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high school writing:
a celebration and
recognition



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Best Midwestern High School Writing: A
Celebration and Recognition of Outstanding
Prose

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Shadow Master

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Bagley High School

Bagley, MN

Grade: 11-12

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Second place winner

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Go right.

Sanja ducked to her right, nearly sliding around the corner. Her footsteps pounded down the corridor, her breath rasping harshly from her ragged lungs. Her pack slapped against her side and she gripped it tighter, fearing the loss of her precious -albeit troublesome- cargo. The guards were no longer gaining on her, but she hadn't lost them yet either. The *chink chink* their armor was echoing around the caverns, creating the illusion of dozens more men chasing her. If she didn't hurry though, the illusion might become a reality. Her exit hadn't been as stealthy as she would have liked. The broken window *definitely* hadn't helped any, either.

"I thought you said you knew the way!" Sanja hissed between huffs of breath.

I do, but it's been a while. Left.

This time Sanja did slide around the corner, having too little time to make a proper turn. Her hands scraped against the damp cobbles of the floor as she shoved herself back into an upright position. The cobbles broke through skin. She'd need to fix that later. The last thing she needed was a troublesome infection from this filthy sewer. But the slight pain proved as an extra motivator to move faster.

Barely any light filtered in from above her, only in little spots from a small grate or gutter on the side of the road above. Thankfully it hadn't rained for a few weeks so the floor was only damp instead of the treacherous slide it could have been. The dampness and accumulated mold and other funguses also helped to muffle her footsteps a bit. She couldn't be more grateful that she didn't have to flee through the sludge and filth the city sewers were most famous for. Above her, the city was a shining beacon of human accomplishment, but below, it was a filthy refuse. Funny how that applied to more than just the physical design of the city.

You could always find your own way out.

"Just shut up and focus on where I'm supposed to go and not get me killed!" Sanja had to fight to keep her voice low to prevent making excess noise. Every little sound helped her pursuers, and she was fairly certain she didn't want to give them any more help in catching her. She liked her head on her shoulders, where it was supposed to be, thank you very much.

Alright.

"Why do I feel like your mocking me?"

I'm not.

Sanja snorted at that and nearly choked on her air supply. *Sure you are*, she thought snidely, *and I'm not a thief.*

I think we've lost them.

Sanja slowed to a stop hands on her knees and taking great whooping breathes through her nose and mouth. True enough, the sounds of heavy leather boots on stone had faded, no longer in close pursuit. She could still here them scuttling about down here with her somewhere, but they didn't seem close enough to be a problem. *Fools*, she thought, *they couldn't find the sharp end of a spear even if it was poking them in the arse*. But then again, their skill had never lain in *catching* the enemy, but in *overwhelming* the enemy.

"Go check!" Sanja gasped out between breaths, still hunched over her wobbly legs.

It won't kill you to say please.

"It might, and that's not a risk I'm willing to take," Sanja snapped back. "Now go check!"

Fine.

Sanja sucked in a few more ragged breaths, easing the stitch in her side. She had to resist the temptation to fall back and sit against the wall. She grasped the canvas bag still at her side and fingered for the snaps in the near darkness. Satisfied that they had remained secure and her treasure within, she opened it and pulled out the precious cargo.

It was a large smooth stone, oblong, and roughly the size of her palm. A solid obsidian black with a notably sinister shine to it, it looked like any other Stone of Misfortune. Sanja (and the one she had stolen it from, obviously) knew differently. The steady tingle of magic swirling inside it was far stronger and darker than any other Stone of Misfortune. It was one of the original seven, the Chaos Seven. The seven stones of dark magic that had plunged the land into the Thousand-Year-War. *Such a simple thing can cause such destruction*, she thought. *Oh well, I never was one to judge on appearances*. She tucked the stone back into her bag and snapped it closed again.

They're gone, but if you just stand here they'll eventually find you.

"Fine then, which way?" Sanja said snobbishly. She never was one for sweet words.

Go straight.

Sanja forced her weary legs forward, but at a slight jog this time, staying alert and on her toes; one could never be too careful, especially if one is a thief and a criminal.

Straight ahead, there will be a grate above you. It leads into an alley behind an abandoned forge. Go through it.

Sanja nodded her acknowledgement. It was quiet for a time, then-

Why did we take it?

"What?" Sanja pulled up short at the question in surprise, unused to being questioned about such things. Partners were uncommon on these expeditions of hers, and those who did come never questioned her.

Why did we take it?

“None of your business,” she snapped, continuing to the grate just ahead.

Sanja stood under the grate now, looking up. It was only about two feet above her hands reach, but it still meant she would have to jump to reach. That also meant she would have to find some way to brace herself in order to get the lid off to get out. There were handles on either side of the grate cover. She could use those.

With a practiced jump, she leapt up and grabbed each of the handles and slammed her shoulder into the grate with all the force of her jump and arm strength. It ground a quarter inch off the lip, and she jumped up and slammed her shoulder into it again, hard enough to bruise. There was a gap big enough for her to slide her fingers in between now. She jumped up again, hooking a foot into one of the handles and gripped the other. She slipped her fingers into the small gap, pushing it open wider (*Good Gods, how much did the thing weigh?!*), just wide enough for a small, skinny girl like Sanja to slip out. It was a tight fit, and it left her leathers dirty and scummy, but she was out.

The alley was dark with almost no light. It was probably just a little before dawn, an hour or two at the most. She carefully, and as quietly as possible, slid the lid of the grate back into its rightful position. *Never leave evidence, never get caught*, she thought.

“Where to now?” she asked.

Out of the city, I suppose.

“Oh quit being cryptic and tell me how to get out of this God’s forsaken city before I’m caught!”

Very well. At the very back of the alley, to your left, there will be a small stone wall connected to the shop. Climb it up to the top of the roof.

Sanja pressed herself against the darkest shadows along the wall and shuffled down to the back of the alley. The cool stones against her back were calming, almost reassuring, in the sense that she trusted them to block her from view.

The wall was in fact, *not* small. It was almost twenty feet tall, made of bits of old coble and field stones stacked with mortar to keep them together and it was only about as wide as Sanja’s arm span. Obviously it had been hand done by someone other than a professional mason or one of the city builders. The thing was crumbling, on the verge of collapse, giving one final testament to its builder.

“You said it was small,” Sanja growled.

Yes. I said it was small, not short.

“It’s falling apart! How am I supposed to climb it?”

It was a perfectly good wall the last time I was here. It still is. You’re small, you can do it.

Sanja grit her teeth and scowled. "Wonder what happens to you if I die?" she hissed.

She was met with silence.

Biting out a curse, she rubbed the excess moisture off her hands onto her leathers. She grabbed the first piece that was stuck out far enough and began to haul herself up. Already tired from her escapade in the sewers, and not to mention the added bruising in her shoulder from moving the grate, caused her to ascend slowly but surely.

It was with quivering arms, though, that she hauled herself up over the ledge of the roof of the building. Indulging in a moment of laziness, she lay sprawled out on the roof of the old forge, taking a moment to rest and regain what little strength she could in the small span of time.

You don't have time to laze about.

"Shut up," Sanja grumbled, throwing an arm over her eyes to block out the non-existent light.

It will be dawn soon and I'll be of little help then.

"Even less than you are now," she hissed.

She was ignored. *Do you wish to be caught?*

Sanja sighed and rolled herself up into a sitting position.

"Just shut up and get me out of here."

Very well. You need to get to the roof three to the right from this one.

"Then what?"

I'll tell you when we get there.

Sanja ground her teeth again. At this rate she would have the teeth of a woman six times her age by the end of the night.

She backed up to the edge of the roof and ran taking a flying leap to get to the one next to hers. She slid a little on the gravel at first but regained her balance quickly, repeating the process until she was on the roof of the desired building.

"Now what?" she asked shrewdly, crossing her arms in a huff. Every time she had to be given directions one at a time it slowed her down. She was officially on a clock now that dawn would be coming soon.

At the back, there is another alley. Climb down to the ground level and go right until you reach the end of the alley.

Sanja looked over the back of the building. There was no wall or ladder or even a rope to speak of. She scowled, thinking of some very colorful words.

“And how do you propose I get down?” she asked. “And I swear, if you tell me to jump...” she let the threat hang in the air.

In the middle of the roof, there is a trapdoor going down. Open it and take the stairs.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the door?!”

Because you walked over it.

Sanja stomped over to the door and ripped it up, dropping down into the dark. She had to feel around a little until her eyes adjusted enough for her to find the stairs. The building-an old house by the looks of worn furniture and personalized items- was dust covered and looked like it had been abandoned almost as long as the old forge had. On the ground floor, there was even more dust, and pieces of wood splinters everywhere from what looked like a busted door.

Sanja stepped through what was left of the entrance and back out in the street. She crouched low to stay out of sight and snuck around the back of the building and into the alley. She kept a hand on the wall and stayed alert for any noises, any kind of hint that she had been noticed.

As the Gods’ would have it, unfortunately, she had.

“You there! Stop! Show yourself or else!” came a shout from the street.

Cursing, Sanja abandoned all pretense of stealth and tore off into the deeper recesses of the alley. A single set of footsteps pursued. She reached the end of the alley, but her current trailer had been faster than her last, so by the time she reached the part of the wall she could escape through, the guard was hot on her heels.

“I order you to stop!” he shouted. She felt the sharp point of a spear prick the back of her tunic.

Sanja raised her hands and turned slowly in a circle to face the guard. He was thin and willowy, with wisps of brown hair and stubble peeking out from the encompasses of his helmet. He held his spear with an air of practice and confidence, the steel point glinting silver in the moonlight, and uncomfortably close to Sanja’s face now. Her thieving side was slightly distracted by the glittering of the blade. *It’s so shiny*, she thought idly. *Maybe I can take it?*

No, you can’t.

“Fine then, I won’t,” she pouted.

The guard was perplexed now. “Who are you talking to?” the guard demanded. He shoved his spear a little closer into her face for intimidation.

“My friend,” she answered.

You need only call on me.

"I don't see anybody."

"Of course not. Not yet," Sanja answered. She gave the guard a dark smile. Her skin flushed and heated as her magic gurgled to the surface, eager for use. The ant-like crawling tingle of magic settled into the base of her skull, making her light-headed and simultaneously grounded, like her head was floating, but her feet had grown deep roots into the stones. The magic in the air around her stirred and charged.

"Zyra," she whispered. The name fell like the sting of copper over her tongue.

Finally.

The sudden rush of magic that left her made her feel cold and chilled to the bone. It always made her feel as if she had sprinted a mile and suddenly come off an adrenaline high, wobbly and drained. The shadows around her stirred and seemed to darken and thicken, until it seemed that they swallowed the alley. The guard flinched as the temperature dropped in the alley. His head whipped around, frantically searching for an answer before his gaze whipped back around and focused on Sanja.

"You're- You're a Shademaster," he stammered.

Sanja felt the shadows stir behind her, and with a rustle like silk, she felt, more than saw, Zyra emerge. The guard dropped his spear and stumbled back, tripping over the broken cobbles. One arm was raised as if to shield himself from the view of the Shade. His body shook like a leaf.

Sanja didn't need to say anything, the answer was obvious. Yet she answered him anyways.

"Yes." With a rush of wind that stirred Sanja's hair, the shadows surged forward and swallowed the guard into the darkness.

There was no scream.