, I am the daughter of Sara and Lane Yves.”

“Servants? That would make sense... where better to hide someone than among the poor, uneducated people who couldn’t put two and two together.” he said.

“What are you saying?” I asked, angrily.

“Silver had a daughter that went missing fourteen years ago, a week after some of the town’s people declared him guilty of killing his wife. They gave the child a new home, but Silver spelled the town. Just like the way everyone on the outside world forgot about Luna, they were spelled into believing that this daughter didn’t exist.”

“And what are you implying!” I exclaimed.

“The daughter’s name was changed to Jodee after she was adopted,” He said.

“It is possible that there is another Jodee...” I tried to reason.

“Jodee, joy-spells aren’t a natural occurrence. A magician would have had to spell you as a baby for you to be like this...” He stopped. “Wait, you just got angry at me!”

I took a deep breath, realizing that the joy-spell was broken, and wasn’t coming back. “I think the fear of the dragon overtook whatever spell was cast on me.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “I am Luke, the magic immunity man. That is how I found you, because I am unable to be affected by magic.”

We were silent for a few minutes. “What do we do?” Luke asked. I thought for a second, but the answer was pretty obvious to me.

“We give the dragon what it wants,” I told him.

“Are you crazy? You seriously are going to let it kill you so that...”

“That isn’t what it wants!” I interrupted him. “He wants his sister, and maybe some revenge.”

Luke raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to lead it to Silver?”

“Father or not, he needs to pay for what he did to Luna,” I stated. He nodded.

“There is nothing I do better than revenge,” he claimed, and we headed out to see the dragon.

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I hurriedly walked to the main cavern. Luke had to run to keep up. “Wait a second! How are we going to convince the dragon to leave its cavern?”

“That is simple; we talk to him. He shouldn’t need much convincing, since he has already gone out to attack other villages...”

“Since when is the dragon a he? I doubt it will listen to reason anyway...”

“Why not? It is a living, intelligent being!” I exclaimed.

“That thing is trying to murder us! It killed my sister!” he said harshly.

“Silver sent your sister into this place where hundreds have come in and never came out,” I said, trying to calm him down. “It was like a forced suicide.”

Luke stayed quiet after that and lagged behind me. I walked into the main cavern. The dragon looked at me with curiosity. He probably didn’t expect me to return. Before he could swing his tail or breathe fire, if dragons really do that kind of thing, I spoke.

“We want revenge on the man who sent me here to charm you,” I said. “I think you do too. Since he is sending us in here to keep you away from him, we can assume he has Ini.”

The dragon grunted. “How can you be so sure?”

I thought for a moment. It was a fair question and I had no answer. “Does the name ‘Silver’ mean anything to you?” I asked, to change the subject.

The dragon roared, and I cowered in fear. “He spelled my sister...”

“He sent me here in hope that I wouldn’t survive.” I said, angrily. “You know where the exit is, and I know where Silver is.”

“Where?” He howled.

“Queen Bella’s old castle, which he now calls D.D.T., Dragon Diva Training.” I said. “If he hasn’t moved since teleporting me here...”

A flash of Silver’s face in my mind made me feel a tinge of guilt. I had a second of hesitation, and only one thing ran through my head: It is murder. This plan of mine was going to kill my father.

Murder is killing an innocent man and Silver was by no means innocent. This wasn’t murder, it was justice. Just because he is my father, doesn’t mean anything. No true father would joy-spell their daughter and have them live with servants, and never love her.

The dragon lowered his claw like an open hand, and told us to get on. He lifted us up to his shoulder blades and ran through a maze of tunnels and caverns.

The bright light of the exit burned my eyes like salt on a fresh cut. The wind could have easily pushed me off my seat, had it not been for Luke holding on to me tightly. Soon we were flying, and there was no turning back.

“Dear dragon!” I shouted over the wind. “What is your name?”

“Gem,” He replied. I giggled a girly giggle, the way I use to before being sent to D.D.T.

“That is why they call you the Gemini, isn’t it? Gem and Ini, it forms Gemini!” I concluded, happily. The dragon nodded his head.

It was a short trip to D.D.T., since the castle was at the fake entrance. It turns out, the entrance that you could see from the window of our room in D.D.T., was fake and leads to no-where. Not only that, but it wasn’t even part of the real Ritual Cave. It was on the completely other side of the mountain!

Why would they bother with a fake entrance? What did they gain from scaring us with fake screams and legends?

They scared everyone with it, and those who felt no fear were emotion-spelled. It was all a test to see who was worth keeping alive. They gained a deadly knowledge that would kill us all.

“What are we going to do when we get there?” Luke asked.

“Dear Gem, do you breathe fire?” I ask him.

“I breath more than fire, I breath destruction.” He replied.

“Time to put into action ‘escape plan x’” I said.

“What is that?” Luke asked.

“Should any of us in D.D.T. escape and live, we created several rescue plans.” I explained. “‘Escape plan x’ is this: we get into the tallest tower, with the schedule bell. We ring it seventeen times, way more than normal so that people know it is the time. Then we go open the main gate, and everyone runs out. While the guards are still confused...”

“What?” Gem urged me on.

“We lay waste to the building. Destroy everyone and everything still trapped inside.” I said.

“We should modify this plan.” Gem suggested. “Why don’t we ring the bell, and send the human boy in there with that sword of his and take out the guards. You can go in and make sure everyone is out, and then we can lay waste to the building.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Luke’s said.

I nodded. “Let’s do it.”

• • • • •

We landed on the top of the tallest tower, and with a flip of Gem’s tail the window was shattered and I carefully climbed inside.

I rang the green bell seventeen times, and waited. Gem flew down and crashed in the main gate and only about a dozen people came out. Then a few more, and a few more slowly came out.

Luke pulled me into the building and we searched rooms. I found several girls huddled under a bed, and a little boy crying in a corner.

Elli ran past me, into the room. "Eli! Stop your sobbing and let's get out of here!" She grabbed him. I saw her wink at me as she darted past me.

Luke sent me out of the building and he went into the North wing. "Gem!" I yelled. "Southern wing is clear!" The dragon cut the Southern Wing from the main building with his tail, so the other ends of the building wouldn't be burned until there respected time. He roared as fire shot from his nostrils.

Soon, there was a single, unburned square in the center of the old castle, and around three hundred people surrounding it. As I looked, I noticed nobody was older than eighteen and most were girls.

"The spell is gone," Luke stated, coming up behind me. I gave him a questioning look. "The existence spell is broken. Your family will remember you, and my family will remember... Luna" He took a deep breath and continued. "The people will be in panic about the missing people, but they will be alright."

I nodded and waded my way through the rubble into what was left of the old castle. There stood 'Celeste', her mask was cracking and coming apart. I could see half of her face now.

"This mask cursed my mouth to say opposite of what my heart willed." She said as the rest of the mask came crashing to the floor. "My dear Jodee, I had hoped you would survive and you have. You saved us all..."

A blue light surrounded her as she started to take dragon form. "Queen Bella asked me to give this to you when you came looking for answers" She said, handing me a folded piece of paper. "Goodbye, my dear."

I opened the letter, as Ini returned to full dragon form and joined Gem. I read what Queen Bella wrote:

*Dear Silvia,*

*By the time that this letter gets to you, this will no longer be your name, but I do not know what else to call you. This is the letter you will find when you are ready to know the truth, so I am guessing you are around fifteen. It is hard to imagine you being so old.*

*Where do I start? If you're looking for the answers of your past, you probably know that your family is not yours by blood. I hope they have done a good job at loving and raising you.*

*Your real mother's name is Gold, and your father is my brother, Silver. That makes you my niece, and a princess.*

*You father is a great magician, but he is a little confused with wrong and right. He joy-spelled you, meaning he blocked all your emotions but happiness. He meant it to make you never have to experience pain, but life is painful and to live it to the fullest you must know pain.*

*The key to breaking the spell lies with the dragons known as Gemini. Ini, whom I have trusted this letter to, should be able to assist you in all your troubles.*

*I am not married, and have no daughters. Traditionally, our land is ruled by a woman and this tradition will not be changed. Therefore, there is only one heir to the throne.*

*If you are receiving this letter, I am either dead or dying.*

*My brother, and your father, must not be allowed to rule.*

*You shall be a great queen, my dear.*

*With Joy and Love,*

*Queen Bella.*

I held the letter tightly in my hands, and for a moment time stopped. It took me several minutes to get it through my head, but at last I understood. This world was now in chaos due to my fathers wrongdoings. The people have lost so many loved ones, and they're afraid of the possibility of loosing more. My father destroyed this world; my job would be to restore it.

I would not be burdened to do this task alone. As fate would have it, I gained many friends in D.D.T. and none of them were about to abandon me now. I had Ini for wisdom, Gem for strength, Elli for passion, Monica for patience, and then there was Luke. Because no princess is complete without her knight in shining armor. Only time would tell if this one would be mine.

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# **Animal Competitions** By Amanda Hall

Honorable Mention Winner

*By Amanda Hall, 11, Corunna's Elsa Meyer Elementary School – "Animal Competitions" Daughter of Jeremy and Jennifer Hall*

One beautiful spring day, a turtle named Bart was new in 1st grade at Elsa Meyer and heard that soon there would be something called Animal Competitions. Animal Competitions were where all of Bart's classmates went out into a big field to participate in numerous games and a lot of competitions. Bart was worried that he wouldn't win any competitions, especially the races (he was a turtle you know). A lot of animals made fun of turtles, snails, and other slow moving creatures, because they are not fast like everyone else.

All Bart thought about was the Animal Competitions, however, he was worried and excited. Bart asked Curly the snail, Whiskers the cat, and Spots the dog if they were going to the Animal Competitions. All of them said, "Yes." Whiskers, Spots, and Curly were Bart's best friends. There was one more week left until the Animal Competitions, and when Bart looked at the calendar he screamed like a squirrel in a blender. Bart called his friend Curly, and told him that he was not quite sure if he wanted to go to the Animal Competitions. Curly said, "But you have to go because I am going."

"I don't know if I should," Bart explained.

Curly was now frightened to go without his best friend Bart. At least Whiskers and Spots are going, but those were not Curly's best friends, they were just normal friends. They hardly ever went to Curly's house, but they went to Bart's. Bart had to go to bed. He slept in his shell because he was a turtle. While Bart was in his shell he decided to go to the Animal Competitions and show those animals what he could do, he had talent, (only a little though).

All of a sudden, the phone started ringing, "Ring, Ring." Bart answered the phone, and the mean animals, Speedy, Smelly, and Pep, started talking to him saying that Bart was going to make the race stink.

"No I won't!" demanded Bart.

"Oh yes you will!" yelled Pep.

Then Pep hung up, "Beep umm, is anyone there?" asked Bart slowly crawled back in his shell, hoping that the phone wouldn't ring again. Bart was almost asleep then all of a sudden, "Ring, Ring, Ring." Bart fell out of his shell and walked to the phone.

"Hello," said Bart.

It was Curly, he said, "Oh my gosh! I need you now. I saw a tiny thing wearing black inside our school with rope; I don't know what to do!"

"Relax, I will be there," explained Bart.

Finally, (I mean finally), Bart arrived. "Knock, Knock, Knock." Curly opened the door.

"Thank gosh you are here, the tiny thing has not left yet," told Curly.

"I will go see what is going on," explained Bart.

Bart (for some reason) hopped outside to see what was going on. Bart tiptoed to the edge of the school and looked in the window. Bart thought in his head that, "Curly was right there is a little black thing with the supplies for the race!"

Bart went to get back up. Bart returned with Curly, Whiskers, and Spots. First, they had to come up with a plan. Bart decided that Curly and he would get a ladder and climb to the roof of the school. While they did that, Spots would stay by the window to make sure the little black thing was still there. Whiskers had to set up a trap by the door and hid herself so that the tiny black thing didn't see her. The little black thing would step in the trap, they would ask (whoever it is) some questions, then we will know what was going on. So they got started.

Once Curly and Bart got on the roof, they saw a vent. Bart said, "I got string so...I am going to tie you to this string and drop you in."

"But why me?" asked Curly.

“Because you are small,” explained Bart.

“Still why?” shivered Curly.

Bart said, “I am just going to have you look for evidence, so we know what is going on.”

“Ok,” said Curly.

Bart quietly tied Curly to the string and dropped him in the vent to see what was going on. Curly saw Pep the rat, he had rope but he couldn't pick it up. Bart pulled Curly back up the vent and asked what was going on.

Curly said, “It's Pep and he has the rope to the animal race!”

All of the animals ran inside and stopped Pep, but it turned out that the principal told him to get it ready for the race, but he couldn't pick it up. The animals said that they would help him set it up. So Pep, Curly, Whiskers, Spots, and Bart carried the rope where the principal wanted them to put it. Finally, it was the day before the Animal Competitions and Bart told his friends that he would go. At school, animals were setting things up for tomorrow, and it made Bart really nervous, as if butterflies were twittering their wings in his stomach.

Bart told his friends that he was really scared for the big animal race. Spots told Bart that he didn't have to do the races. It was just a time where they get to hang out with friends and play games. The butterflies flew out of Bart's stomach.

Bart said, “Thanks for telling me that.”

“You're welcome” told Spots.

Once school was done Bart went home. Bart went in his shell to go to bed. Bart could not fall asleep because he was so excited about the Animal Competitions, so he decided to read a book. The book was called Magical Elves. The book only had 43 pages in it. It was written by the best kid writing stories in the world. Her name was Jackie Sklit.

Bart finally fell asleep, then, at 6:30 the timer went off. Bart shoved the timer off of his shelf and crawled out of his shell.

“I don't want to go to school,” yawned Bart.

He brushed his teeth then grabbed his backpack and rode his turtle-mo-bile to school. His friends were waiting for him so they could hang out before the bell rang. The three of them ran to Bart and started to talk about the Animal Competitions.

“The competitions are going to be so fun!” yelled Spots.

The bell rang so everyone went to class. After seven hours of school Bart went home. It was 4:30 when Bart got home, and the Animal Competitions started at 6:00. So Bart had plenty of time to catch up on homework. Bart had three questions to finish in math which were:

What is  $4+11$ ? His answer was 15.

What is  $6+10$ ? His answer was 16.

What is  $8+2$ ? His answer was 10.

His last assignment was writing. In writing Bart had to write about one of his favorite vacations. Bart wrote about a time when Bart and his family went to Florida to go to Disney World. It had to be at least 2, 3, or 4 paragraphs. It only took Bart 25 minutes to finish all of his work. Once he was done he got ready for the Animal Competitions. Bart polished his shell, brushed his teeth, grabbed a water bottle, and got money so he could get a hotdog. Finally, it was time to go win some prizes!

“I'm ready,” Bart shouted.

Bart hopped on his turtle-mo-bile and took off. Once he got there all of his friends were waiting for him. There were so many activities set up. First there was the water balloon fight. Everyone was issued 6 water balloons and when the teacher blew his whistle everyone started throwing the water balloons at each other. Bart threw one at Curly, one at Whiskers, one at Spots, one at Smelly, one at Speedy and he missed the last one.

Once that was done, Bart went to go play limbo. Everyone had to go under three times. Bart won a ribbon and a limbo trophy because he did the best. Bart saw the race but he jogged past it (that's exaggerating). Bart joined a marshmallow contest. What he had to do was, see who can fit the most, tiny marshmallows in their mouth. Bart fit 11 tiny marshmallows in his mouth. He won 3rd place. His prize was a bag of marshmallows, Bart loved marshmallows.

He saw a race just for turtles so he decided to join it. He was surprised because he went pretty fast for a 1st grade turtle. He finished in 2nd place, so he won a medal that said “2nd Place in a Turtle Race.” He also received a stuffed animal turtle. Bart purchased his hotdog and drank his water.

Smelly and Speedy ran up to Bart and said, “Are you scared about the huge animal race?”

“Leave me alone!” yelled Bart.

“Ha, ha, ha, you’re not going to do the race,” laughed Speedy and Smelly.

“Oh yah watch me,” yelled Bart.

Speedy and Smelly watched as Bart entered the big race.

The coach yelled, “1, 2, 3, GO!!!

Everyone started running. While they were running, they screamed in a high pitch voice. Bart didn’t do so well because there was a cheetah, a leopard, and a lot of other fast moving creatures. Bart came in second to last, but the coach gave everyone a medal for being brave enough to join the big race. Speedy and Smelly laughed at Bart because he was second to last.

The coach came up to Speedy and Smelly and said, “If I were you I wouldn’t be laughing because Bart was braver than both of you to be able to complete the race.

The coach gave Bart a certificate of bravery. He told Bart that he was really fast for a turtle. Bart’s friends came up to him and said that he was really brave to do that big race. So they all went home for milk and cookies, even the coach went with them.

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## **Mark’s Adventure** by Josef Waldorf

Honorable Mention Winner

*Josef Waldorf, 10, Owosso’s St. Paul’s School – “Mark’s Adventure” Son of Matthew And Julie Waldorf*

One day a mouse named Skipper and his best friend, an otter named Maple were playing their instruments, woodland flutes. Suddenly, a shrew named Mark appeared under the brush. Mark exclaimed, “I found a map to a treasure chest filled with riches and food.”

The two friends were astonished and asked, “Where did you find it?”

“I found it by the old tree,” Mark said. “I recon it’s very old since it was by the old tree.”

“We should go back to the village. We will pack tomorrow and start right after the Summer Feast,” said Skipper.

“Oh! I forgot that the Summer Feast was in two days. I have to finish my healers class on the day of Summer Feast!” said Maple.

“Okay, maybe the day after the Summer Feast?” said Skipper.

“Okay with me,” said Maple.

“But not with me,” said Mark. “That’s the day I’m finally eligible to leave the forest.”

Skipper said, “Let’s do it after Seasons Change. But for now I want to go back to the village.

I’m hungry.”

The next day, when they were eating the woodland cream pie, Maple’s brother, Oak, came and said, “Maple, why are you packing? Can I come? I can navigate!”

“We are going to find treasure. You can come too, Oak,” said Maple.

“I will pack some tarps,” said Mark.

“The pack consists of herbs, food, tarps, maps, star charts, and some candied chestnuts,” said Skipper.

At the Summer Feast there was music, food, games, food, and more food. The elders approved Maple of being a herboligist.

Later that night a star fell. Mark picked it up and examined it. It looked like a key!

The next day, Mark graduated. Then at Seasons Change Feast Skipper got to choose his vocation. He chose to be an entertainer, and even the elders thought he didn’t have to train, so he graduated right on the spot.

The next day, they started their journey. When they were out of the forest, Sagfur appeared out of nowhere and

said, "Give me that map!"

"No!" said Skipper, "It's ours."

Sagfur took a leaf he thought the map was on, not knowing that it was a fake. He said, "See you later."

After Sagfur left, the group went to Elmrose's tree where they thought the treasure might be, not knowing it is actually under Sagfur's tower.

When it was night, Mark exclaimed, "I think I see it!"

The crew was so happy, Skipper even played the ballad of "Old Tame Tam".

The next day when they reached Elmrose's tree, they started digging, looking for treasure, but then Elmrose, the squirrel, came over to them and said, "I have what you're looking for."

He produced a small map that pointed to the bottom of Sagfur's tower and Oak exclaimed,

"It will be hard to get the treasure, and we should Elmrose come along too."

"I agree," said Maple.

They traveled for days and days till they got to Sagfur's tower.

"The gate is closed!" said Mark. "Can you pull the lever Elmrose?"

"I'll try," said Elmrose.

She disappeared through the window. The friends heard a click and the gate opened. They all cheered and Elmrose appeared through the window. The group went through the gate and a cage fell on them, but since Mark was in the back of the group he was not trapped. He saw a keyhole and surprisingly his key fit! He put his key in the hole and the cage started to rise. A booming voice said, "You don't have to share the treasure with them."

Mark said in response, "But I will because they are my friends!"

Then out of the shadows Sagfur appeared and said "Then I will have to take it."

Mark ran until the cage was high enough for his friends to get through, and then they ran around until they were at the cage lever and Sagfur was at the spot where the cage would fall. Sagfur said, "I have you now!"

The friends pulled the lever, and the cage dropped. Sagfur was caught! Sagfur said, "Let me out."

The small group descended the stairs to the basement, and started digging. Soon after, they found a treasure chest, but it had a lock. Mark said, "I have a key!"

Mark unlocked the chest and inside was a life time supply of pie! Afterward they went home and shared the pies with everyone.

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## Whipping Wind

Honorable Mention Elementary

*Shyler Stehlik, 12, Elsie's E. E. Knight Elementary School. Daughter of Chris and HyDee Stehlik.*

The rustling of branches could be heard from overhead. Cardinals, Blue Jays, Sparrows, and Whippoorwills twittered away in the soft morning light. The river murmurs under the strong sheets of glass. Fawns stand with bright eyes following the does who flicker their gaze at sudden movements. Rabbits, squirrels, and field mice roam by tree roots and bushes. The white blanket of snow sparkled as the sounds of dawn rang through the trees. This morning started off normal but soon changed. A new song started on its way and everything became still listening. A young girl came into view between the thick brown trunks. She sang as she came, picking her way through the thick snow. Stopping short three yards away from the group of animals, she drew a hand from the bag she carried and sprinkled birdseed on the snow. The birds cautiously flew down and picked carefully at the seeds. Next from the bag came hickory nuts for the squirrels and mice. Last of all she pulled out carrots, bright orange carrots for the deer and rabbits. They all knew then that she was a friend bringing them food in the dead of winter.

The sun was high when it hit. Walls of snow, blistering wind ran through the trees. All the animals had taken

cover in a small cave hidden by evergreens and shrubs. The birds sat with solemn songs on rocks near one side of the cave. The deer and other smaller creatures lay or sat in patches of soft moss. A blizzard had come in the middle of the afternoon, separating the animals from their homes and their food. So, they were stranded in a cave without any food, wondering if they would survive. One small Whippoorwill gave a solemn single note of sadness. Listening to the whistling winds and the cold beat like a drum against the stone walls, the arms of the evergreens kept out most of the storm creating a barrier. A slender doe paced while her fawn lay curled watching with wide eyes and listening to the noise outside. Every animal hoped that their forest visitor would find them and bring food. For now a squirrel was in search of some source of water. A chatter was heard after awhile, the leader of the deer there, a strong, noble stag lead the rest toward the back of their shelter. The squirrel sat in front of a small area against the stone. There, water pooled into the slanting floor, it flowed down the gray wall from the ceiling, darkening the stone. Now they could all survive if they drank the water, lasting some time without food, but not forever. One small cardinal had an idea, if two days passed without change in luck, he would go out on his own and begin searching for their forest friend. That night went by slowly, no creature slept, but lay in waiting for dawn.

The next day went by slower than the night, some of the squirrels and mice gathered twigs and leaves from around the evergreens and somehow managing to create a fire for warmth. The great tongues licked, leapt, and devoured their food, spreading light and warmth through the hollow rock. The wind whistled all day and all night on the first day, giving a sort of lonely company. The morning of the second day, every animal had a job, some were only guarding the cave entrance or exploring where the cave lead. All day they tried to keep busy even with things that didn't need to be done, like checking something more than once, more than twice. That night all the animals were starting to hunger for one pleasure they did not have. The small cardinal took flight, when no one was looking, starting a long journey through the cold.

The wind battered him as he flew through the low arms of the giants. Snow obscured his vision and the cold proceeded to try and make him lose the little strength he had. Resting on the forest floor wasn't as easy as it should have been, his red feathers sheltered him from the snowflakes falling as he waited all alone. Howwwu! Howwwu! His drowsy eyes popped open to see bats, owls, wolves, and other creatures streaking through the blizzard toward the hidden cave. The bird's mind raced as it thought, more creatures, not even the wolves can survive out here, I just hope I can find help while I can. With that, it gave him strength to fight the battle many would not know about until the end, driving back the other thought that all the animals depended on him even though they didn't know.

Wolf after shaggy, gray wolf trotted into the warmth, the others stood staring. The leader of the pack stepped forward and sat on his haunches, telling the words anyone would understand. So, the stag beckoned them in from the cold with a toss of his head and they all made room for the newcomers.

Wings beat as a tiny heart raced, he was almost so far away from the little hole in which he slept last night, it was a pinprick in the icy world. Looking down he spotted the long curving river that murmured still under its glass sheet. The air had a new feeling to it as the storm roared on, something that only your heart could explain. The cold battered and did its best to stop the determined cardinal, but never prevailed. He spread his feathers out resembling a fan that was half open, half closed, using some wind that was working hard against him. The draft propelled him on making the rest of the mission look like a summer breeze, but of course it wasn't. Luck seemed to be so far away from that large forest or perhaps just out of reach. A small dot could barely be seen between the thousands of snowflakes along the horizon. Speeding up to see what it was, the cardinal lost altitude, hovering a small while just above the snow then flying on. Closer and closer he flew until he could see a shape he had never seen before, his heart pounded. Gray, fluffy clouds, and rows out of what looked like a bright red tree trunk. Below that was an oddly formed hill made entirely of wood. As he grew closer, he made out the finer details, openings covered with what looked like clear ice, the top was pointed, not flat like that of cave's, and a funny looking row of trees that were evenly spaced and held more trees crosswise. The trees there didn't have branches or roots that went into the frozen earth. Something stood made of wood where the bird thought an opening should be. Icicles hung from the sides of the roof, resembling icy fingers

protecting whatever it was. Flying up to one of the clear iced opening, looking into a sort of room almost nothing would recognize. A bed stood in the corner, neatly made with a patchwork quilt, a stump like thing by a kind of shelf both made of solid wood, a tall bare tree that let down rays of sun, and a black stump that was long sat before something that shone a brilliant black with white toward the front. Someone was sitting on the long stump, setting their fingers gently down on the white part, making a beautiful song worthy of any bird. That person just happened to be the same that had given them food, singing along with the melody.

Whines echoed in the almost pure silence, ringing through the sensitive ears of many. Their insides all on fire. Starving with only water in hope to cease the pain. Warmth of the crackling flames was the only thing there that had been fed for five days and even his food was running low. The cold came in easier now, driving them all back further into the darkness. Birds sat here and there with not even a song or a note left within them. The deer, rabbits, squirrels, and wolves lay on dark mosses losing energy every moment. They were all surprised that the wolves chose to starve, rather than kill, maybe it was because they were all in the same predicament, like friends or allies working together to reach a common goal. A small breeze blew in, ruffling their feathers and fur while letting the flames flick brighter. Then came, not a breeze but a strong wind, plunging everything into sudden darkness.

Finding her was one thing, getting her attention was another. Apparently, pecking on the clear ice, then singing the loudest song he knew wasn't helping in the fact that she still didn't hear him. Sitting and waiting until the music stopped took patience, which somehow he was able to get. He had an idea that he would fly straight at the ice and hope he would make enough noise to get attention that way. Here goes he thought backing up. In a second, he was flying toward the ice, broke through it, fell, and was knocked senseless into deafening darkness.

The sound of soft singing was coming from somewhere above, but the world was still as dark as the cloudy, new moon sky. Slowly light filled his vision, making him blink repeatedly to adjust to it. The girl looked down at him, smiling wide, still singing. Suddenly he remembered his mission, hopping up and twittering away, afraid of the thought that he had slept for years. "Ok! Ok, little one! It's ok", she said, standing up. He was surely not ok, he needed her to follow him right then! Flying over to where her bag hung on a peg near the door, he twittered away again, then flew back and jabbed at her sleeve. "Do you want food?" No, I don't, he thought, let's try again. This time he flew to the bag, flew back, jabbed at her sleeve, then flew to the broken ice, and pecked at a jagged piece that still remained. "Do you want me to go outside and feed you?" Almost there, little bit more. She got up, put on her coat, hat, scarf, and mittens, then she grabbed her bag and turned something that opened out into the frozen world. On second thought, she grabbed the patchwork quilt and stepped out into the cold.

The wind whistled and blistered cold as the bird again tried to make the girl follow him. The sun barely showed between the blizzard and the dark clouds, making it hard to see the trees until you were almost too close to sidestep. Hours later, the two found themselves lost and decided to rest. The girl cleared the top layer of snow from a small area for her to sleep, while the bird found a knot in a tree trunk nearby. The sky was growing dark, throwing long shadows over everything. "Good night little bird. Sweet dreams." Her eyelids drooped, heavily laden with sleep, falling into a deep, dark nightmare.

"Layla!" "Layla!" She tried to run, but could not get anywhere. "Layla!" Her father was calling from somewhere far away. Waves tossed and rolled, thunder pounded her eardrums as lightning lit the stormy clouds. Rain fell as the image grew stronger, splintered wood, open sea, her father drifting farther away, he ducked under the surface and never came up, while someone was screaming, crying. Then suddenly it stopped, the storm was gone, her father was gone, and nothing could bring back the true, horrible memory of that night. Her eyes stung, she felt cold sweat on her forehead, realizing that she had screamed, she had cried and now it was all over. She spent so much time trying to forget that moment that she even forgot her own name and even though she ran away, her memory was still there in her dreams.

Hunger was not the word that those who have been stranded in a cave would use, more like starving. It felt like their stomachs were eating themselves from the inside and they were growing so weak they could barely walk or fly. A speckled fawn lifted her head, was it, was it, she thought. It was, complete silence, except for the steady drip of the water falling in a puddle. All the rest stood and were lead out by the stag and alpha wolf.

Sunshine sparkled on the snow, hurting their eyes from being in total darkness for so long. The wolves howled, the birds and bats sang, the mice and squirrels chattered, the rabbits hopped playfully, and the deer pawed the ground. They were all joyful that it was finally over. Soon the joy and happiness was gone, replaced by the hollow pain, looking out into the bright world.

The cardinal and Layla made their way through empty bushes, coming to a clearing. The blizzard had ended sometime in the night, leaving hills of snow and sunlight. A group of animals came out from behind evergreens and shrubs. Layla stood watching as the bird flew over while singing. He came back and pulled at her sleeve, as if to say, "Come with me!" Layla stumbled forward, drawing just close enough to see them properly. They all looked up with hopeful, but mournful eyes. It's a good thing I brought lots of food and meat for the wolves and owls. Bending down, she patted the alpha's head, stood and brought raw meat from her bag, laying it in a pile a few yards away. Then the birds received their seeds, owls their small game, bats their fruit, the squirrels and mice their hickory nuts, the deer and rabbits their carrots, and then brought out a big, red apple for herself to eat. They ate happily, then ran around the trees almost like hide and go seek.

After that day, Layla found her home again, with a family of friendly animals. Once she did leave to visit her old home and ran into a bear, but that's another story.

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## **Finding the Hidden Castle** by Hailey Klenk

Honorable Mention Winners

*Hailey Klenk Age: 9, Fourth Grade, Mrs. Wing*

It was a dark cold winter's night, James Oliver Curwood was walking about when he saw a light flickering in the distance. He had walked this route many times before and never seen this light. Was he lost? Did he take a wrong turn? He walked up to it and saw a flame inside. Mr. Curwood had never seen fire before. So to him this was a big deal. But after he turned his head he saw something even better.

It was a great big castle hidden behind the trees. He went up to the big wooden doors. "CLUNCK, CLUNCK, CLUNCK." He knocked on the door.

"Who is it" someone said in a small but sweet voice.

"Ja... Ja... James Oliver Curwood"

"What a nice name would you like to come in?" The voice asked

"Why yes please ma'am, "What's your name?" Asked Mr. Curwood

"Olivia, Olivia St. Johns," she said "What brings you here James?"

"Nothing really, I got lost I guess. What a nice castle you have Olivia." James said.

"Oh I it's not mine, I'm just the care taker of the castle. It's belonged to Robert St. Peters in 1792. I've been taking care of it for him since then." Olivia told him.

"You know," began Mr. Curwood "you sure do know a lot about this castle Olivia." James stated

"Why, yes I do. Because I spend so much time reading books in our library I just remember so many things." She said

"You have a library!" James loved to read all kinds of books especially big thick ones.

"Yes," replied Olivia "follow me," James followed Olivia to the indoor library. "Have you ever wrote a book before?" asked Olivia.

"No, but I want to someday" replied James

"If you did, what would you write about?" Olivia questioned.

"The wilderness. Wolves. That kind of stuff. James said.

"Cool, you sound like you would enjoy that." Olivia said.

As they walked to the library James looked around and saw many pictures of Mr. Robert St. Peters hanging on

the bare walls of the castle. Mr. Curwood thought he looked kind of old to have run a castle long ago.

“Hey Olivia, what would you write about? He asked

“Oh I don’t know maybe research books on different types of books of flowers or animals.” She replied

“Cool does that mean you like to read those kinds of books to?” He questioned

“Actually,” Olivia began “I love to read about historical fiction. Everybody thinks it’s weird but that’s ok if you do.”

“I don’t think it’s weird I actually think that’s pretty cool.” James said

“You don’t?” Olivia said

“Why of course not.” James said

Once they got to the library James saw all kinds of books, thick ones, skinny ones and even pop up ones. Soon he began reading tons and tons of books. After he was done Olivia came over and told him about a library card to check out all the books he wanted to.

Eventually he remembered that he had to be home by 6:00 o’clock for dinner. It was already 5:45 and it took him 20 minutes to get home from here so he checked out a couple of books, said goodbye to his new friend Olivia and was off.

As soon as he got home his mother asked him “what took you so long?”

He said “oh I just found a hidden castle.”

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## **A House Divided** by Delaney Atkinson

*Delaney Atkinson, 12, daughter of Brian and Heather Atkinson of Laingsburg, is in 7th grade and is home-schooled.*

It was a sunny, autumn day in Denmark, 1939. Annemarie Kaufmann and her older brother Sylvester were walking home from the Saint Canute School in Copenhagen. Just then Morten, the scandalous teaser, jumped straight in front of Sylvester. "Hey, there Sylie watch where you're going. Don't want that German father of yours to start yelling at you."

Annemarie had seen the encounter with the bully from a distance, and quickly ran up to her brother and whispered in his ear, "Just ignore him Sylvester. You can't let him get your goat."

And the two walked on together. "What's the matter Sylie, you gonna let a girl save you from the big ol' meanie?" another boy shouted at the Kaufmann's retreating backs.

Then Morten began snorting with laughter and the other boys joined in. As the two siblings continued on Sylvester began, "I'm sorry Annie," he said, "and thanks for saving me from a big fight."

Annemarie was silent. "Well, aren't you going to scold me or something?" asked Sylvester. Annemarie was still quiet.

"What's wrong with you?" her brother questioned.

"Sylvester," she began "I was just wondering why everyone is teasing us about our father all of a sudden. Some older kids were whispering to each other when I walked down the hall this afternoon. I asked Mary Ellen about it, but she just shrugged her shoulders." Annemarie finished. Mary Ellen had been her best friend since second grade. They shared secrets and dreams and Annemarie was certain that if something was wrong Mary Ellen would tell her.

Now it was her brother's turn to be silent. The air was beginning to turn cool and the sunset illuminated bright colors upon the trees. Finally Sylvester said with a heavy sigh, "You're just too young to understand."

Annemarie halted abruptly and turned to face her brother. "I may be younger than you Sylvester, but I am 11 years old," she stormed. She turned swiftly and continued on in a rapid, irritated pace the remainder of the way home. When she got there she opened the front door and ran to her room slamming the door shut without saying a word to her mother who stared after her with a questioning gaze.

"What on earth has got into Annie?" Mrs. Kaufmann asked as Sylvester walked through the already open door. Sylvester continued on as though he hadn't heard a word she'd said. He was thinking. Thinking about how, when he was little, Hannah would tell him everything.

Hannah was his older half-sister. She was the daughter of Hermann Kaufmann's first marriage. Hannah's mother had died of influenza when Hannah was a toddler. Hermann Kaufmann married their mother, Ada, a poor, young farm girl shortly after and together they immigrated to Denmark to begin a new life. Ada had loved Hannah as her own child and Sylvester was born just a year after their arrival.

Hannah adored her little brother and although there was nearly six years between them she never tired of his antics. She doted on him like a little mother and Sylvester followed her everywhere he possibly could, but "not to school" she would say. When Hannah left for school each morning he trailed her to the front door with his sad little face looking up pleading her to stay and play. He knew just when to expect her home and waited as patiently as he could.

One afternoon she didn't come at the expected time. And when mother and he put on their sweaters and ventured to find her they came upon a horse and buggy accident. Ada noticed Hannah's little red shoe lying along the roadway and she knew in an instant that Hannah was gone. Sylvester was devastated. He remained sullen and miserable until the arrival of his new baby sister four months later. Suddenly the young boy seemed jovial and contented again. He loved that baby girl from the moment he set eyes upon her.

Sylvester realized that he should be to Annemarie all that Hannah had been to him. So he went to her bedroom where she was sobbing quietly. "I'm sorry Annie," he said "You are right. You're not a little girl anymore."

Sylvester told her about Hannah which made her cry even more because she had never known that she had a sister.

“I would have liked to have known her,” Annemarie cried, “I always wished I had an older sister and now I know I did.”

Sylvester finished by telling her of the coming war. He also divulged to her his greatest secret. “When the war comes to Denmark I am going to join the Danish Resistance, which has already begun to form. We are going to ship the Denmark Jews, including mother to Sweden, where they will be out of harm’s way.”

Sylvester and Annemarie bonded that evening in a way that made them more than brother and sister, more than allies in a great battle, with the same hope – the same dream.

The next day at school was unimaginable. The children were passed rude notes with swastikas on them and no one would talk to them. The teachers were no comfort. They only turned their heads and mumbled, “You Germans should have never come to this country.”

Even Mary Ellen, Annemarie’s best friend ignored her. The end of the horrible day brought fresh tears to Annemarie’s eyes. No one could tell her that everything was going to be all right. No one could comfort her or convince her that things would get better. She knew her life would never be the same. And deep within their hearts, all the Kaufmann’s knew that nothing would ever be the same.

The next month brought days that seemed never ending. The children did their schooling at home and left the house only for hurried trips to the market. A haze of anxiety seemed to suspend itself over their lives. And then the letter came...the letter that brought them to their knees.

Attention Mr. Kaufmann,

By order of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei: You MUST return to Germany immediately. If you do not arrive within the month there will be consequences.

The entire family pleaded with Mr. Kaufmann not to go. They saw the terror of losing them on his face mingled with the fear of separation. He refused to give his heart heed to their protests. He promptly packed his bag and departed, leaving Mrs. Kaufmann to console the children. “One day,” she said “this house and this world will no longer be divided.”

The children became horribly desolate as the war came on. In September, the news came that Poland had been taken over by Germany. One night Annemarie, lying wide awake, heard the front door creak open. She slipped out of bed to investigate and found her brother creeping silently out the door. At that moment she made the unconscious decision to follow him. Hiding in the shadows she quietly crept along behind him. She saw a massive building looming ahead and watched as her brother proceeded to the immense door, knocked and whispered, “For Denmark”.

The door opened and a young man poked his head out, looked to and fro and stepped aside as Sylvester slinked into the building. Giving little thought to the consequences Annemarie decided to follow her brother’s example. She waited a few moments, pulled her cloak over her head and strode on into the unknown. She stretched to her full height and declared in a gruff voice, “For Denmark”.

The same process ensured her entry. The darkness engulfed her. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness she peered around the doorway and saw the group of young men that included her brother. She was astonished to see several young women among them. She felt a brush against her back as another person passed by to join the assembly. She was about to do the same when it occurred to her that maybe she shouldn’t be there. Abruptly realizing the depth of the situation, she stood motionless, held her breathe and listened intently. She could only hear a few snatches of their conversation. “What should we do about the Nazi’s?” and “How long before they invade?”

Annemarie suddenly realized this was the secret meeting of the Danish Resistance that Sylvester had informed her of. Fear swiftly overcame her and she longed for the warmth and comfort of her bed, left just a short time ago. She turned quickly and frantically searched for the door she had entered. Like a storm cloud that appears unexpectedly a dark figure blocked her exit. She came face-to-face with a young man. Annemarie could only hope that he was one of the resistance members. Knowing her behavior might have caused suspicion she stammered to explain the misunderstanding, when, as quick as lightning, the man grabbed her around the throat and dragged her out the door.

Annemarie woke up in broad daylight. She suddenly remembered what had happen and instinctively curled into a ball to protect herself from the unknown. Burying her head into her chest she shielded her eyes from the bright light. "The girl's awake," she heard someone say in a foreign language. She knew that language, it was German. That could only mean one thing, her captors were Germans.

"Who could these Germans be?" she wondered, "her father?" No, it couldn't be. Why would he take his own daughter hostage? Maybe he had been forced to take her against his own will? Something here was not right. What had her brother said about the Nazi's? And where was her brother anyway? Before she could question further she heard a thump near her right side. She turned her head as far as she could and her eyes widened in astonishment. Sitting on the floor, hands bound at the wrist, sat Sylvester Kaufmann, her one and only brother. Sylvester sat on the floor looking stunned. A uniformed officer came over and untied his wrists. He began speaking to them in Danish. "We speak German too," Annemarie said defiantly.

The officers surrounding them laughed. The one who had spoken to them in Danish spoke again, but this time in German. "How fortunate that your senseless father taught you," he said, as he spat on the ground on front of them.

"Do not think about running away, you cannot escape. Any attempt will cost you your life." Another soldier said. He walked from the room and came back with woman who he carelessly tossed into the room. She landed with a thud next to Annemarie's trembling body. She studied the woman momentarily and let out a faint gasp as she realized it was her mother. As soon as the officers left them she raced to her mother's side. She cupped her mother's chin in her hands and examined her tear stained cheeks. Still stunned, Sylvester slowly crumpled to the ground beside his mother. "Oh mother, what have they done to you?" Annemarie sobbed.

"Don't worry about me, Annie," her mother said in a raspy voice. The three of them clung to each other and sobbed soundlessly on the dirty, rotten floor. In the next room they could hear muffled moans of distress, shouting and slamming doors. In whispering tones, Sylvester related the story of how he and other Resistance members had been captured by the vile Germans. "But there is still some hope left," Sylvester whispered with shining eyes. "Some of the other members of the Resistance had not yet reported to the meeting. Niels left a secret message telling them of our imprisonment in hopes that they would be able to find and rescue us."

The family endured many dreadful days in the little, secret hovel in the woods. The food they were given was scarcely edible, but they ate because they knew they must keep their strength up. They were allowed no fresh air or exercise and their muscles grew cramped and weaker each day. Day by day their optimism dwindled. And even Sylvester was beginning to lose all faith in the chance of being freed from this repulsive prison by any of his comrades.

One day, after being held captive for several weeks, Annemarie heard a barely audible, indistinct voice in her ear. She thought someone was saying, "Come with me. And hurry."

She tilted her head as far as she could manage and was astounded to see, bent at her side, a young man around Sylvester's age. Sylvester at once recognized him as a fellow Resistance ally and his adrenaline surged within his veins, fortifying a strength nearly forgotten. The man repeated his plea once again and Annemarie prayed her feeble legs would move swiftly enough to pick her up. Relieved at the opportunity to be released from the horrid encampment, the family obeyed. They dashed outside rejoicing to breathe the fresh air once more. As they scurried along behind the young man they felt the surge of others merging at their sides as more captives were released by the Resistance rescuers. The hostages rushed swiftly from the shack and within minutes the place had disappeared out of their sight forever.

Annemarie, feeling many emotions, tried to resist the tears that beckoned within and in this desperation the fear of her captors disappeared along with the view of her prison. Now feelings of hope wrapped Annemarie like a warm blanket within which she could no longer feel the bitterness.

"Where should we go now mother?" Sylvester asked Ada Kaufmann. "The Nazi's will stop at nothing to punish us for being who we are."

"We have a plan in place," Jorgen, the leader of the Resistance fighters, told them. "We must follow it strictly to ensure a safe passage. A ship transporting many Jewish families is sailing for Sweden on Saturday. In the

meantime, you will be lodging at a Resistance safe house where you will find a place to wash, fresh clothing and a warm meal.”

The Kaufmann family knew it was the only way they would ever be free and that the journey may become treacherous. They could only hope one day to see their dearly loved husband and father once again. The thought of leaving their beloved Denmark tore at their hearts. It was the place their family had started over, had begun anew. It was the cornerstone of their family. They yearned to return one day and remained hopeful that the beauty of the people, of the country, would not collapse under the Nazi Empire and the wretched power of Adolf Hitler and his allies.

The Kaufmann family waited with anxious hearts as each day the departure loomed closer. They dreamed of once again being free. Free to breathe the fresh air of the spring morning, to feel the earth under their fingernails and smell the fresh soil of a newly tilled garden. To linger leisurely in the market, touching the fabric, smelling the fresh fruit and visiting with the shopkeepers. In Sweden, they would begin again.

Early Saturday morning, they awoke before the sun rose in the sky. The Resistance members ushered them in small groups down to the docks and to the departing vessel that was to be their only escape from the detestable Nazis. They boarded the ship along with numerous other refugees, most who were Jewish. Moments before the ship pulled anchor Sylvester announced, “I cannot go to Sweden. I cannot leave when there is work to be done. The Resistance Fighters are making a difference and if I can prevent just one more person from suffering at the hands of the Nazi’s it is my duty. Mother, you and Annemarie must go off to Sweden to safety, but I shall remain in Denmark, serving my country, even if it means I may die.”

Mrs. Kaufmann burst out in heart-breaking sobs, but she nodded her head in a small half circle - knowing that Sylvester was right, even if it was unbearable to say goodbye. “You go.” she stuttered faintly, amid falling tears. “It is for the best.”

Annemarie was forlorn, but she also envied her brother for his bravery and valor in defending his country. Sylvester gave his weeping loved ones a heartfelt embrace and his sorrowful eyes glistened with tears, all the while a resolute smile formed at his lips. He turned gently and walked down the gangplank to join his fellow Resistance fighters.

Within the next few days, Ada and Annemarie’s emotions trickled out onto the laps of kindly people, old and young alike. The days spilled together in a collage of pain and sorrow, fear and dread and then finally resolved with faith and contentment that in this new life they would somehow be fine. The journey that began weeks earlier finally ended as the ship reached the shores of Sweden. As they prepared to disembark a kindly, elderly couple named Mr. and Mrs. Johansson, who had become fond of Annemarie, inquired if they had made arrangements for a place to stay. The Johansson’s were returning to their native home and welcomed them to join them in their small apartment until they were settled enough on their own. Ada, attempted to refuse the offer, not wanting to be a burden, but the Johansson’s insisted. Ada realized this was a blessing from God alone and she heartily thanked them as tears of gratification streamed down her cheeks.

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They were settling in as well as imaginable, but from time to time Annemarie would find her mother leaned over the garden bench weeping inconsolably. She would try to comfort her, but sometimes she would just cling to her and sob along.

One fine afternoon, Ada and Annemarie were languishing in the warm summer sun, faces shining with happiness and serenity. They gathered bouquets of forget-me-not and thought about Herman and Sylvester, praying for their safety and wellbeing. From somewhere up the enormous hill on which the flowers grew came a robust voice calling their names “Ada! Annemarie!” It shouted.

A man’s figure appeared on the horizon. It took Ada and Annemarie a moment before recognition registered in their minds. They turned toward each other, eyes gaping, as gigantic smiles enveloped their faces. And they dashed off up the hill laughing like little girls.

“Father, Father!” Annemarie called.

“Herman, Herman!” shouted Ada.

They engulfed him in an embrace that knocked him completely off his feet. His face shone with joy and relief at finally finding his beloved family. When Annemarie could breathe again she opened her eyes to the bright sun and noticed another figure hobbling toward them. All at once she knew it was Sylvester, her cherished brother, her comrade, her hero. She sprang forward and consumed him within her arms. It didn't matter that he was injured, it didn't matter that they weren't in Denmark. They had each other and no words could express the immense exhilaration of their reunion. Their house was no longer divided, nor would it ever be again.