



PIKES PEAK LIBRARY DISTRICT

2017 Teen Fiction Anthology

AWARD WINNERS FROM THE 2017 TEEN FICTION WRITING CONTEST

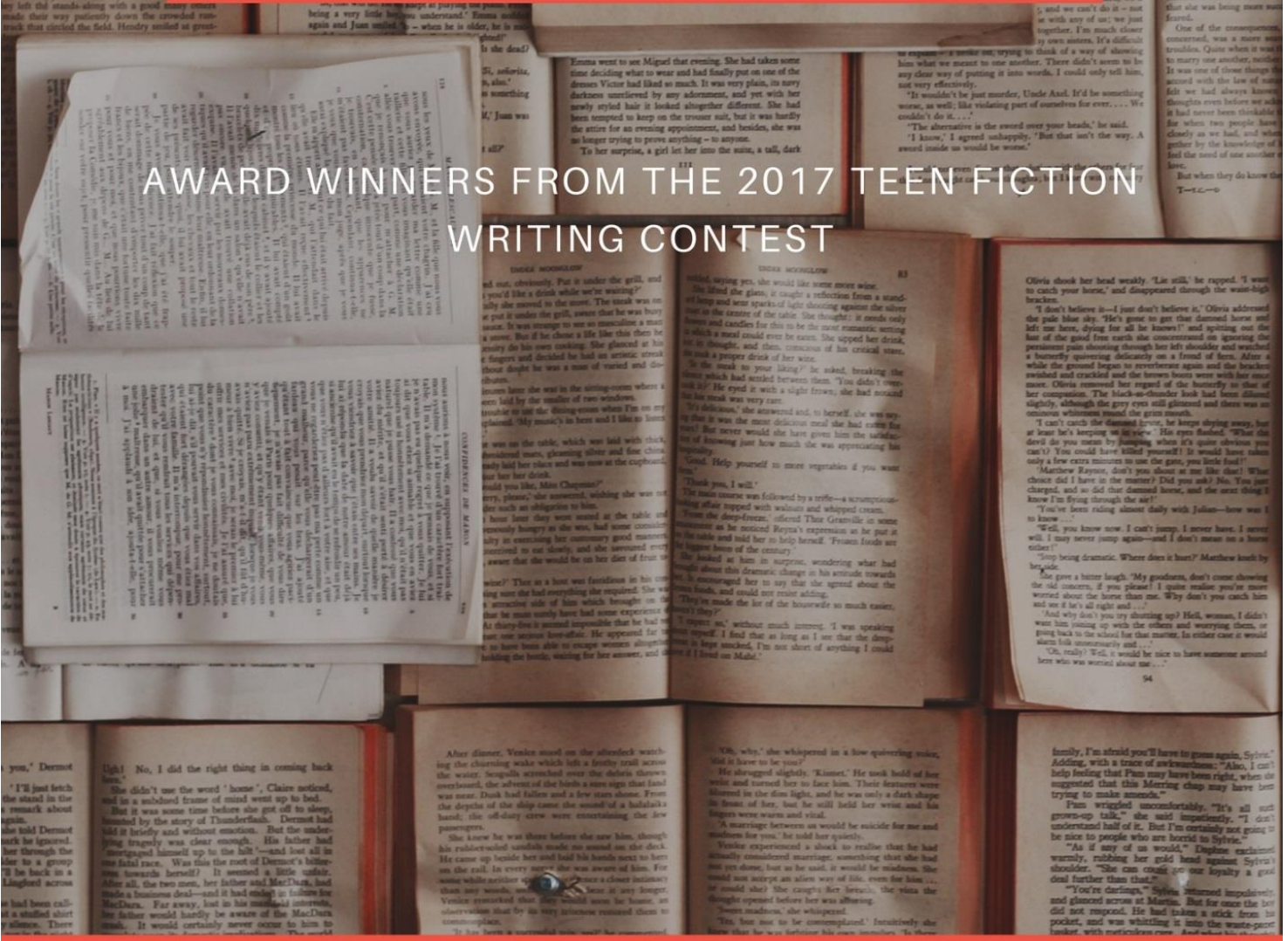


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The Teen Fiction Writing Contest is held each year by the Pikes Peak Library District for students in grades 6-12. Each year we challenge them to write a short story in under 2,500 words that begin with the same line. And each year, we have a spectacular group of authors rise to the challenge.

This year, our starting sentence—“ Everything changed when night fell,” was chosen by local author, Evangeline Denmark. From this one line we received 42 completely unique and wonderful stories, ranging from imaginative fantasy to a new take on Cinderella.

Our winners were chosen by an excited group of staff members from a variety of locations and positions across the district. Our judges read blind—that is they didn’t know the name of the author of the piece. These judges had the unenviable task of choosing winners from the great submissions we received.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Foundation and the Friends of the Rockrimmon library for the gift allowing us to purchase the prizes for our winners today.

I hope you enjoy the following stories from our winners.

Becca Philipsen
Teen Services Librarian
Pikes Peak Library District

Honorable Mention, Middle School Division:

Fox and Wolf by Brinley Ruesch

Everything changed when night fell. The moon glowed with a light blue color as it grew ten times its size. Families gathered on the sides of the streets outside their homes, watching the night sky with great awe. Cars stopped and traffic grew. In a small hospital at the end of Parlok Street, baby girl Fox was born. Her mother held her close, scared from the outside chaos. Her mother looked up from her baby to see a tiny flame appear in midair. She watched in shock as it grew into a gorgeous red bird. She looked at Fox's mom.

"Don't be afraid," the bird said, noticing how huge the mom's eyes were.

Fox's mom tried to investigate every detail of the pretty bird. "Who...wha-what are you?"

The bird laughed. "I'm a phoenix, Chloe."

"You know my name."

"Yes. And I came here for a reason."

Chloe glanced at her baby. "You came for Fox."

"Ye--"

"Well then you'll just have to leave because she's mine and there's no way I'm giving up my only child the day she was born!" Chloe glared.

"I'm sorry, but there is no other way. Just say good-bye to her and I'll take her. She'll be safe where I come from, you won't have to worry," the phoenix said.

"No, never."

"No matter how hard you fight, Fox will come with me, Chloe."

Chloe looked at her baby and kissed her on the head. At the same time, the phoenix flew over and took the baby.

“No!” Chloe yelled.

“I’m sorry!” The phoenix called back as she left the room, dropping a small flame onto Chloe’s head. Soon enough, the mother would forget about her baby.

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“Torch, I need push pins! Do you have any that I can use?” Fox yelled to her guardian phoenix.

Torch flew in with a small box full of colorful pins. “Will these do?”

Fox brushed her long red hair out of her face. “Yeah, thank you.”

“Yup, no problem,” Torch replied. “Whatcha’ making?”

“Oh, nothing. Just pinning up stuff on my new bulletin board.”

“So you are doing something,” Torch said, looking over to the bedroom wall as Fox rolled her eyes. “I see you hung the board up,” Torch said.

Fox nodded her head and grabbed the pins. “Thanks again.”

Torch flew out of the room and shut the door behind her. Fox ran to the board and set the pins down. Fox felt like she didn’t fit in. She lived with phoenixes after all, and she was human. She needed to find the rest of the people, and her family. How would’ve Fox gotten here anyway? It was time to start searching. The first thing Fox thought to do was a display board, like the ones

the detectives use in TV, even though she wasn't a detective. After being in her room for an hour, Fox really had no idea what she was doing.

"I quit," she said, flopping down hard on her bed. She hadn't realized how hard this would be at the start. "That's what I get for not thinking."

Fox fell asleep after laying there for five minutes. Her drowsiness had gotten to her.

Fox's dream came to life during the night as she slept. She was in a hospital, standing outside of a door. *This seems familiar*, she thought. Fox closed her hand around the door knob and turned it. Inside, there lay a woman in a bed holding a baby close to her. She kissed the baby's head and looked up at a beautiful phoenix. It reminded Fox of Torch, her own phoenix. The phoenix flew over and took the baby.

"No!" the woman yelled.

"I'm sorry!" the phoenix called back. It dropped a small flame, barely noticeable, as it flew off. The piece of red fire landed on the mom's forehead as she cried her heart out.

Now Fox was flying through the sky, right next to the phoenix holding the baby. The night sky was light blue and the moon looked larger. Right as they flew over a small cliff with a red fox on it, the blue moon shattered to red pieces, and lightning came down, striking the baby with red lightning. The phoenix kept on flying until they reached an amazing place within the trees. It was inhabited with phoenixes. It looked **exactly** like Fox's home now.

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"So are you going to tell me why I was taken here?" Fox asked Torch at breakfast.

"What are you talking about?" Torch replied.

“You took me away from my mom at the hospital. Why?”

Torch looked down, “It was for your safety.”

“Safety?! Safety is not living with or seeing your own family for the rest of your life?!”

Fox yelled.

“I took you for a reason, Fox.”

“But why? What’s the reason?” Fox questioned.

“Because you’re the chosen one,” Torch said. “How do you know about this anyway?”

Fox rolled her eyes, “The chosen one? This isn’t Star Wars. Plus, you’ve said that a lot of times, but I know I’m not that special.”

“So?” Torch asked. “How do you know about it?”

There was a silence for ten seconds before Fox answered. “I had a dream last night, and it was of you taking me from my mom.”

“Oh,” Torch replied.

Fox looked down and started crying, her red hair covering her freckled face. She reached her hands up to her eyes and cried into them. A minute passed when Fox stopped crying. She sniffled and set her hands back down. Fox slowly started to lift her face. Torch became scared immediately as she saw Fox’s face. Her eyes glowed red, contrasting with her wet face from the tears. She glared at Torch with flames in her eyes. Fox walked up to Torch.

“I don’t need to be cared for by a stupid phoenix, who took me away from my family,” Fox said. Her glare turned Torch to flames. Fox swiped her hand through her, making the phoenix disappear. Fox smiled as she began on her journey to find evil and her family.

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Amara started walking home, when she saw a dark cloud, just miles away. It wasn’t a normal cloud. It was pitch black with black lightning in it. She ran home faster to go tell Aura. Aura is a phoenix, who has watched over her since she was little. She was Amara’s best friend, and her parent. Aura cared for her and watched over her like a mom would do.

“Guess what I just saw outside, Aura?” Amara asked Aura as she walked in the house.

“What?” She wondered.

“Come see,” Amara led Aura out to their back porch. There were vines growing up the fence lining the porch. The trees were as green as ever in the spring. The house was nowhere near any other person. Amara lived with phoenixes, way out in the wild, which made her feel a bit left out and different.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Aura said, staring in awe at the dark cloud. It looked as if it was moving closer, but really it was getting bigger, covering more sky and land.

All of a sudden, Aura collapsed and fell to the wooden porch.

“Aura!” Amara yelled, crouching down to help her.

Aura looked up to Amara, “I have to tell you something, something very important. I took you from your mom at the hospital when you were born. I raised you because you were supposed to be the chosen one. You will save our land from any evil. Another girl was taken that

same time, as a baby from her mom, at the same hospital. She was another chosen one. I fear that things have gone terribly wrong though. She has turned evil, Amara. You are on your own, right now. Go save us all.”

“But will you be okay?”

“Yes.”

Aura turned to flame and disappeared.

That night, Amara dreamed about her getting taken from the hospital. On her way home, Amara was flying through the sky with Aura. She flew over a wolf, standing on the edge of a cliff, right as the large blue moon shattered to pieces. Baby Amara was then shot by blue lightning. She dreamt of another girl being taken. She had red hair and freckles, unlike Amara’s blonde and brown hair and pale freckle-less skin. A short part of her dream showed what looked like the same girl, except older. She was all dressed in black and red, with red eyes. She was under the large storm cloud, and was using some sort of dark magic to build a big black and red castle. She laughed evilly and then Amara woke up.

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Fox sat down on her bed and studied her hand. She’d figured out how to unleash powers she never knew about. Black and red sparkles came out, flying through the air. They paused and turned to flame immediately, disappearing right after. It reminded Fox of fireworks.

Fox created a whole castle and her outfit, just with her hands. She wore black leggings with a red shirt. Over the shirt was a black leather jacket with red spikes poking out from the

sleeves. It was matched with black leather boots with the same spikes, and a deep red headband in her Dutch braided hair.

Fox got up and walked down to a part of her dungeons. This part was reserved for red foxes. She put the foxes in cages, and used them for evil. Fox used her magic to turn their eyes red, and to make them follow her commands. She could talk to the foxes, and they could talk to her.

“Hello, Ash,” Fox told the lead fox.

“Hello, Fox. What do you need?” He replied.

“I need you to show me the girl somehow.”

“But how?” Ash asked.

“I don’t know, that’s why I gave you the job.”

Fox turned around. Recently, Fox had dreams of another girl, her same age and a past similar to hers. Her name is Amara, and Fox wanted to find her so they could join together. After all, it is possible that Amara could have powers.

Suddenly, a flame shaped out of midair, forming into a phoenix.

“Torch?” Fox asked.

“Yes, Fox. You didn’t realize that phoenixes are reborn. We live on forever, you know,” Torch replied.

“If you’re trying to make me stop evil, I won’t, so you can just leave.”

“Fox, you were supposed to fight evil, not become evil. You have to stop. Join forces with Amara and be good.”

Fox quickly looked over to Torch. “You know who Amara is. Where is she? Tell me!”
Fox yelled.

“I won’t.”

“Well I guess I’ll just have to make you then.” Fox reached out and swiped in front of Torch. Red sparks flew into Torch’s eyes, turning them red. She was evil now.

“Find Amara,” Fox commanded Torch.

“Yes, master,” Torch replied, and flew away to go find Amara.

Fox made a bird perch there for Torch for when she came back.

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It was early morning when Amara arrived at the big castle. She walked up stairs to the grand red doors, and knocked. They opened up and Amara walked right in. The inside was dark and gloomy. There were black walls and red rugs, and pieces of furniture that were dusty and never used.

“Hello?” Amara called.

When no one replied, Amara thought to search around the castle. She walked down a flight of stairs and found cages in a small room. They looked empty at first sight, but when she walked closer, the cages each held a red fox in them. They had evil looks and red eyes. They showed their teeth and growled when they realized Amara was there watching them. She turned

and found a bird cage with a perch inside. Standing on top of the perch was a phoenix. She too had red eyes and an evil stare.

“Why are you down here? I never invited you in,” a voice startled Amara and she turned quickly.

There on the stairs stood a girl with long red hair, Dutch braided and falling down her back. She had freckles and wore what Amara had seen in a dream. “You look just like her,” Amara said.

The girl looked puzzled.

“You were in my dream. We were supposed to be fighting evil together. Your name is Fox. You became evil because your phoenix, Torch, took you from your family,” Amara told Fox. “My name is-“

“Amara. You were in my dream. I was expecting you to show up.”

Amara looked over to the foxes and Torch. “You shouldn’t do that.”

“Do what?” Fox asked.

“Make them evil. They have better lives to live than being locked up in cages and doing your bidding.”

“Whatever,” Fox said. “Come upstairs.”

Amara followed Fox upstairs to the couches that looked never used.

“Why are you evil? I’m not and I had the same past as you,” Amara explained.

“Because I grew up without a family, who doesn’t even remember me anymore!” Fox replied.

“What?” Amara asked.

“Torch dropped a memory eraser flame on my mom’s head, along with the rest of my family. Aura did the same to your family.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” Amara said. “That still shouldn’t make you evil.”

“Join me. We have powers. We can rule over everybody, and make the world into our own image together,” Fox said.

“No. I chose my side. The good side. The one that you should be on with me.”

A flame appeared next to Amara, gradually turning into a phoenix. It was Aura.

“Aura! You’re back!” Amara yelled.

“Yes, we live on forever,” Aura replied.

“Please. We can be good together. Fight evil,” Amara told Fox.

“No. And if that’s all you came here for, than you’ll have to get out.”

Fox lifted up her hand and used her dark magic to push Amara and Aura back to their home, which was covered by the dark cloud.

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Fox looked out upon the land. The darkness flowed through the dead trees and the blood red rivers flowed fast. Her image of a perfect world had come true. Evil had finally won. No good was there to stop her. The world finally belonged to Fox.

Suddenly, behind her a bright light came, slowly disappearing. Now Amara was standing in her room, with her phoenix, Aura.

“I thought I told you to leave,” Fox said.

“You did, but I didn’t listen. Now it’s time to turn you back to good.”

Amara shot out a blast of light, and Fox was knocked out.

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When Fox woke up, the world was good again, and her family was standing around her, Amara with them. Fox and Amara were neighbors, who lived with their phoenixes and families, and were best friends. Both girls fought evil the rest of their lives. As Fox and Wolf.

Third Place, Middle School Division:

*Copperstar's Nine Lives* by Shanleigh Glide



Everything changed when night fell.

As Jayfoot and I climbed the ridge to the Grove of Stars, I couldn't help but cast a glance over my shoulder at the beautiful world we lived in.

The valley these four clans knew was ringed by mountains on all sides. To the south, MoonClan's leafy forests bordered SnowClan and their willow trees. Right below us, SunClan's golden plains glowed pale in the moonlight. Right next to them sat the cats of my clan, PineClan, nestled in our camp among the pine needles. In the center of the valley sat the pond, fed by the river that ran through SnowClan's territory. In the middle of the pond was the island where all the clans gathered at the full moon under peaceful terms.

I caught up with Jayfoot, the medicine cat of PineClan, at the top of the ridge and looked down into the small hollow that was our destination. I couldn't help but gasp with surprise. The last time I had been here, I had been about to become a warrior. Although that hadn't been a long time ago, lots of things had happened since then.

"So that's why it's called the Grove of Stars..." My mew trailed off into the night.

"Pretty amazing, huh?" Jayfoot's eyes sparkled with excitement. "C'mon, we're wasting moonlight. There's still a ceremony to perform, Copperheart, or did you forget?" She pranced off into the trees.

Hurrying after her, I felt even more amazed once I stepped into the trees. The grove was completely made up of aspen trees that glinted silver in the night. I squinted my eyes, turning each silver-green leaf into miniature stars.

I made it to the center of the grove and found myself at the edge of a pool, known to the clans as the Pool of Dreams. I could also hear a waterfall further back. *It must be feeding the pool*, I thought.

Jayfoot sat off to the side, motioning to me to drink from the pool. I settled myself down, leaned over, and lapped up a few droplets of water. My eyelids started to close, and I let myself drift off into a deep sleep.

I could feel a strong wind buffing my fur. I unsheathed my claws, and found that there was grass underneath them. I blinked open my eyes, and found myself on the gathering island in the middle of greenleaf, the warmest season. There was only one place I could be.

*StarClan's hunting grounds.*

The stars seemed to dip down from the sky like a water droplet falling from a leaf. Around me, the ranks of StarClan formed, a huge mass of cats, all with stars in their fur. They formed a half circle around me. One cat stepped forward, and I gasped.

“Branchstar! I didn’t expect to-” His tail rested lightly over my jaw, cutting off what I was going to say.

He smiled. “I see my successor, Leafstar, choose his deputy well.” The former leader’s warm amber eyes held my gaze, and a hint of a laugh graced his features.

He leaned forward and touched his muzzle lightly to mine. “With this life, I give you the ability to trust your Clanmates unconditionally, no matter what mistakes they have made in the past.”

He drew away, and I felt a slight shock where he had touched me. Branchstar stepped back, and another cat took his place. This cat was a pale yellow tabby with eyes so pale they had almost no color at all.

“Who are you?” I didn’t remember this cat ever being in PineClan, at least during my lifetime.

He smiled thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose you do, seeing as I died just two moons into your lifetime. My name is Larkear. When you and your littermates were that young, I used to tell you the best

stories, and you would always beg me for more..." Larkear's eyes clouded in memories, but he refocused after a heartbeat.

"I guess I have to give you one of your nine lives," he sighed, "With this life, I give you the gift-and sometimes curse-of curiosity. Use it well." He touched my muzzle. I felt another shock course through my body, this one rougher and more energetic, like I could turn my paws in any direction and go wherever I pleased.

Larkear stepped back among the mass of cats, and I expected another cat to come forward. Instead, three little shapes trotted towards me. It took only a moment for me to see who they were.

"Spiritkit, Rainkit, Lionkit! What are you doing here?" Excitement overflowed within my body. My own kits were going to give me three of my lives!

"Hello, mother." Rainkit was trying to be serious, but she was clearly failing at it. A trace of a smile graced her features. "With this life, I give you courage to keep fighting, no matter how hard you want to give up." She had to stand on her hindpaws to touch muzzles with me.

Spiritkit stepped forward. "With this life, I give you the strength to fight for others who cannot."

Lionkit, the only tom among my litter and the first to die of the sickness that had ravaged the camp a few moons ago, stepped forward. "With this life, I give you the bravery to trust yourself in all the decisions you make." Their three combined lives burned within me like a scorching sun.

My three kits stepped back among the mass of warriors, but not a single cat came towards me; it was as if they were waiting for something. A few heartbeats passed, filled with a tense silence, and I began to get worried. Where was the next cat? What if I didn't get all my nine lives?

"Looking for me?" A rough meow made me jump. I spun around to face whoever had spoken, and was rewarded with the best surprise of the night.

“Talonclaw!” My mate smiled, and I rushed over to him and rubbed my muzzle against his.

“With this life, I give you the power to move on, however hard the loss may be.” His life rolled gently through me, soothing my fears and doubts. Despite this, it didn’t stop the tears from rolling down my face as he pulled away and joined my kits.

A bright smile broke through my haze of grief that had gripped my heart after having to tear myself away from my family once more. I recognized the face as she pushed herself gently past my kits and mate, who looked like they were hurting as much as I was that moment. A blur of fur landed heavily on top of me, playfully nipping as we rolled over together. I shook her off as I came to my feet.

“Brightheart?” Her eyes glowed and she smiled as I spoke. I forgot she trained as a warrior before she found her passion as a medicine cat but I understood why I no longer recognized her. She died an old wise cat when I was almost an apprentice, but in StarClan she was her younger self, spry and energetic.

“Hello, kitten!” She smiled happily and nuzzled me. She had delivered my two litter mates and I when she was alive. Many moons later and she was still calling me a kit. I guess I was still a kit in her eyes.

“I’m not a kitten any longer.” I said stubbornly while smiling pleadingly at the spot my mate was standing. *Help me!*

I glanced back to see her shaking her head and sighing before putting her muzzle to mine.

“With this life, I want you to be able to shrug off your duties and enjoy life every once in awhile.” She smiled and stepped back. I barely caught myself from falling onto the ground as she pulled away.

“I do enjoy life,” I grumbled out of the corner of my mouth as I felt the shock from her life as if my youth had been rejuvenated. I felt more than heard her laugh as she took her place among the cats. The next cat stepped up to me.

“Hello, child.” He smiled sweetly at me and I felt like a newborn kit after looking into his eyes. They looked as if they’ve seen everything and more. I bowed my head in a submissive gesture before looking at him. I felt curiosity consume me.

“Who are you?” My tail twitched and I immediately regretted asking him as he looked into my eyes. I found that I was lost.

“Already using your gift of curiosity, I see.” He paused his tail flicking towards me and I couldn’t help but look up and meet his gaze. “I was the first leader of Pineclan, Tall Tree, and it was born under my paw and protected by my claw. You are one in the line of many leaders, past and present.” He smiled down at me again. “I must agree with Branchstar; you are one of the best I have seen in a long time.” He leaned down towards me and I stared up at him eyes wide as his muzzle touched mine “With this life I give you the skills of a natural leader.”

His was the strongest shock of all the lives. I felt my body shake and I sat down and whimpered as the pain flew through me. It was almost unbearable, and it felt like I had been struck by lightning. I don’t know for how long I laid there, on the ground.

When I thought I could get up, Branchstar helped me stand. I had to lean against him heavily.

“Are you ready to go?” His meow rang in the unnerving silence.

“That was only eight lives,” I whispered out weakly.

“The last life is your own. Live long, live well, and be a leader PineClan can be proud of.” He threw his head back and yowled to the sky, “Copperstar! Copperstar!” All the other cats joined in until it seemed that the whole world was yowling my new name.

I gave my chest a few embarrassed licks.

Branchstar paused and put his mouth to my ear with a whisper. “May StarClan light your path, Copperstar.” His breath stirred my ear fur.

I awoke suddenly, still lying beside the Pool of Dreams.

“Did everything go alright?” Jayfoot's mew contained more excitement than concern.

I shook myself to get rid of the stiffness of sleep. “As I'm Clan leader now, I'm assuming everything's fine.” I realised that my fur was wet. I shivered slightly.

“Good. I wanted to wake you, because, well, this wet fog set in. I decided to leave you there anyway.”

“Thank you, Jayfoot.” A sudden sense of urgency overtook me. “Let's hurry back to camp. Dawn will be here any moment, and even though we're allowed safe passage here through SunClan's territory, I don't want to be stopped by their dawn border patrol.”

After a brisk walk through the rest of the grove, we came to the steep incline that overlooked all the territories. The sun was peeking over the far mountains. Encircling the sun was a rainbow, made from the fog that was now quickly burning off.

“What does it mean, Jayfoot?”

It took her a second to register that I had spoken. When she answered, her voice was far away, as if it was not Jayfoot who was speaking.

“Peace. Peace for the Clans.”

Second Place, Middle School Division:

*After Dusk* by Jessana Crouse

Everything changed when night fell. Crickets started chirping, raccoons and badgers came out of hiding while a swarm of fireflies lit up the gorgeous, dark country sky. On one particular night, Heather and her friend Lindsay decided to camp out in the forest, or so they told Lindsay's mother. What they were about to do was a strong secret with immediate consequences if it was proclaimed.

"You certainly do not have to sleep in the woods alone if you do not want to, girls," cried Lindsay's mother. "There could be wildlife!"

"Mom!" yelled Lindsay. "We're 13, remember? It is not as if we get nightmares anymore." She said this while sighing heavily and rolling her eyes.

Heather chimed in with, "We'll be fine. Don't worry about us."

Dusk fell over the town as quick as lightning. Outside, the faint outlines of stars began to appear while the sun gave way to the moon. The two girls were officially ready for action!

Once in the forest, the girls quickly changed clothes. Lindsay changed into a cute pink top and a black skirt; Heather wore super-skinny distressed jeans and a purple top. To an untrained eye, these two girls merely looked like two teenage girls out for a night on the town. However, Lindsay and Heather in actuality were night scholars at the tedious School of Spies, a school that only accepted the bravest, the strongest, the toughest, and the most promising spies-in-training. Lindsay and Heather had now participated in School of Spies for almost a month. Already they solemnly vowed to never reveal their occupation as spies, not even to their parents.

"Come on, we are going to be late!" This was Heather. She took being a spy seriously and never missed or forgot about a single class.

Lindsay sighed, but she reluctantly ran after her best friend. She thought, "It's not like we get in trouble for being late, but I'm glad Heather wants to make a good impression on our teachers and the other students. It's a good thing we're friends!"



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Ten minutes later the two girls arrived at an unknown, supposedly empty building. The open, dark doorway seemed to beckon one inside its great, gaping mouth.

“Do you get butterflies in your stomach every time we open these doors?” Heather excitedly asked.

“Ummm...sure!” Lindsay tried to act just as excited as Heather, but it was difficult. Lindsay got the shivers every time she opened the huge doors. It was cool to get to train for spying, but what if Lindsay got caught while she stood on a mission? She inwardly shuddered. That was *not* a pretty thought. Every time Lindsay began to share this with Heather, something happened- she started to feel sick or Heather looked so excited it would be cruel, even ruthless, to burst her bubble.

Just then, something happened. The huge black doors to School of Spies swung open with a *thud*. A deep voice made Lindsay and Heather jump both with joy and fear. Both girls knew who was speaking. It was Tyger Mansfield, the most revered spy in the world.

“Girls. After some training you have proven to be more fearless than any other in this school. Please, hurry, for your first mission as a spy starts tonight.”

The two girls stared at Tyger in amazement. “Do you really mean that?” Heather asked. “We’ve only been training for a month. Other students have been training for a year, maybe more, but I won’t pass up an opportunity for a dream come true!!” The young girl was so aflutter that she was blathering nonsensically at the sight of seeing her idol.

“Follow me to East Park,” Tyger continued in a deep voice. “There you will get your first assignments.”

The girls mentally cheered for themselves while feeling nervous and self conscious. They had no idea what being a professional spy, even temporarily, meant.

The walk to East Park was quick in the cool Los Angeles night air. Lindsay had a million excuses running through her mind as to why she had to get home and could not complete the unnamed mission. *I'm not ready for this*, she thought. *What if I fail and disgrace the whole country and the School of Spies? The school will not be happy with me, and what if I become expelled?* As much as Lindsay did not like being a spy, she also greatly loved and took pride in her school. Being expelled or even suspended was too much to even think about.

All too soon East Park showed up in view. The park was considerably beautiful, with trees and flowers gracing the many walkways, benches, and fountains. Near a marble fountain spraying water upwards stood an ice cream cart, which was peculiar because the park was deserted and dark. Tyger Mansfield walked forward to the cart and ordered a “small chocolate ice cream with a lot of sprinkles, maraschino cherries, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream.” Right away, the cart vanished. In its place stood two envelopes clearly marked “Lindsay” and “Heather.”

The girls, clearly in awe and mystified at what just occurred, left the envelopes on the ground.

“Go on. Don't just stand there!” ordered Tyger. “Pick them up, open the letters, and read them.” He forgot that the girls did not yet know all of the tricks and trades of a spy. “Oh, wait, I forgot... those envelopes contain your tasks and how to accomplish them. Do not tell your plans to another being; this is top secret.” And with that he turned and walked away, but not before saying in a low, hushed voice, “If you follow these directions precisely, all will go well.”

Lindsay and Heather opened their respective envelopes. Thankfully, each contained the same instructions: *1. Secretly travel to the airport. There a plane will fly to Arizona. Your jobs are to prevent Alaska Loka, a master villain, from smuggling dangerous materials into the US. If Alaska is not stopped, he may harm someone, anyone.*

“Well, at least we're in this together!” Both Lindsay and Heather were enthusiastically relieved.

Even Lindsay pretended that nothing could go wrong. Whatever the plan was, at least her best friend was going to be right there next to her.

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The airport looked really big, even bigger than normal. Heather gulped. Her happiness had deflated while getting closer and closer to the landing field. A flight attendant announced, “Last call for tickets for Arizona! Last call for tickets for Arizona!”

“Hurry!” Lindsay shrieked. Missing that flight might be the end of the world. She ran to the ticket booth and asked for two tickets to Flight 789, to Arizona. Grabbing the tickets and running back to Heather seemed to take an eternity, but the two of them made it on the flight just in the nick of time. The plane started to lift off.

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The plane safely landed in the Arizona Airport. Lindsay looked at her directions that the ice cream man had seemed to leave just for them. It said: *2. Ask the man next to the newspapers what the weather is in Spain. He will give you instructions to the border.* Lindsay and Heather turned to each other, shrugged, and walked up to the man.

“Let me do the talking, Heath,” said Lindsay. “Remember how you couldn’t stop talking to Tyger?”

“Fine.”

“Sir?” Lindsay started. “Do you know what the weather is in Spain?”

He grunted. “Turn right at South Street, go straight for about a mile, and then turn left at the Loony Cafe.”

“Thank you, sir!” the girls chorused. They turned and walked away.

Sure enough, after the Loony Cafe was Border Patrol. The girls’ instructions said: *3. Find guard suits in the locker room. Put them on and pretend to be men.*

The teenagers snuck into the locker room and found old suits. They were not fresh, but with a little bit of altering, they fit almost perfectly.

“Let’s go save the world!” Heather screamed, and the two girls fell to the ground in fits of laughter.

When they got outside, the two girls suddenly remembered how serious their mission was and immediately fell silent. They tried to imitate and fit in with the other guards. Soon however, Lindsay realized that Alaska might be posing as a guard as well if it is that easy to find a uniform. She saw a man in a guard suit sneaking away from the crowd.

“Stop!” Lindsay ran after the man. “Where are you going?”

She tried to keep quiet so as to not draw any unwanted attention to herself. It could be bad if everybody tried to jump on Alaska, if this indeed was Alaska. He would surely use all the confusion to run away and disappear only to destroy something. She and Heather would fail and never be sent on another mission again. Lindsay tried not to cry as she thought of this. She found that she was not as worked up and terrified about being caught as she was on the way to School of Spies.

The man ahead of Lindsay was now turning his head towards her. He replied with, “I’m just leaving for my lunch break. Nothing to worry about.” He finished this statement with an uneasy smile.

Lindsay felt that something was off, but she could not put her finger on it. All of a sudden, she turned and found Heather standing by her side. Heather whispered, “I figured you might need some help.” Aloud, she said to the man, “I looked at the lunch schedule and, seeing as it is 10:23, there are no lunch

breaks at this moment. So I suggest you quickly tell us the real reason of why you are sneaking around this place.”

Lindsay smiled and looked at her friend with a newfound admiration. She sure knew how to handle talking to people calmly and professionally. They were safe with her.

The man uneasily looked at the ground. “I knew that. Of course I did! What I meant to say was that I needed to put these in my office.”

Heather continued, “Sure, Mr. Loka. I’ll come with you.”

The man jerked around. “How did you know my name?” he yelled. “I’ve been trying to keep it a secret for...I mean... that’s not my name!”

By now everybody was staring at them. One person yelled, “He’s Mr. Loka? We’ve been trying to catch him for a very long time.”

And with that he ran and tackled the man, who apparently was Alaska. Lindsay and Heather helped him as quick as a flash. They brought Alaska to his knees and when the man who helped get Alaska pulled off his suit, Tyger Mansfield was standing there. He told us, “Good job. You passed the spy test.”

Later, when Lindsay asked Heather how she knew who Mr. Loka was, she replied, “I didn’t. I just decided that if it was him, he’d answer to that name. Besides, if I got the wrong guy, it would be way easier to apologize for messing up his name than to apologize for tackling him.”

Lindsay laughed and responded, “I wonder what we will have to do next.”

First Place, Middle School Division:

*Unexpected* by Claire Deeds

"Everything changed when the night fell..." Elle sighed dreamily. "Doesn't sound so romantic?"

"Not really," I answered flatly, not even bothering to look up from my book.

Elle wrinkled her nose and gave a little huff, plopping herself down on my bed. I was curled up in my reading chair, surrounded by pillows and stuffed animals.

"Rosemary, this is the *one* party-"

"That's what you said last time, too. And the time before that. And the time before that-"

"Oh, hush. This one is the one! I know it! Besides, it's like a masquerade ball, and we'll all be wearing masks," Elle tried to convince me, batting her eyelashes.

I looked up and propped my chubby cheeks up with my hands, staring her right in the eye. "Who said I was going?"

"Me!" she declared, flashing me a blinding smile.

"And who says I have to listen to you?"

"Once, again, me," she winked, grabbing a magazine off of my nightstand.

I frowned and turned back to my book.

"Elle, I don't even own a dress because-"

"Blah, blah, blah. I dragged you to a party, it got ruined, it was your only one. Well, boo-hoo. Your dress is ruined. Just means we need to buy a new one!" she tossed the magazine back onto the pile, which it promptly slid off of. Elle gracefully stood up and twirled around my room.

"It could be a deep crimson," she suggested, "Like a rose!"

"Or it could be nothing at all, because I'm not going."

"Oh, darling," Elle shook her head, "You'll give in. Like always."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. Here, let me try my famous trick called bribery."

I rolled my eyes. "Not falling for it."

"Oh, you will!" she chimed, a wicked grin playing on her lips, "Once you see what I have to offer..."

"Go on," I gestured boredly.

"Rosemary! Please, participate in the theatrics! It's so much more fun with drama!"

"Ah, alright," I grunted. Elle smirked triumphantly.

"Really?" I made my voice go lower, "Let's see what you have then..." I trailed off dramatically.

"Eh, could be better. Anyways, would you go to this party if I managed to get you a date with the one and only... Chris Evers!" Her bright blue eyes sparkled with excitement. Chris Evers was a total dream, and I had a huge crush on him.

"That's such a big *if*, though," I stated, giving her a disbelieving look.

"No, it's not! Come to this party in a dress and mask that I picked out, and he'll totally notice you and then ask you out and-"

"Not once he realizes it's Mary the nerd," I muttered bitterly.

"Oh, but here's the best part!" Elle exclaimed, "If he asks for a name, you'll tell him...Rose! It's short, catchy, and ever so romantic."



"You really seem to have thought this through," I raised my eyebrows.

"Of course I have! Only the best for my little Rosie!" she joked, and I groaned at the childish nickname.

"Now that you've agreed to it-"

"Wait, wha- I never agreed!" I interrupted, but she went right over me.

"Time to go shopping!"

"I don't have any money!" I crossed my arms, slightly disappointed.

"You have enough," she dismissed me.

"For a three hundred dollar dress? No way," I shook my head.

"Oh, but we're not looking for a three hundred dollar dress. We're looking for a cheap dress at the thrift store that has potential!"

"Right," I muttered disbelievingly.

"Go get dressed!" Elle ordered.

"What? I am dressed!"

"This is why they call you Mary the nerd," she sighed, dramatically opening my closet. She hummed as she picked out an "acceptable" outfit. The whole top half of her body had disappeared when she finally popped back out, hair wild and messy and lip gloss smeared.

"Here!" she tossed the outfit to me snootily. After discarding the black pencil skirt and loose white blouse, she immediately began touching up her makeup. Smearing her glittery pink gloss over her puckered lips, she turned to face me.

"Well? What are you waiting for? Change!" Elle rolled her eyes and whipped out a tube of black mascara.

I sighed and retreated to my bathroom, starting to change out of my long beige skirt and maroon turtle neck. I slipped on the white blouse, the smooth fabric cool on my skin. Then, I tugged on the black skirt, barely managing to get it over my massive hips. This thing had to be at least four years old!

I groaned, taking a quick glance at myself in the mirror. It was an improvement...sort of.

"Rosemary! It doesn't take that long!" Elle complained, knocking on the bathroom door.

"Coming!" I called, before muttering a small, "Jeez." Who knew all this girl stuff was so complicated?

I swung open the door.

"Huge improvement!" Elle flashed me another dazzling smile. I noticed she already had her designer boots on. Actually, I had no idea if they were designer or not, but they sure seemed fancy.

"Picked out these shoes for you," A pair of simple black flats with maroon interiors dangled from her perfectly manicured fingers.

"Thanks," I muttered, taking them from her hands and slipping them on my feet. I stand up, brushing a strand of my almost black hair out of my eyes. My hair was the dorkiest thing ever; I had bangs that were always in my eyes, and that could probably look good on anyone but me. It was always messy, even when I brushed it, and I had no idea how Elle planned to fix that one.

"Alright!" Elle clapped her hands together excitedly. "Here is the order of operations! First, we go to the thrift store and pick out something with potential. Next, we take it back to my house and jazz it up with all my supplies. Then we do makeup-"

"Um, I *hate* to interrupt, but when is this thing?"

"Tonight! Tonight as in eight o'clock!"

"It's three now..." I muttered to myself, trying to work out all the details.

"Oh, hush. Five hours is plenty," Elle brushed off my concern.

"If you say so-"

"I do say so! Now, let's get going!"

We arrived at the the thrift store around fifteen minutes later, and Elle immediately hurried to the back of the store, where the women's clothing was located.

She began pulling out dresses and skirts at what seemed to be random, but I could never tell with Elle.

"Crimson..." she muttered.

"White would be fine, too," I offered, and Elle shook her head.

"White is so overused! Besides, I don't want you looking like you belong at a wedding."

"What about black?"

"Even more overused than white!"

I threw my hands up in the air in defeat.

"Okay, what about this?" Elle held up a rather atrocious looking wine-red gown. I pinched the material, which seemed to be some imitation of silk or something.

"Er-"

"Say no more! It's disgusting!" Elle tossed it back onto the rack over-dramatically, twirling around to the next one.

"This?" Elle once again resurfaced, holding a brighter, nicer looking red dress.

"I like it-"

"Oh, wait, no. It's too bright," Elle hummed to herself, shaking her head. She put it back and continued hunting.

I frowned. I didn't see the problem with it.

"Third time's the charm, right?" Elle pulled out a third dress. It was like a rose, dark and mysterious. I held it up to my body, the material falling down to just below my knees. The top part of the dress was tight and covered in sparkles. The bottom flared out, looking like a dress a young girl would twirl in. It had a few holes in it, but I was certain Elle could fix those.

"It's the one, isn't it?" Elle breathed.

"Definitely," I agreed.

We left the store and drove over to Elle's house, where she would apparently "spice it up." Whatever that meant.

"So here's the plan!" Elle directed me to her bedroom, her hands keeping a firm grip on my shoulders. "You go take a nice, long shower. Use my shampoo and conditioner and body wash and all that, because I can guarantee it will make a difference."

"But I'm already clean!" I protested. "I showered yesterday-"

"Shower. Now."

"Fine," I moaned.

"In the meantime, I, your fairy godmother, shall fix up this dress!" Elle disappeared from sight, her golden hair bouncing in her ponytail. I shut the door and undressed, hopping into her shower.

I took a long time, watching the water swirl around my feet and disappear into the drain. I could hear Elle humming and singing outside, which made me grin. She had a lovely voice, and it was no wonder she was always picked for the lead roles in our high school's theater program. Elle could've been the most popular girl in our grade, if it wasn't for the fact the "popular" kids avoided theater like the plague.

I shut off the water, deciding that it had been long enough. Slipping on my clothes, I headed into Elle's room.

"Done!" I called. She jumped, so immersed in her work, she didn't even notice me come in.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" she leapt up. "Now I can get started on makeup!"

"I thought you said we were going to be wearing masks. Also, can I see the dress?"

"Not yet! And I want to do makeup because it's fun, and the mask will come off at some point during the night."

"Like when?"

"Like when you and Chris go in for a romantic kiss after he realizes you are the girl of his dreams!" Elle made kissy faces at me.

"Oh, shut up," I grumbled.

"Enough banter, makeup time!" Elle dragged me over to a chair and I plopped down rather ungracefully.

She dashed into the bathroom, gathering all of her supplies.

"Okay, no looking until everything is complete," she ordered.

I won't even describe the makeup process; it was too life-scarring.

"Why do you even bother with all this?" I asked, coughing slightly. My eyelashes felt heavy with all the mascara Elle had applied, and the eyeshadow had hurt to apply.

I blinked repeatedly, my hands going up to rub my itchy eyes.

"No, no, no!" Elle cried, yanking my hands away, "We can't risk ruining my efforts!"

"Right," I muttered, "The dress?"

"Close your eyes!" Elle demanded, hands on her hips.

"Wait, what- why?!"

"Obey your fairy godmother," she smirked, and I shut my eyes.

I slipped the dress on, struggling quite a bit, because my eyes were closed.

"Okay, they're still shut!" Elle barked, and I heard her shuffling around her room.

"Right," I muttered and then something hard was shoved in my face.

"Shoes."

I popped my eyes open and stared at the monstrosity in utter confusion.

"Those are not shoes."

"Yes, they are."

"No, they are not."

"For Pete's sake, Rosemary, it's one night and these aren't even bad," Elle said exasperatedly.

"I don't do heels," I wrinkled my nose.

"You do now," Elle said, dropping them at my feet.

I slid them on, almost toppling over in the process.

"Okay, now take a look at yourself in this conveniently placed mirror," Elle directed me towards her full-length mirror.

"I have to admit, I don't look as terrible," I nodded, impressed. The rose-colored dress had been turned into a masterpiece. The holes had been covered by a shimmery red fabric that made rainbows when I looked at it at different angles. My mask was delicate and had a red gradient decorating the felt surface, as well as some fancy ribbon type stuff and some sequins. The heels weren't too bad besides the fact I was about to fall over.

"Yeah, yeah, now party time!"

Arriving at the night themed party, I was a little worried. I hadn't even walked in and I could already hear loud rap and pop music blasting. I peeked into the door, which had conveniently been opened right then, and saw flashing neon lights and hordes of people "dancing."

I took a deep breath, tried not to look annoyed at humanity, and entered.

The second I entered, I was shoved into the masses, people pushing against me at all different directions.

Had they never heard of personal space?

Apparently not.

I tried my hand at this "dancing", shaking my hips this way and that, and occasionally moving my feet a step or two.

The people were practically suffocating me and all I could think was, So much for a romantic masquerade ball.

At least my dress was nice.

The shimmery fabric had made my dress slightly longer, and some girl who decided dancing involved jumping around like a madman, stepped on it.

No, that was an understatement.

Her stiletto heel pierced the delicate fabric like a knife through butter, and I cringed at the horrible ripping sound. It had been cut on my back, and my whole backside, paleness and all, was exposed to judgmental highschoolers who liked to pick out any flaws they could.

I decided it was time to leave, even though I had barely been there for five minutes. Already multiple were gaping at me like I was some sort of zoo attraction. More focused on giving everyone that looked at me a withering glare, I didn't really notice where I was walking so it was only natural (note the sarcasm) that I tripped over some random chick's foot.

I would've been fine wearing my normal tennis shoes or flats, but in these dangerous contraptions called heels, I was a goner.

I faceplanted.



End of story.

No, not really. I got up again after being humiliated for, like, the second time tonight.

I sighed over-dramatically (Elle would be so proud) and shoved past the masses once again. I wish I could say something cliché and kind of romance-novel-ish, like my heels clicked loudly or I swung my hips and did some sassy walk or something, but that sadly wasn't the case.

No, I nearly fell over. Again.

Heels hate me.

Exiting the nightmare normal teens called a party, I quickly found a bench outside.

I plopped down, crossed my arms, and kicked off my heels. A small pout formed on my face a few moments later.

Nothing ever worked out for me.

Not even lame teenage parties.

After awhile I registered someone sitting next to me.

"Hey," they greeted, their voice high-pitched but not female. Sounded kind of like a nine year old trying to be masculine.

"Hi," I stated, my voice colder and harsher than I expected.

"My name is Travis," the apparent Travis stuck out his hand, which I completely ignored. Not even fazed, he put his hand back in his lap and smiled at me.

I sighed softly. "My name is Rosemary."

"I'll call you Rose," he decided, giving me a childish grin.

And, for the first time that night, I smiled.

Honorable Mention, High School Division:

*Aiko's Blue Moon* by Sapphire Esquibel

Everything changed when night fell. Though, in hindsight I should have anticipated something like this. My Grandma would always tell me, “Aiko, stay indoors at night. Never walk in the moon’s light.” I was nicknamed their little **Aoi hono**, *blue flame*. Whenever I’d get mad, my brothers and cousins would run from me shouting “**Akuma** comes, run and hide! She is **yokai!**” Maybe I should explain this from the beginning.

My name is Aiko Miroshima. I am sixteen and go to school at Sky Hills High School in Cripple Creek, Colorado. The Miroshima **clan** was originally from Japan but moved here in 1914 for unspecified reasons, though *now* I know what those “unspecified reasons” are. I remember the day had started out all so well. My two friends and I were walking to school. Jacey and Ava were talking about boys or something of that nature while I stared longingly at the trees in the distance. My Grandma had always forbidden me to step foot in the forest, even if it was for a daylight stroll. While lost in thought, I hadn’t noticed that Jacey and Ava had stopped walking until I ran into their backs. Only then did I turn around and pay attention.

“Well?” Ava asked. Ava was my age, and was often thought of as petite and fragile, however after spending just five minutes with her, you would know that wasn’t the case. She had wavy blonde hair that fell a few inches past her shoulders. Today though, she had it tied back into a tight ponytail. Her sea blue eyes stared quizzically at me, waiting for me to respond to her question.

“I’m sorry, what were we talking about?” was all that I could offer.

Ava let out a huff of annoyance. She was surprisingly athletic, and usually wore sports jerseys and shorts along with tennis shoes. “Of course, you weren’t paying attention. Honestly Aiko, do you ever stop daydreaming? I asked if you were going to the pre-blue moon party

tonight! Everyone will be going and this is just the time for you to go out and seek the crowd! Let everyone know the name of Aiko Miroshima!”

“Also, you could find a hobby to immerse yourself with.” Jacey piped up. Jacey was the artistic one of our trio. After school she would always rush home to paint a mural or design a song about something wonderful she discovered that day. Jacey designed all of her own clothes, which captured certain events or just because she wanted to push boundaries on what art should be. On this day, her long, silky, strawberry red hair was tied loosely around her head in a circlet with butterfly and flower pins nestled in to resemble a garden. Her theme for that day was ‘nature beauty.’ “By talking to more groups, your inner aurora will burst forth and want to be a part of more activities!” Jacey exclaimed, her vibrant green eyes sparkling at the ‘opportunities’ she foresaw me doing in the near future.

“Well, I don’t know, you know how strict Grandma can be about me being out too late.” I managed to stutter out. Unlike my friends who choose to show their passion, my style was dull. My ebony black hair lay flat against my back. Everyday I wore a simple skirt that went down to my knees with a white button up shirt and black vest over it. Even my eyes were an ordinary brown. Though, Ava and Jacey insisted they appeared a shiny gold.

“Who cares what she says!” Ava exclaimed, “You have to go out sometime! Look, the party is in the forest, the one you’re always staring at. Ask her and if she says no, then sneak out! All teenagers do so.” Ava knew how tightly Grandma held onto tradition. Sensing her irritation I quickly made my response.

“I’ll try to,” I choked out. Though, I was already feeling apprehensive of trying to convince her. However, even the thought of losing my only two friends just because of my limitations already had me planning ways to sneak out.

I spent the rest of the day in a silent nervous fear of what to say and the consequences that could happen if I took Ava’s advice. All day during class I was a wreck. Just barely paying enough attention to get work done, my mind in disarray. Later on that day, I walked home alone contemplating how I was going to broach the subject to Grandmother.

When I got home, it was as if no one knew of my inner dilemma. The afternoon passed as it always had. I went to my room and did my homework, then studied until dinner time. That night we had pork stew with a side of rice and steamed vegetables. A chorus of **itadakimasu** was heard around the table. Only then did I look towards Grandma Kaori Miroshima, the head of the house. She looked like an older version of me, except her hair had a few gray streaks and was pulled back into a bun with a jade comb peeking out of the top. An heirloom that showed her status to the rest of the house. Grandma’s eyes were stern with no twinkle in them. Unlike most grandmothers, her face didn’t have those wrinkles in the corner of her eyes that showed merit and happiness. In fact she didn’t have any wrinkles, which she credited to proper skin management and to wearing the proper expression on her face at all times. To her right was her son, my father. Sora Miroshima was next in line as heir of the Miroshima clan and once he and his wife Kanna, my mother, were head of the household, they would have to choose between their children as the next heir. That shouldn’t be too difficult, as I’m the oldest. Looking down to my twin brothers Riku and Haru, who were both eight, I revised my thinking. ‘For males are more likely to become heirs unless I prove myself worthy.’ This was the mantra I repeated to myself every now and again so that my pride would never become my undoing.

To the left of Grandma was her daughter, my aunt, Himari Yamamoto and her husband Reo Yamamoto. From them I had three cousins, all of which were boys. The eldest at age twelve, Asahi was more invested in video games than his studies, but we got along fairly well. Yuuto was the middle child at age ten. He was helpful and kind, always offering to help his mother with chores around the house. Then Itsuki, the youngest at age nine, would have to be my favorite. He was always a ball of sunshine and loved to tell anyone a story to help brighten up their day.

Thinking now was a good time to phrase my question, I coughed low to signal if I could speak. Grandma turned her head towards me and nodded once. My hands shaking, and sweat sure to be left on the tablecloth, I spoke. “Respected Grandma, I would like to go to a party tonight and would appreciate your approval to go.” I held my breath in slow apprehension as I awaited her answer. It seemed like hours before she spoke.

“Absolutely not. Aiko you know the rules, you are not to be out after daylight hours. Speak no more about this topic unless you want punishment.”

Numbly, I finished dinner and asked to be excused, already feeling my throat close with unshed tears. After being excused, I rushed up to my room and bawled into my pillow. Thoughts rushed into my head about how unfair this situation is. All my life I had been denied from going to the forest or leaving the house after daylight hours, I was not allowed even to sleepovers, but my brothers and cousins were. They could go to the stream and wade in the waters, or explore the forest and have sleepovers. Twenty minutes had passed, when I realized Ava was right, it was time for me to become a part of the crowd even if I had to sneak out.

At 9'O clock I snuck out through the back, an hour after everyone had went to bed. Instead of trying to be quiet, I ran so that the feelings of guilt would not have me going back, I ignored all feelings of dread and just kept on running until I was safe in the forest. How I wish I had listened to Grandma.

I arrived at the party, but it wasn't what I expected. A campfire was in the center and around it were teenagers hungrily making out with each other, some leading others away to their car. Beer cans and trash littered the ground, so the forest wasn't as pretty as it should have been. I couldn't hang out with Ava or Jacey as both were in their own friend groups of athletes and artists. For the duration of the party I stayed in the corner silently sipping the punch and waiting for this night to be over. I had decided after just three minutes of being there that this was not my cup of tea and that I would never go to a place like this again.

Quickly the moon appeared with a faint blue tint to it, though it was covered by clouds. Unexplainably, I started to get dizzier and started to feel nauseous. I staggered on my feet as I tried to make my way to my friends and tell them that I was feeling faint. But I never made it. The last thing I saw was my vision going blurry, then total blackness. A shrill chorus of screams was the last thing I heard.

When I woke up again, it was still dark, so I believed that I was only out for a short while, but when I looked around, a startled scream made its way past my lips. No one was in sight. In fact, the entire area looked as if it had been disintegrated. Though that wasn't the cause of my yelp, the entire area was surrounded by blue flames. Terrified of being surrounded by something dangerous, I scrambled back to put some distance from the flames. I felt something furry and warm. Shaken from my daze I scrambled up and heard a noise behind me. A pop that sounded like when the coals were being burned in the fire place, and of hot embers popping out



of the fire. Startled I ran and closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see the beast that made this destruction. If I had my eyes open, I would have noticed that I ran straight into the flames with no injuries or pain.

I kept running until I felt something wet. Only then did I stop and look around. I was standing in a creek. Looking down at my reflection I did a double take. Instead of a girl with a white button up shirt and black vest, completed with boots and a simple skirt, I now had on a kimono. The kimono was a pale blue that started dark at the bottom but gradually became lighter and changed tones, until the top was a silvery mist color. My hair was no longer ebony black, nor did it fall to the middle of my back. Now it was longer, to my waist and it was raven black with royal blue highlights flashing through it. Then I focused on my eyes. They were no longer a dull deep brown, but sunburst gold with ice blue flecks scattered in them. Was this what my friends saw when they said my eyes flashed gold from time to time? A flick of blue caught my eye. My eyes traveled upwards. Nestled on top of my head were two sapphire blue ears with the tips a moonlight silver. I thought back to the furry thing that brushed back against me and on a hunch looked back. There behind me was not just one but *nine* tails. All about two feet long. The same sapphire blue with moonlight tips as my ears. My ears went back in a quiver, and I had to bite back a whimper. Suddenly I thought about all of Grandma's warnings and hoped she'd have answers. Turning around, I ran back home.

I ran a good half hour until I spotted my home. Luckily my house sat on the edge of the forest so I didn't have to go into town. Running in I called out in hope of a response, "Grandma! Father! Mother! Please come, I need help!" no one answered.

I was just about to walk upstairs to continue my search when my eyes landed on the calendar. Saturday. Today was Saturday. "No that can't be!" I wailed, "it was Friday when I

left!” in the corner of my eye I spotted a letter with my name on it. Choking down my sobs I approached it and opened it up.

*Dearest Aiko,*

*I have warned you time and time again to never stay out late and to never go to the forest, and all for good reason. Our family was cursed by a **kitsune**. He reigns over the moon. As such whenever a blue moon passes the sky a girl with our name and blood will be chosen to go live in his domain. We thought by moving away from Japan, the curse would be lifted, but we were wrong. I knew it would be you as your aunt married out of our name, and I was married into the family. I hope you forgive for leaving you in your most vulnerable time, but a **kitsune**'s fire is deadly to human. Even, a **kitsune** who is only a **kitsune** by curse. Please forgive us.*

*Love,*

*Grandma Kaori*

I sat still, shocked as I realized what actually happened to all the kids at the party and what was to become of me. There was nothing more I could do, so I sobbed. I sobbed until the blue moon's light took me away as it has done every night during a blue moon. But please, don't feel bad. You'll see me again; once in a blue moon.

*The End*

Index

**Akuma:** demon

**Aoi hono:** blue flame

**Clan:** family group

**Itadakimasu:** thanks for the food

**Kitsune:** fox in Japanese, a trickster

**Yokai:** evil spirit

Third Place, High School Division:

*Fugitive* by Nicole Eiland

“Everything changed when night fell. The sounds, the scenery, the emotions...” I take a slow, staggering breath.

*Tell them the truth. You're safe now. Here.*

Safe. Right.

If there's anything I've learned, it's that *safe* is hopelessly relative.

A jury member coughs. I can feel the judge's eyes.

His unapologetic curiosity.

Swallow. “The rest of the block was turning lights off. But behind our boarded up, blanketed over windows, they were only turning on.”

I don't know how much to say. Do they want to hear about Madame screaming to look ‘pretty,’ the frenzy of digging around for bolder eye shadows, tighter clothing, the youngest children begging to be spared another night they'd learned all too well led only to humiliation and pain?

Pain.

Tell them about the pain. Deep. Penetrating. Catastrophic.

Shakily. “We never had a real choice whether or not to obey. It was either pain because of the customers, or beatings from Madame or Rex.”

Deep breath.

“They killed a girl once. She had tried to escape.”

Laura. She had been Laura, and she had been seventeen.

“I don't think he meant to beat her that long. Intoxication will do that - cloud whatever fragments of judgement are left...”

It takes a long time to break someone so completely that their body is destroyed and their soul has surrendered.

My stomach turns, remembering. Sounds, smells, stains.

The pain.

“Somehow, customers were less. More temporary.”

Silence. The echoes of disturbed thoughts racing around the courtroom.

“Tell us about your confrontation with Vincent Garcias,” the judge says. Eventually.

Now we got to it. Why I’m here accused instead of witnessing.

Vincent Garcias. Known to the trafficked as Rex. Burning in hell as of two weeks ago.

“The evening of April 11th,” the judge clarifies, as if there were more than one ‘confrontation.’

Breathing. Swallowing. Ordering my mind to detach the emotions.

“That was the morning he brought home Claire.”

Claire. Beautiful, timid, four years old. Now in the custody of Child Protective Services.

“Madame was out that day. Recruiting, she called it. She knew a girl was being delivered, but beyond that, like the name or age, wasn't informed. It wasn't like she had to be there. There wasn't a run planned for that night. So it was only Rex at... home.”

Home. Another despairingly loose definition.

I had been in the kitchen. Searching for an overlooked cup of ramen or can of anything else edible. It had been days since any of us had eaten a decent meal. Hearing Rex’s heavy footfalls approaching, I abandoned the hopeless search and spun around to glare at him.

I have always loathed Rex. Even more so than Madame.

Grease.

Rex was grease. His hair, his clothes, his words, his actions reeked of a slimy, vile quality altogether snakelike.

My poisoned eyes had found not only him but another, tinier, unfamiliar figure beside him.

Claire. Big-eyed, dainty, terrified. Probably incapable of spelling her own name.

“This is Claire,” Rex said indifferently.

He shoved the child at me. None too gently. She whimpered, but didn't cry.

Had already learned the necessity of submission.

“I want to see her fixed up,” Rex growled, using a grimy key from his belt to obtain a beer from the locked-up fridge. “Now.”

My breath had caught. If he wanted to see her ‘fixed up,’ an offhand way of meaning promiscuous, scandalous and/or grossly commodified, it could only mean one thing.

Rex intended to traffik this infant. Up to that point, I had assumed the girl was a hostage, here only until some family member paid an exorbitant sum to recover her. It had happened before.

But this. I couldn't wrap my mind around it. Rex was going to sell the body of a four year old. He was going to steal the innocence of a life that had just begun.

Granted, mine had been robbed at ten years. Laura had been on her first run at nine. But neither of us had been here.

Here at Rex and Madame's, the youngest trafficked is eleven. We all have memories from before. A coin size image of a free life. Hope? Something like hope. An awareness that this hell cannot necessarily last forever, because we can remember tangibly witnessing a before hell.

Four years of life will not impress this awareness upon the mind.

All Claire will be able to remember is this. Pain. Humiliation. Hopelessness.

Something snapped.

“They don't sell fishnets that small,” I had hissed. Before I paused to consider.

Rex's eyes narrowed. His hand found my face before the sentence was finished. Claire began to cry.

“Did I say now or later?” Rex asked menacingly.

Burning. My face was burning, my few shards of pride were burning, my whole being ignited with hate.

I had dragged Claire upstairs before he could hurt her too.

That was deceptive. One way or another, he was soon going to kill everything in Claire but her heartbeat. I knew that. I despised that. So I pulled her away from him in an attempt to save her for then. Only that moment. What else could I do?

I pause at this point. Collecting. You can hear the exhales of people in the courtroom. Their captivation.

Buckle up. This isn't even the exciting part.

I suddenly resent these spectators. How they can sit there. Objective, removed.

Safe.

I may never be safe.

By the time I had Claire standing before Rex, her face masked in makeup, her body scantily covered, it was late. Typically the time we would embark on a run. But not tonight, I had reassured myself. Whatever the torment that would inevitably fall on the little girl, at least it wouldn't start tonight.



Rex's beer can was crumpled on the carpet. Another one sat on the rickety coffee table beside him. I had watched as his eyes traveled over Claire. Initially, he seemed satisfied. The body bronzed to offer illusive curves and angles, the mess of fringe and leather covering the bare necessities, the wild hair and flashy makeup. Rex began to wave us away. Then he hesitated.

And then I saw. The greed. The spark of carnal interest.

For a four year old.

He yanked Claire onto his lap. Removed a gun from his pocket so there was no interference between his body and hers.

Began to move his hands.

I looked away, feeling ill. So maybe it would be tonight then. I swallowed. Felt a thorn in my eye as I struggled to avoid an outburst of emotion.

Wrong.

This was hopelessly and irrevocably a violation of Claire, of children, of society.

Yes, it had happened before. It had happened to me.

But this felt different. This I could not tolerate.

Not when the victim was this vulnerable, this impressionable, this young.

Rex wasn't restraining. Whatsoever. Not that any customer would either...

Four years old.

Rage.

There it was, and I began to shudder with it.

This was intolerable.

The neglected gun was in my hand. I had jerked the whimpering Claire behind me. The barrel was aimed directly at Rex's forehead, and I had cocked the trigger.

Amusement. There was amusement on his face and irritation in his voice. "Give me the gun." He didn't believe I would do it.

But he didn't know me. Yes, he knew my weight, my human capital, my 'specialities,' my rate per hour.

Everything to succeed in his industry.

Where his appraisal was off was my resolve.

I was going to kill him. It was unquestionable now. Inevitable.

Somehow, Rex had picked up on this sentiment. "You're a dead girl," he had snarled, his eyes squinted.

One small detail.

I was far beyond dead.

The other children were around us. I could smell their fear, their hatred of Rex, could feel their silent encouragement. Behind me, Claire was sobbing. Bruises already forming on her chest. This was my motivation

This and the years of torture. The crippling nights. The stifling, isolated days. The dread of repeating those nights and days. Which we did.

Over and over and over.

Dead girl.

An understatement.

This I tell the judge in the courtroom. This I say with conviction, with another wave of wrath for our tormentors.

Firing the gun, releasing with the trigger years of pain and despair and rage, was the easiest thing I've ever done.

Well worth the nightmare images of Rex's shocked face as the bullet encountered his flesh, the expression eternally solidified.

Well worth whatever punishment, if any, I'll now be subjected to.

I'm more than ready.

Like I said, I've already been crushed and kicked and mangled to death before.

Hundreds of times.

Claire won't be.

Second Place, High School Division:

*The Monster's Come Out at Night* by Sariah Smith

Everything changed when night fell.

That's what the woman used to tell Cricket, over and over again. "Night is the only time it's safe," she'd say. "We're invisible in the dark. The night is our friend, my love, so no need for tears. We're safe."

At night, the sight of a woman walking with a little boy and a baby in a sling was too suspicious. They walked during the day. At night they slept in sewer tunnels and the gutted shells of foreclosed houses. The cops here didn't bother with squatters anymore; it was an epidemic with too many legal loopholes to solve quickly, and the houses in question were so uninhabitable that even the most desperate buyers would rather squat themselves.

It was the immigration officers—the alien hunters—the woman feared. Mere squatters were untouchable when compared to illegals, to the foreigners stealing through the night because they couldn't feel safe when alien hunters prowled. They were a self-fulfilling prophecy. They knew they were sought at night, so at night they ran fastest, and thus handed the alien hunters more reason to give chase after sunset.

The woman knew better. She trusted the night.

Night was safe, until.

She saw it from a distance, saw it because it glowed faintly, eerily green. She peered around the vast trunk of a tree older than the city park itself, and she saw it standing over a heap in the road, some sort of rod clenched in its teeth. The thing's howls had woken her, like the pitiful cries of some unearthly being.

*Wolf*, she thought, even though there were no wolves here, even though it was too big for a wolf. Ugly hulking beast, muscles heaving. Unnatural. Some scientist's magnum opus.

The woman's arm tightened around her baby, and she felt Cricket shift awake in the moss beside her. His prosthetic leg groaned. "What's happening?" he mumbled.

A flashlight beam was birthed far off in the blackness, illuminating the collar on the thing's massive neck. The light swung behind the beast and silhouetted its ragged form.

A hand dangled from the end of the rod in its mouth. She counted five fingers before the beast shook its prize and they flopped limply, five dead worms made of human flesh.

Hefting the backpack over her shoulders, she sat up. Crouched. Clutched the sleeping baby to her chest. Didn't bother with the sling she'd worn to sleep.

The beast's head swiveled. She thought she hadn't made a sound. But the twin flashes of a night creature's eyes fixed on her.

Impossible.

She hadn't yet sold her smartwatch and wedding ring so she could pay for a prosthetic technician. There were so many dead wires in Cricket's leg then that his foot drooped uselessly.

But somehow, limping, Cricket ran. A small miracle.

The woman never looked over her shoulder to see if the beast had pursued them. In the heat of blind fear, they ran.

The arm could've been that of some red-blooded American vagabond, but there was no doubt the beast was designed for illegals. The beast was bioluminescent; it had been engineered to catch fellow night creatures. And there were far too many nocturnal illegals hiding and weeping and praying in the dark.

The alien hunters had finally declared open season on illegals, and what did it matter if a few harmless drifters were lost along the way?

After that night, the woman learned to love the day. She could never feel safe in the harsh daylight, unhidden, but it was better than the alternative. Better than fearing teeth and claws.

"Everything changes at night," she told Cricket now. "At night, the monsters come out."

#

It was sunset, the sky bleeding red and gold. The woman's heart drummed as she stared at the inky blue seeping toward the horizon. She should have already found a place to stay for the night.

It was surprising how many people would let a woman and her children stay for the night for the meager price of some household chores, but they'd gotten to a worse part of the city. She didn't dare. Not here.

"Mommy?" Cricket said, breaking her reverie. "Will you tell me another story? Can it be the one about the pretty lady who turns into a princess?"

She stopped, and for a moment she stood still, memorizing him. Her son, all tangled dark hair and torn jeans and arms thin enough to snap with a glance.

She loved every grime-caked inch of him.

At the woman's absence of motion, the baby woke and began to cry. The woman stroked her little velvet head and sighed. "I'll tell you a story when we find a place to stay tonight, okay?"

"Okay." To himself Cricket whispered, "The monsters come out at night."

They walked.

They had to get to the west side of the city soon. The woman's sister, Doe, lived on the west side, or so she had deduced from Doe's emails. For months, Doe had sent them money and news of the United States. "Save some of this," she urged with every payment, "so Someday you can join me in America." She had to be vague in her emails—Big Brother was watching—but the woman knew, at least, that she was working in an electrician repair shop.

She had explained the choice of Doe as her pseudonym in one of her emails, saying, "The first night I spent in the room I'm renting, I saw a deer just outside my window, and I counted her ribs. Housing developments and parking garages are chasing the wild into the city."

Indeed, it was the dichotomous lullaby of chirping insects and distant traffic, noticed first by Cricket, that had inspired his own pseudonym. The woman had seen plenty of deer as well, but they hadn't provided any hints to where Doe had found her namesake. Where Doe was living.

She needed to find her sister, knew they couldn't live without her aid, but Someday had come too suddenly and violently for her to alert Doe. If she hadn't sold her smartwatch, perhaps she could have contacted her sister once she found a place with free Internet. But she'd needed money to fix Cricket's prosthetic leg, and she'd been hasty. Too late now.

The leg creaked faintly, and she bit her lip. Could they even make it to the hospital before it got too late?

Her mind conjured a howl somewhere in the distance.

She hoped it was only her mind.

"We'll hitchhike," she murmured. "Stop at the first hotel we see. There's a little money left from the living room I painted. How does that sound, love?"

They'd only be in the car with the driver for a few minutes. She'd keep her switchblade in her sleeve. No one would hurt a mother and her children.

She showed Cricket how to stand by the side of the road with his thumb sticking out. Several cars whizzed by before a pickup truck finally pulled over. Her stomach fluttered with hope as she surveyed it. It looked vintage, and only the extremely rich could afford the gas for vintage cars. Depraved acts were rare without desperation behind them, and the rich were seldom desperate. Perhaps the driver would even be so charitable as to give them money or buy them food.



No. She couldn't get carried away.

"Try not to speak," she reminded Cricket. They were both fluent in English, but she worried that their accent would be too *other*.

The window of the truck rolled down, revealing a red-haired and bearded man who offered the woman a broad smile. "What's a nice lady like you doing here this late?" he said amiably.

She shrugged slightly. "You?"

"Touché," he said, chuckling. "Tried to take a shortcut home from work, got a little lost." He tapped the flickering screen embedded in his left forearm. "I'd map it, but this stupid thing's broken. Autodrive won't even work 'cause the implant controls it. Never beta test things they got to cut you open to fix."

She smiled in spite of herself.

"Where you headed, lady?"

Repressing her accent as best she could, she answered, "Anywhere we can stay tonight."

"You illegals?"

"We—"

He laughed. "Nah, 'long as you ain't ragheads, I don't judge. Hop in."

The man introduced himself as Locke. She said her name was Dawn.

"Hey, kid pretending to sleep in the back," Locke said, "I like your Colonel Parsec T-shirt. You got a name?"

"Cricket."

Locke snorted. "Sure it is, kiddo. What about the baby?"

The woman smoothed the baby's hair off her little forehead. The soft spot was sunken. "We call her Baby for now. My husband and I were going to choose a name when she was a few months old, but he...passed on."

He cast her a sidelong glance. "What happened?"

She hesitated.

She could have told him that her husband had helped sell magic crystals and pixie dust to anyone who could pay. That blood money bought diapers for the coming baby and a carbon fiber leg for Cricket when his real one rotted off. That blood money had built an empire, and her husband was lucky to serve the emperor.

Even though servants were expendable. Even though servants were punished when they made stupid mistakes.

She could have told Locke that Someday came when the emperor's advisors tied her husband's body to the back of a truck and dragged it through the streets.

"It was cholera," she said.

"It's always cholera." He scratched his ear. "I'm sorry."

"It was a while ago," though it wasn't. "I have a question of my own."

"Shoot."

"Do you know a mechanic named Doe? In the west side of the city?"

"Nah. It's not like I live here, so I wouldn't know."

She swallowed the lump of disappointment in her throat and nodded. "Do you have any water?" she asked, touching the baby's dry lips. "For my little girl?"

He opened the cooler built into the console between them, empty except for a half-full water bottle. The woman unzipped the backpack at her feet and took inventory of its contents: the flask, the baby's bottle, the diaper stash, the empty formula tin, toothpaste and toothbrushes. As always, her breath hitched at the sight of her husband's photo, framed in plastic. The money was nestled between the frame's backing and his beautiful face. Some from her pawned items, some from odd jobs, some from underneath a loose floorboard in her house, before Someday came.

Which meant some of it was blood money.

At the next stoplight, she poured the water into the bottle and added a pinhead drop of whiskey. She took the baby out of the sling and smiled at her. The baby smiled back, a little bloom of joy. She hadn't needed to be changed since this morning, and finally having the chance to give her a drink lifted a tiny piece of the woman's anxiety.

"Hey." Locke jabbed a thumb at the windshield. "There's a convenience store over there. Want something to eat? I'll give you some money."

"Yes," she said. She couldn't hide her smile. "Yes please."

He took one of the parking spots with a pay-to-plug charging post because it was closest to the front of the store, though he wasn't supposed to, having a gas car. Absent-mindedly, as if money was meaningless to him, he yanked a few bills out of his wallet. The woman's first and middle fingers lifted off the bottle, almost of their own volition. They clamped the money to the bottle, uniting what she and the baby each thirsted for.

"You don't know how much this means to me."

"Yeah, well, I'm a sucker for accents."

She felt her cheeks warm at the mention of her accent, but he didn't seem to notice. He pressed a button to open the passenger door. As she stepped out, Locke called, "Oh, Dawn?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful," he said mildly. "There are wolves out there." And the door clanked shut behind her.

A chill crept down her spine.

He was right, of course. But though night had poured over the city, this was a well-lit parking lot for people with cars and grocery money. The alien hunters wouldn't unleash their pets here. They couldn't, could they?

Cricket had already scrambled out of the truck and was bolting into the store. She hurried after him, now-sleeping baby cradled in one arm.

He said something the woman didn't hear. Something outside the automatic doors had her attention. A bright blue-white glow flaring to life.

Locke still sat hunched over the steering wheel of his truck, but he was tapping the screen in his arm. The screen he had said was broken.

*He's got it working again, she told herself. That's a good thing.*

She helped Cricket pick out a sandwich and juice box, then began searching for formula and baby wipes. A sign taped to the cash register read, "in back - pls wait 5 min."

He was distracted with looking out the window. She shook her head, grinning, and moved to the next aisle.

But Cricket didn't follow her.

"Mommy?" he said. "Why are there so many cars?"

Fear curdled in the pit of her stomach. She turned to the window, and she saw them. The glossy electricars, three of them, blocking the entrance to the store. A man in each driver's seat. Arms glowing. Watching.

Aside from the cashier in back, the store was empty but for her and Cricket and the baby.

The men were waiting for her and her children.

She grabbed Cricket's arm, and he dropped the food. "Mommy?" he said, but she was already running, dragging him behind her. The bathroom in the back of the store would have an open window for cheap ventilation. A necessity after anonymous attackers had dispersed aerosolized chemicals through public buildings. Their escape route.

She slammed the bathroom door shut, locked it. Helped Cricket clamber onto the lid of the toilet. And he could lift himself onto the window sill, he had to because she had the baby, he was her strong boy and he could do this, couldn't he? She coaxed and cajoled him and was so desperate she didn't hear him cry. "Please, love, please," she said, louder and louder until hysteria contorted her voice. "*Please!*"

The window was safe, until.

A howl shattered the night. Cricket fell and she saw the demonic glow of the beast as it stood on its hind legs and snarled and snapped, claws peeling paint off the window sill, trying to get in and rip and tear and bite. Close enough for her to see the padlock branded on its ear.

Lock.

*Locke.*

And the baby slept angelically, and she yanked Cricket to his feet and they ran, they ran though she knew there was nowhere to run.

The monsters were here.

First Place, High School:

*Mayhem in Paradise* by Kristen Kater

Everything changed when night fell.

Anyone who stuck around Paradise long enough knew it. Of course, anyone who stuck around Paradise period was their own shade of magically crazy.

Or worse.

The street lamps around me flickered on and I tugged the collar of my coat up against the sudden ice in the wind. Night in Paradise was the time for things to pop out and say, “boo!” Already I could see the fog creeping along the ground, taste the iron in the air.

I tightened my grip on the grocery bag and glared at the nearest shadow.

“Very fierce, Amelia. I’m shaking in my grave.”

I swung the milk carton around as hard as I could. The person who’d snuck up behind me went down with a wheezing crash.

“Ouch. Amy. Not.” The boy at my feet coughed. “Cool.”

“Don’t sneak up on people after sunset.” The word *moron* hung unsaid. Normally I’d be feeling a sort of vicious satisfaction at bringing Isaiah Lahey down to his knees, but the pleasure was offset by the growing panic in the back of my brain.

Isaiah coughed again and looked up at me.

“Nice to see you too.”

“Why are you even outside?” I grumbled, reaching a hand down, despite everything in my hindbrain screaming *No!*

Isaiah took it with a feline-like grin and let himself be dragged to his feet. He studied our joined hands with apparent interest, green eyes glinting with knowledge that I didn't like.

Touch-telepaths *SUCKED*. Which is why I made a point of avoiding them. Even ones as fantastically gorgeous as Isaiah. There weren't enough green-eyed, roguish grins in the world to make me hang around a bunch of people that could read my mind simply by touching me.

Speaking of. . .

I jerked my hand back, brushing it off on my jeans like that would somehow undo the exchange. Isaiah just smiled at me and curled his hand into a tight fist before tucking it into his pocket.

"I could ask you the same question." Isaiah looked pointedly at my grocery bag.

I strongly considered clobbering him with it again. "I asked first."

"You also ambushed me." Isaiah pointed out, rubbing his diaphragm, and puckering out his lower lip. "Hurt me real bad."

"Oh yes, the great Isaiah Lahey's weakness! Dairy products." I rolled my eyes and looked across the street. You could barely see the lamppost if you squinted, and a cold lump of dread settled in my chest.

"Maybe it's feisty redheads." Isaiah said with another camera worthy smirk. My glower snapped back to him like if I frowned hard enough he'd magically go up in flames.

Which, huh - might be worth looking into. Explosive as my own magic was.

"I'm blond." Was all I said instead. Isaiah's mouth twitched up.



“Who said I was talking about you?”

My jaw clenched, but I just looked back across the street.

Where the lamppost was no longer visible, but a dark shadow was standing out against the stars.

“Uh, Isaiah.” My voice cracking over the words. “Which building did you come from?”

Isaiah’s shoulders tensed and he looked, without really looking at the figure across the cobblestones.

“I was at Sahara’s house.”

“How many blocks away?” I inched closer to the alley, knuckles white around my grocery bag.

“I may not be welcome there.” Isaiah said with the same cautious-through-the-teeth tone.

“What’d you do, kick her dog or something?”

Isaiah gave me that grin again. “Or something.”

I tried not to think about what that entailed. As far as I was concerned Isaiah and Sahara lived on completely different planes of existence.

Unfortunately the phrase, “Ignore it and it will go away” did not apply to the wraith across the street, because it suddenly began to move towards us with a *pop* of pressure.

Now, I would love to say I held my ground and fought off a pissed-off ghost with nothing but my groceries, but really, faced with an ethereal being that could kill me with one touch, I did the more sensible thing.

I turned on my tail and ran like my life depended on it.

Isaiah caught up to me quickly, long legs put to good use. For once his swagger was gone, as he tugged me down a different street.

“This is your fault.” I wheezed, as we careened around the corner.

“How?” Isaiah shot back, sounding much less out of breath than I was. I mustered up the energy to glare at his head. Stupid soccer players and their stupid lung capacity.

“You distracted me.”

“You went to get *milk* at nine at night Amelia. What did you think was gonna happen?” Isaiah grabbed the back of my jacket and yanked me down another street. The milk carton whacked against my thigh.

“Cereal?” I hazarded, stumbling over a curb. Behind us the wraith was almost as clumsy as I was, except unlike me, it didn’t get caught on curbs so much as lose our location. Thank God that ghosts, for all their creepy coldness and their ability to drain you of life, couldn’t really see all that great. Something about not having actual eyes.

“You’re an idiot.” Isaiah sounded like he was having an epiphany. The milk carton swung high as we ducked around a corner, smacking him in the chest.

“Stop *doing* that.” He hissed. Above us the wraith began to scream the haunted tune of the dead.

“Fine, you take care of the homicidal ghost.” I snapped at Isaiah.

Isaiah glared at me with righteous indignation in his eyes. He still wasn’t even winded, the bastard.

“I’m a touch telepath Amelia. Not a necromancer.”

“Then why are you here?” I groused. Isaiah went unnaturally quiet.

Which, could have been because we were sprinting through fog so thick you could barely see your hands, but this was Isaiah. I’d seen him flirt with the vampire trying to kill him once. The worst part of that scenario being that the kelpie had apparently been *charmed* and let him go.

“Please tell me I didn’t hurt your feelings, I don’t have time to deal with you being a delicate flower.” I pushed Isaiah left into another street.

Isaiah gave an almost girly gasp.

“I am not a delicate flower.” He pressed a hand to his chest.

“You’re a delicate climate controlled fricken lily of the valley. Duck!”

I slammed into Isaiah as hard as I could, the breath leaving both of us in a *woosh*. The ghost swooped over where we’d been standing, his wail rising to a crescendo.

Isaiah wheezed beneath me and I realized I was on top of him, hand pressed against his larynx. Unfortunately, while he couldn’t talk in that position, he also couldn’t breathe.

The fact that I hesitated was probably a bad sign. But those freakin’ *smirks*.

With a sigh I removed my hand.

“Suffocation is not the way to kill me, Amelia.” Isaiah whispered, breath wafting over my palm in a warm wave. “I deserve a far more glorious death.”

“Murderous ghost good enough?” I shot back before I rolled off him, gripping his coat with one hand so I could haul him to his feet, as we took off again.

“I was hoping for a zombie hoard.” Isaiah sighed forlornly.

“Why would you even—” I shook my head and leapt over a fence, my toe catching at the last minute and sending me tumbling into the hydrangeas. The leaves and branches scratched at my face, tearing along my cheek and I felt more, then saw, the thin strip of blood on my knee.

Isaiah followed much more gracefully, legs not even touching the wooden posts.

“Because, it will be big, bloody, and glorious.”

I scrambled to my feet, brushing the dirt off my jeans. Above us, the wraith was blooming, dark against the clouds. Thunder began to crackle through the air, and suddenly I was no longer scared.

This was my element. And I was not going to run anymore.

“You want ‘big bloody and glorious?’ I’ll give you big.”

I turned and held my palms up to the sky. The ghost screamed, but it sounded almost like maniacal glee, as he began to spiral down.

“Amelia, no!” Isaiah yelled.

*Amelia, yes!* I thought almost deliriously.

Then the air was crackling and the wraith’s cold fingers were reaching for my face. For a second I saw its eyes, dark, hallow pits, just wanting to be filled.

And then I clenched my fist and hit it with 600 megawatts of electricity.

.....  
I might have blacked out.

When I came to my head was in Isaiah's lap and my mouth tasted like pennies. I made a face and licked my lips, grimace intensifying, as I tasted ozone.

"It's dead for sure, right?"

"Holy- Amelia you hit that thing with enough electricity to power the *town*." Isaiah's voice was flatteringly shrill. I could see the door to whoever's front lawn we were in open, spilling light into the darkened yard. Isaiah's mom stepped out with a deep frown on her otherwise pleasant features.

"More." I mumbled, my tongue feeling weird and fuzzy in my mouth. Isaiah stared down at me like I was speaking in tongues.

"More what?"

"It was roughly 600 megawatts. That's as much as a nuclear power plant."

Isaiah got this super dazed look, like he'd been the one hit with lightning. His mom started mouthing numbers.

"Oh." Isaiah finally said, and his mouth was hanging open a little.

"A small one. Baby sized. Oh, my god, my head hurts." I touched the sides of my temple with shaky fingers, and realized that somewhere along the way I'd lost the milk.

"Noooooo!" I wailed, slumping back.

"What, what is it, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" Isaiah said, thighs tensing beneath my head. His fingers fluttered over me like he wanted to touch, but wasn't sure he wouldn't get shocked.

“I lost the milk.” I sulked, my lower lip pushing out against my will. “You owe me...milk, 2%.”

“Me?!” Isaiah sputtered. “Why would I owe you anything?”

“Because if it wasn’t for you scaring the living daylights out of me, I would’ve been home!” I flailed dramatically. Or tried to, anyways. My extremities felt pretty numb. Isaiah swatted my hand away from his face.

“I was just making sure you got home okay!” He protested, pinning one of my hands to my chest. I froze.

Isaiah stopped as well, his fingers barely twitching on my wrist. I rolled my eyes as far back as I could to look at his face.

“You were there because of me?”

If I ignored the hopeful edge to my voice, would it go away? Probably not I decided.

“No.” Isaiah was looking stubbornly at my shoulder.

“Yes!” His mom called from their porch. “Amelia, you’re welcome to come in, once he’s manned up. Isaiah, just tell the girl.” Mrs. Lahey sounded faintly exasperated. She turned on her heel and walked back into her house with a twist of her skirt. Isaiah was scowling now.

“Speak.” I poked Isaiah’s thigh, which was about as much as my noodle arms would cooperate with. Isaiah glowered at the burnt grass under me.

“I felt you in the store.” Isaiah grumbled to the grass. “So, I took a detour to make sure you got home safe.”

I raised my eyebrow at his mother's burnt hydrangea bushes.

"You failed."

"Could you please be *quiet*?" Isaiah exclaimed, though his hands stayed on my wrist. I mimed zipping my lips shut and throwing away the key. Isaiah rolled his eyes.

"But you were at Sahara's house." I blurted. Okay, so maybe I would need a double lock. And an extra strength zipper.

Isaiah sighed.

"Me and Sahara are lab partners. *And everyone knows I like you so she was giving me a pep talk.*"

I blinked several times, because wait what?

"Could you repeat that last bit please?" I asked politely. "I don't speak mumble."

Isaiah was glaring at my face now. Good.

"Everyone in the school already knows I like you," Isaiah took a deep breath, "So Sahara was giving me. . . advice."

"Sahara's advice was to get me killed by a pissed off ghost?" I asked, before the first part of that sentence sunk in.

"I'm trying to tell you I like you here! Though, at the present moment I don't know *why*." Isaiah was glaring at the grass again, like if he stared hard enough he could burn a hole through it and crawl away.

Which, hey, was my super special magical ability.

I felt like a fish that had grown legs and though, *oh climbing a tree would be a good idea*. Except now my hypothetically fish self had no idea how the heck to get down.

“Oh. Oh I um- I . . .”

“It’s okay, obviously you don’t have to like me back. Because you’re super pretty and you just whammied a ghost with the force of a small nuclear power plant. Okay, you don’t have to even say anything.” Isaiah’s face was roughly the color of a fire hydrant, and he seemed to be having trouble even looking at the grass now, his thighs twitching nervously under my shoulders.

I blinked again. The penny taste was fading from my mouth and my fingers had gained back enough strength that when Isaiah went to pull his arm away I clamped on.

“But- but I do like you.” I said. Isaiah stopped twitching.

“You do?”

“I mean, yeah.” I shrugged, then grimaced again because my body was not having that.

“Okay, but do you mean like, like or just like, like-“

“Isaiah, we graduated middle school three years ago. I like you, okay. In the, ‘let’s go see a movie and get our handles tangled up in the popcorn’ kind of way. I want to *date* you. Are you happy now?”

Isaiah’s face split into a wide grin, no smirk in sight, and yeah, my heart kind of stuttered a little. Stupid Isaiah and his stupid, happy, gorgeous face.

He bent his head low over mine.

“You know like this, I can tell what you’re thinking right?”



My ears burnt bright red, but I stubbornly held his gaze.

“Fine. I find you attractive.”

Isaiah beamed.

“Can we go inside now, or are we waiting till more ghosts show up? Cause I’m not gonna lie, and I’m kind of drained right now and-“

“Oh! Oh yeah! Sorry.” Isaiah helped push me to my feet. And, if his hand slipped into mine, while I leaned on his shoulder, well, nobody needed to know.

“So blondes *are* your type.”

“Shut up, Amelia.” Isaiah said, but he was smiling ear to ear, so I assumed he didn’t mean it.

He led me inside the house, hand warm in mine, and even though I knew he could read my thoughts, it didn’t bother me so much.

Everything changed when night fell.

But sometimes, it was for the better.