

“Write a story with a non-cliche happy ending.”

MERAKI {WINNER}

“Cowardice is in the ranks this morning.”

Master scrutinized our faces. His black robe fluttered behind him as he jabbed the end of the cane in my face. “Your faces are twisted with it. Your eyes are glazed with it. Your souls are possessed with it.” He lowered his voice. “You are disgraced with it.”

I clenched my teeth and stilled my fidgeting fingers. I would not be the coward. I would not show my fear. The mantra of the gladiators throbbed in my blood.

Master began pacing, his cane clicking against the cobblestone courtyard like a steady countdown. He turned, lowering his brows and scanning our faces. He thumped his cane against the ground, but I didn’t flinch. I didn’t dare. “Many of you will not see the sun set tomorrow. Many of you will return broken, scarred. Defeated.” His voice rose. “Why?” Master pointed his cane at me.

My breath choked in my throat, but the steel resolve tightened in my chest. I forced my voice to steady, meeting Master’s gaze. “The path to ruin is paved with fear.”

Master ignored me, probably wishing I had answered wrong. He moved down the line of men—barely old enough to be called that, but certainly not boys anymore. That title had been stolen from us all long ago. “You are all here because of fear. Your parents were unable to face it.” His deep-set eyes bored through me as he stalked back down the line once more. “Will you?”

A trail of goosebumps crept down my arms, but I tipped my chin a little higher.

Master wrapped long fingers around his cane. “Tomorrow is Tournament. Tomorrow is your chance. Success will be rewarded. Failure will be punished.” Master’s voice lowered. “Those who flee will become Outcasts.” He lifted his cane. “There is no room in this city for the ruined. If you wish to be the heir of kingdoms, if you count yourselves worthy of life,” Master’s voice crescendoed, “then you will spurn the terror within your hearts and fight to the last man, the final blow, the dying breath. For you are not the ruined, but the Gladiators of Therase!”

A roar rose from the ranks, none shouting louder than I. Seventeen years I had waited for Tournament, when twelve boys in our orphan compound were selected to battle before the lords of Therase in the hopes of being chosen for heirship. It was a difficult class to get into, for there were over two hundred boys to compete with for the coveted slots. Every year I broke my body in an attempt to become a part of the selection class, and every year I had failed. Until this one, when Master declared that I was by far the strongest and most promising warrior in the entire compound and finally decided that I would compete in the upcoming Tournament.

I pushed myself even harder in the months following his decision. All my life I had spent in the compound, longing and hoping and praying for the glorious chance to prove myself and be accepted. The day could not come quickly enough.

I spent Tournament Eve in preparation and it was all too soon that the curfew bell tolled the end of the day, and I followed its clanging orders unwillingly. However, as I collapsed into bed, I was grateful for the night, for sleep would bring morning more quickly. And I was ready to wake to the dawn of my future.

My forehead crashed into something hard, and I jolted back. My teeth clenched down over gritty fabric, and rough fabric rubbed against my eyelids, crushing my eyelashes as I tried to open my eyes.

Nonono. My pulse roared in my ears and I clenched my hands. Ropes dug into my wrists. The same rough cord stung at my ankles. I twisted into a sitting position, my breath coming tight in my throat. Each exhale puffed back into my face and sackcloth prickled the exposed skin on my arms and neck, rubbing my scraggly hair down into my eyes. Was I in a sack? Was this a test?

I tried to feel around, but the ground beneath me lurched, and I pitched headlong to the side, my temples slamming into the edge of something hard. White lines streaked across the blankness of my vision and I gasped, the sound muffled through the gag.

The world whirled around me, even though I couldn't see it. What was going on? Where was I? Was I kidnapped? Was this all part of the Tournament? Why—

“The path to ruin is paved with fear,” I tried to whisper it aloud, but my tongue couldn't move around the gag. Nevertheless, the words inspired me, and I forced myself to take deep, calming breaths through my nose.

If Master discovered me missing, he'd assume I escaped and would surely make me an Outcast. I shuddered. Master's threats were not idle. Two years before, a Tournament contender was caught trying to escape on the eve of Tournament. After being flogged before the entire compound, he was bound and sold in the city square as a slave. None had seen him since. I bit down on my gag. I couldn't think about that now. I needed to focus on escape.

Since my fingers were free, I strained to reach the knot of the rope at my wrists. After some wriggling, I found it and set to work loosening it. Every jostle of the wagon sent me off balance but bit by bit I eased the knot undone. Eventually, the bonds fell from my wrists, and I wasted no time in tugging off the sack and unknitting the gag and blindfold.

I gasped in a huge breath, my vision blurry for a dizzying moment as everything swayed. I blinked rapidly and glanced around, reaching to untie my ankles as I took stock of my surroundings.

I was in an open wagon with several burlap sacks and two crates for company. The jostling was on account of a forest road embedded with rocks and branches. Two men sat at the front, one driving the horses and the other scanning the woods for movement. They leaned close to each other, whispering, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Breath held between my teeth, I inched closer to the seats.

"How much farther?" the lookout asked.

"Twenty miles at least," the driver hissed.

His companion chuckled. "Just think, twenty miles and we'll be rich!"

"Shut up and keep your eyes open," the driver growled. "I didn't like this job in the first place, and I don't fancy having it made worse by being ambushed."

The lookout muttered something below his breath and returned to scanning the side of the road.

I bit my lip. The nearest town that I knew of was Rochefort, about thirty miles north of Therase. If that was our destination, I had about ten miles of distance to cover to get back home. I looked up at the sky. The half moon had completed three quarters of its journey, which meant I only had a few hours for mine. I had to leave now.

I began shimmying towards the back of the wagon but stopped and squinted at my captors. Even if I could escape the wagon without being detected, it probably wouldn't be long before they'd discover me missing and come looking for me. Seeing as how they had horses, they'd

catch up with me long before I reached Therase. I'd have to incapacitate the pair if I had any chance at freedom; besides, I could use the horses.

I glanced around the wagon in search of a weapon of some kind. One of the crates. That would have to do. Staggering upright, I gripped the crate in both hands and lifted it to chest height. The lookout had turned his gaze forward and was whispering to the driver again.

On three. I inhaled slowly. One. Exhale. Two—

A lurching bump sent me staggering forward; by some trick of luck, I tripped at the perfect moment and hit both men squarely on their heads. They tumbled forward into the horses' backs and the animals reared. I reeled backward, my knees hit the back guard of the wagon, then I tumbled to the ground.

The horses kept running, far out of reach by the time I staggered to my feet. The two men lay motionless on the side of the road in the midst of the distancing neighs of their horses.

I'd have to change my plans. Quickly, nervously, I searched the men, taking both their daggers and clipping the sheaths to my own belt.

"Sorry gentlemen," I murmured, "but I've waited too long for this to let you spoil today."

It took me two hours to reach the edge of the woods, and I finally let myself rest. I didn't dare to light a fire, lest I fall asleep. I didn't have time to sleep now. Not today.

Light bled across the horizon and outlined four black spires on the opposite edge of the valley. The infamous Towers of Therase. I allowed a tiny smile.

"Almost home," I whispered, pushing to my feet again.

I wove my way down the slope, quickening my pace at the nearness of the city.

A stick snapped somewhere behind me. My heart lurched against my ribs.

And I ran.

Adrenaline banished exhaustion, and I hurtled down the path. Tripping. Nearly falling. But never pausing for a moment. I wouldn't be caught. I wouldn't be stopped. Not now that I was so close to home again.

Hoofbeats pounded behind me and I twisted around, slowing my pace slightly. A black horse thundered toward me, the wagon driver astride it and leaning down toward me as they swept

nearer. I didn't have time to dodge before his hand grasped the back of my shirt and heaved me up onto my stomach over the front of the saddle.

I snarled, going to shove off. Anything to escape. Then something hit the back of my head and everything was darkness.

I awoke with a start, banging my head into a stone wall. Red and white lines flashed across my vision and a gasp escaped my lips.

"There, see? He's awake. Are you happy now?" A familiar voice.

I cracked my eyelids open. My vision blurred in and out of focus, but I made out three figures: the kidnappers and another wiry man who looked strangely familiar.

"Yeah, can we have our money now?" the lookout pressed.

"Not until I'm satisfied," the wiry man grunted. He pushed the other two aside and knelt down beside me. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not afraid," I growled. I would never be afraid. Fear only led to defeat. I pushed up to sit against the wall, and the dagger hilts nudged into my side.

The man scanned me from head to foot, then turned away. Didn't he notice the daggers?

"One thousand as we agreed." He motioned towards the door. "Osgood will see to it that you're paid before you leave."

The lookout rubbed his hands together. "One thousand— Just think!" he chuckled as the two stepped out into the hallway.

The wiry man paused in the doorway, watching after the two men. Now was my chance. I rolled out of the low bed onto my feet. The room rocked around me, but I kept my balance, sliding a dagger free.

"Move aside," I growled, gripping the wiry man's shoulder and touching the knife point between his shoulder blades. "Or I swear I will kill you where you stand."

His form stiffened under my hand. "Wait, I—"

"Move." I repeated, pressing the blade closer. My hand quivered, but I would not show fear. I needed to win the Tournament. I needed to prove I was worthy.

The man shuffled from the doorway.

I sidestepped past him, watching him carefully until I reached the hallway, then turned and scrambled down the stairs. Would he follow? If I could just make it out the door and escape—

I stumbled down the last three steps, then around a corner and straight into an armored man. I staggered backward, but the man clapped me on the shoulder and laughed.

“I guess our little runaway finally woke up,” a genuine smile lifted his voice and he nudged me toward the room he’d just stepped out of. “Say, fellows, come welcome your late companion!”

I blinked. What? Somehow my feet moved me forward into the room and I froze.

Staring back at me were the eleven other tournament contenders.

I couldn’t breathe.

The huge man stepped in after me and I twisted to him. “Who are you? Why have you taken us?” I asked.

The man smiled again. “My name is Captain Osgood of His Majesty’s army. As for your second question,” he leaned closer, “I didn’t so much take you as save your lives.”

No. No, this wasn’t what was meant to happen today. I clenched my fingers around the dagger and lifted it toward the man. “You’ve ruined us,” I snarled, choking on the words. “We were to be the sons of kings today. We were to prove—”

“Your worthiness of heirship,” the captain finished. “I know Tournament is no more than a bloodbath where contenders fight to the death or, if they should survive, are sold in the slave market to the highest bidder.”

Cold tingled down my spine. “You lie.”

“No, he doesn’t.” The wiry man stepped in, his lips pressed in a line. “Don’t you recognize me?”

I blinked at him, then the cold washed right through me. “The runaway!”

“Yes,” the captain nodded. “A year ago he found me and told me that he’d discovered the truth about Tournament and had tried to flee. His knowledge and the assistance of two mercenaries, enabled us to rescue you boys from certain death or enslavement.”

I looked over at the others, then back at the captain. “What will you do with us?”

“Take you to your parents, of course,” the captain laughed. “There’s twelve families who’ve volunteered to adopt a son each. These eleven have already have already met their parents.” He paused, and my throat clenched.

Today I thought I would be competing for the right to become an heir. But here there are people willing to accept us as such without proof. Cowardice and all.

Then the captain’s words sunk in and I stepped back, something desperate and terrified welling inside my chest. Desperate and terrified, but still hoping.

“Parents?” I repeated, my voice croaking.

He smiled. “Yours are still waiting in the hall. If you want to meet them, that is.”

For a moment, I was frozen. Then the last of the ice cracked apart and I could finally breathe again. Maybe for the first time in my life. I smiled and squared my shoulders. “Yes. Yes, please.”

Judge’s Comments:

First of all, I’m a sucker for adoption stories. But I also thought this book had the most non-cliche happy ending of the four. My expectation halfway through was that this kid would win the Tournament and then become an heir; not get completely rescued like this and adopted into a loving family. Good job to you!

The story was well-written and I enjoyed all the details that were put into it.

NEW WESSEX {2nd Place}

Min passed Tae Ki in the changing room, but the younger boy quickened his steps and was gone with a clatter of skates. The plane to America was tomorrow -- surely Min could've at least said something. But now it was too late.

Min went straight to his locker, looking for something he hadn't bothered to put on for a while. A leather bracelet that matched Tae Ki's -- they'd been wearing matching ones since they were little, taking them off only for competition.

It would be nice to have with him in America, he'd thought.

But it was gone.

Min Ho Lee downed the punch in his cup and leaned back to survey the room. The banquet hall, satin tablecloths and all, was awash with golden light. People who had been rivals on the ice just a few days prior were now having the time of their lives, laughing and taking pictures. In the chatter that filled the air like confetti, he picked up snippets of Japanese, Chinese, and European languages he couldn't name.

All was as it should be.

Idly, Min glanced towards the stage. Despite his limited English, he could understand the banner over the top: "Junior Grand Prix Final Figure Skating Championships - Milan, Italy - Appreciation Banquet". The second to last word gave him some trouble -- ap-ree-kee-a-shun? -- but the name of this competition, he knew, he would always remember.

"Hey, Min!" Ian, the silver medalist, took a seat beside him. "How's it going?"

The American ran a hand through his blond hair patiently as Min sorted through the bits and pieces of English he had gathered up through his months in America.

"I feel good. I... I am enjoying myself."

"Yeah, the banquets are always fun. I'm enjoying myself too. But hey, man, you're taking home the gold medal. You'd feel good no matter where you were."

Min blushed.

"Do you have banquets like this in South Korea?"

“Yes,” Min answered without thinking too much, “but the food is different.”

Ian laughed easily. He really was a good sport, Min thought. He had been the first competitor to congratulate Min after his victory.

“Why do you do that?” Ian asked suddenly.

“What?”

Ian pointed to Min’s hands, and Min realized that once again, he was trying to feel for something missing on his left wrist. Some habits just didn’t go away. “I wore a... a bracelet.” Min didn’t know how to say leather in English. “I am used to it being there... now it’s gone.”

The other boy frowned. “Oh. Did you lose it?”

“Uh...”

“Min!”

Min looked up to see Coach Brooks waving him over. “I need to go.”

“Talk to you later, Min.”

Min joined his coach. “What is it?”

“Come. There are some people I want you to meet.”

They weaved their way around banquet tables, the carpet cushioning every step from Min’s dress shoes. As he made eye contact with figure skaters from all over the world, Min felt a momentary rush of disbelief. A few months ago, crumpled under the stress of a transition to America to train with Coach Brooks, he would have never thought he would be able to make the final. Or win gold. Life could be unexpected like that...

They were walking straight towards a table where some *very* familiar faces were sitting. “Who are we meeting?”

Coach’s silent expression spoke clearer than if he had been using Korean.

“I have already talked to Coach Kang. He said it was okay. He holds nothing against me,” Min said evasively.

“I know.”

Min set his jaw as they walked up to the table where his former coach sat with two of his trainees. Apart from Coach Kang, Min had not spoken to any of them for months. Eun Ha brightened at his approach and waved. Min gave her a quick smile.

The boy sitting beside Eun Ha looked up from his phone and fumbled, almost dropping the device.

Min swallowed, forcing himself to meet Tae Ki's gaze squarely. He had prepared himself for this moment, though he did not know it would happen so soon. There was much he needed to say, but he did not know how.

He turned his attention away to bow and greet Coach Kang.

Coach Brooks imitated Min's bow, and the two men shook hands. "I have something to say to you," Coach Kang told the American and, smiling at Min, led Coach Brooks away.

Min turned back to the table, his mouth a little dry.

Eun Ha glanced between the two boys, some of her smile fading. Still, her tone remained cheerful. "*Oppa!*" she greeted him, using the term for a close friend. "Congratulations on your medal!"

Min thanked her, not daring to look Tae Ki's way. He exchanged a few more formalities with her before she left to talk to some other girls, blue dress swishing at her knees, leaving Min and Tae Ki alone.

Min hesitated, then took a seat a few chairs away from Tae Ki at the round table. He fingered the brocade tablecloth and examined at the golden swirl patterns on the red carpet before risking a glance at his compatriot.

Tae Ki looked stonily at his phone, laid out flat in front of him. It had a different phone case than when Min had last held it several months ago. He looked taller, and briefly Min remembered that the other boy had just turned sixteen. Their birthdays were exactly four months and three days apart, with Min being the elder. Tae Ki would have had chocolate cake from the bakery two blocks away from the rink...

Min bit his lip, wondering how much he'd missed by choosing Coach Brooks. He knew which K-Pop artists the other boy listened to to calm down before competition. He knew that the edge of Tae Ki's mouth quirked briefly whenever he landed a jump combination, because it wasn't exactly dignified to grin when skating to a theme as serious as *The Dark Knight*.

Tae Ki looked up now, and as much as Min knew -- or had known -- about him, there was still this insurmountable chasm hanging between them. And something inside Min knew that he himself had opened it.

“You look well,” Min finally ventured in their native tongue.

Tae Ki sat up a little straighter. “So do you.”

Silence.

“Mi-Jin, Eun Ha, and all the others... everything is going well with them too?”

“Yes, they are well. Have you not been keeping in touch with them?” There was some surprise in Tae Ki’s voice.

“Since... since I moved, I have only spoken to my parents.”

They both looked at the tablecloth again.

Tae Ki fidgeted a little, like he wanted to say something, but didn’t dare. He opened his mouth, and closed it again. Finally, in an impassive tone that belied the intensity of the words: “You moved to America. Was it the right thing to do?”

Underneath the table, Min clenched his hands together so hard they cried out in pain. His mind was swept back with an invisible tide, and suddenly he was seven months younger, on the ice at the rink in Seoul for the last time.

“You are moving to America. Is this the right thing to do?” Tae Ki asked.

Their blades were making sweeping sounds as they glided over the ice, warming up for the day’s training session. It would be Min’s last, but he thought only Coach Kang knew that.

Min narrowed his eyes. “What does it matter if it is right? I’m going to do it anyways.”

“I want you to tell me why you’re going.”

The light filtering in from the windows overhead was bright. Min had never noticed the windows before. “It’s none of your business.”

“Why are you leaving Korea to train in a foreign land? Why are you rejecting the coach who has always been patient with you? Who has taught you everything you know. Who believes in you. Are these things not worth discussing?”

Min launched himself into a toe loop, rotated three times, and landed on a perfect running edge. Why couldn't all the jumps be this easy? Would he get better where he was going?

"Don't be silly. Even though I'm training with a foreign coach, I'll still compete for Korea. You know that."

"And Coach Kang?"

Min spoke before he could help himself. "The coach doesn't believe in me very much. He believes in the people who are good."

Tae Ki slid into Min's path and stopped there, eyes blazing. Min skidded to a stop too and faced him.

"Is this how you treat your best friend?" Tae Ki asked quietly. "You make the decision to move across a whole ocean to train with an American coach, because you're jealous? Of me?"

Min answered in the same calm tone; it wasn't proper to yell in public. "Ever since you won the Grand Prix Final, you've acted like I was beneath you. I was disappointed I didn't qualify, but did you ever show sympathy? Did you ever encourage me when you received all the media attention and all of Coach Kang's praise?"

"Wouldn't you have thought I was bragging?"

"I feel that you have shown me no concern since then."

"I feel that you have avoided me since then." Tae Ki gave Min a searching glance, his expression bordering on contempt. "Here is my concern for you, then. Here is what I would've said. You did not win because you are not good enough yet, but I think that with another year or two of practice, you will be able to reach your full potential. But I guess you are not patient enough to do that. You have to move to America."

"You... you have no right to judge my decisions."

"That's true." Tae Ki's voice shook a little. "If our friendship still existed, I would have told you what I thought, and you would have welcomed it. But if it's not going to be that way, then I don't care."

He turned and skated away. Practice was starting. Min felt a lump in his throat.

Later, Min passed Tae Ki in the changing room in silence, and Min found the bracelet that he had been ready to neglect had disappeared.

Min blinked as the lights of the banquet hall came back into focus. The words had rushed through his mind somewhat incoherently, but the weight of the memory was still real, as if it had happened yesterday.

There was a bit of a flush over Tae Ki's face as he waited for a response. Min recollected himself and answered the question. "It was the right choice, but I didn't do it for the right reasons."

"You achieved your goal, didn't you? You got the gold this time."

Min remembered how he'd felt yesterday when he'd heard that Tae Ki had placed fourth. "I think that once you win, you realize that the medal is only a medal. I cannot always win gold -- no one does."

"It was the wrong decision then?"

"I had difficulties at first... yet, I am happier in America. It's not just the gold medal today, it's things like the quad lutz triple loop combination, if you get what I mean."

"Coach Kang said that those kinds of jumps were unreasonable, and yet you can do them now." Tae Ki was nodding slowly.

"The way my coach teaches me is better for my personality. Like I said, it was really hard. But now it has been worth it."

The other boy appeared to weigh his words before replying. "Or perhaps it was just that extra year of practice that finally did it for you."

"Perhaps." Min took a deep breath. "I was foolish at the time. Even though I had problems with my situation, I was blaming all of them on you. You never wronged me."

A small pause. "The same cannot be said of you."

Min stopped tracing the little flower patterns on a napkin and set his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Tae Ki."

These few words, he knew, fell flat against the months of deep pain that he had caused. Min himself had struggled getting used to a new culture, but it was Tae Ki who had to deal with Min's abrupt decision to leave. It was Tae Ki who had to show up to practice every day only to sense the absence of a best friend he had lost long ago, who had chosen the path of bitterness as Tae Ki had reaped the harvest of hard work and talent.

Min knew this was the same burden that now made Tae Ki's shoulders slump and kept that stony expression on his face. "I'm sorry, I really am. I'm sorry." He could find nothing else to say.

"It's never going to be the same again, you know." Tae Ki finally said. If anything, he sounded angrier than ever.

Min exhaled a little. "I know."

"What you did was... was..." Tae Ki was looking at the table, so Min couldn't see his expression.

"Was what?"

"You know, I don't want to talk about this." Tae Ki pushed back his chair and walked away. Min's heart sank, shrouded in a gray cloud.

The two coaches were returning, their expectant smiles beginning to fade when they saw Tae Ki striding the other direction. The boy paused beside his mentor to say something briefly in Korean. Min averted his eyes under Coach Brook's concerned gaze.

"Is everything all right?" Coach Brooks asked as he drew near.

"I don't think so."

"He looked pretty upset. I don't think he's gotten over it."

I haven't really gotten over it, either, Min thought. Coach Kang was walking over now, and Min had to wonder at the small smile on his face.

"Did it go well?" The coach asked in Korean.

"No, not really. I don't think... I don't think he could forgive me."

"Is that so?" Coach Kang pressed something soft into Min's hand.

The bracelet. *Min's* bracelet. Rumpled a great deal from travel -- probably had been stuffed into the bottom of his backpack, where Tae Ki kept his small things -- but recognizable nevertheless.

Min bit his lip to keep the tears back.

"Are you okay?" Coach Brooks asked.

I'm good. Really, really good.

But Min said nothing. Not even daring to smile, he lifted his eyes to where a figure stood in the distance, waiting. Tae Ki met Min's gaze, gave a small nod, and ducked into a hallway, out of sight.

Min knew better than to follow -- once the bleeding stops, even the smallest wounds take time to heal completely -- but the bracelet in his hand was a start. So he let himself savor this moment: the weight on his chest lifting, Ian laughing with Eun Ha a few tables over, the familiar loop of leather around his wrist. The golden lights of the room seemed brighter than the sun.

Judge's Comments:

This one came super close to winning first place. Unfortunately there were a couple of places where I noticed some passive voice and that's what bumped it to second. I did really enjoy how the ending wasn't just happy-go-lucky, but almost a bittersweet ending. You did a great job with it.

PARIMI ALCA {1st Honorable Mention}

Once upon a time, there was a prince named Ralph who had a Charley horse. That is, he had a horse named Charley. I was Charley. I mean—I still am Charley, but you get the point. Or maybe you don't. In fact, you probably won't get the point of anything I say. Too bad for you, but it's not like you'll miss anything important. On that note, what was I saying? Oh yes, the prince. You see, we always used to have all sorts of fun and happy adventures together, until...

"Charley, Charley!" Ralph slammed through the stable door like a battering ram, flinging his arms wide in the most un-princely way I'd ever seen. "Come quick! We've got to rescue a damsel in distress!"

I blinked. Okay, how exactly was I supposed to "come quick" when I was locked in my stall—and before breakfast, besides? And...*damsel in distress*? Where did he think we were, fairy-tale land? People here didn't go on magical quests or get turned into animals by wicked old witches.

"I know what you're thinking." I flicked my ears forward, straining to catch Prince Ralph's words as he thumped into the tack room. "You're excited. You've been waiting for this day for years. You think I should have done this a long time ago."

What? Good oat mash, his mind reading had gotten horribly out of touch.

"But sometimes," he slid the saddle up to my withers, "a prince must wait for just the right time to find his true love. But now, at last, I set off!"

He had to be mad. Mad! What else was there to explain this sudden notion about running off to find true love? What even was "true love"? And I still hadn't had my oats!

"Ah, Charley," he mused. I stared at him dumbly, allowing myself to be led out and mounted. "In a matter of days, you'll be telling stories to your stable-mates and ending them with, 'and Prince Ralph and his lovely bride lived happily ever after to the end of their days.'"

The sensation of a dozen biting horse-flies swept over my heart. *My* name was supposed to be in that sentence, not "his lovely bride." Prince Ralph couldn't live a happy life with someone besides me, could he? He couldn't seriously be determined to chase after fairy-tales so early in the morning.

"Let's go!" Prince Ralph's polished boots squeaked in the stirrups and brushed against my sides.

But my oats...

Prince Ralph shifted in the saddle, throwing my staggering walk off balance. He brought up a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

“Oh dear, Charley.” Well, at least he’d said my name again. All he’d done for the past six hours of traveling was babble about what the maiden’s name might be. “I’m positive the traveler said the tower was near this glade, but I can’t see it anywhere.” He sighed. “Enough for today, then.” My right rein tightened. We were turning around! Finally! Maybe I could get a proper dinner and some rest. But then—

“Wait! What’s that?” He pointed to a grey thing that I could just barely see over the tops of the trees.

I huffed. Was it a massive stack of hay? Because if it wasn’t, I’d rather not—

“It’s the tower!” Prince Ralph yanked the reins around, and I had no choice but to race after his discovery as if it were going to run away. “It’s the damsel, the damsel, whoopee!” I wrinkled my nose, glad the king wasn’t here to listen to this childish blathering.

The bit pressed against the roof of my mouth, and I slowed, panting as the prince half-fell out of the saddle. “Fair maiden...I have come!” *I?* Where was the “we” in this adventure?

“I am here, my prince!” something squealed. A mass of something that looked temptingly like hay came out of the high tower window, followed by a very pink face.

Prince Ralph clasped his hands to his chest and smiled so widely I thought his lips would split. “I am come to rescue you! What is thy name? Why art thou trapped?”

“My name is Porchina, and my wicked stepmother hath cast a spell upon me, that I might not escape unless I be rescued by a charming prince!”

“Porchina, thou...thou art as gorgeous as a...a...” Prince Ralph stuttered, his face turning pale. I was sure any moment he would swoon. “...a s-spring flower!” With that, he stumbled over his feet and disappeared, leaving me with nothing but the echo of his boots skipping up the steps.

The stall's latch screeched as Prince Ralph swung it shut, floating out of the room without so much as a good-bye, a pat on the nose, or even a backward glance—meaning he didn't see the glare I'd leveled at the back of his head. How dare he? He'd promised a hunting trip to the mountains today, but he'd chosen to attend Porchina's sixteenth birthday party instead.

I snatched a mouthful of oats from the feed box and promptly spat them back out. Nasty, tasteless things. Nothing had been enjoyable since the rescue. The prince only came to see me when he wanted to travel to this village—Porchina's village. No long walks. No carrots. No adventures.

"Hey, your prince rescued the young maiden, Porchina, just in time." The mare I shared the stable with poked her head into my stall.

"Huh?"

"Haven't you heard the legend?"

I grunted. "What legend? There seem to be too many of them for my taste." Like legends about princes rescuing maidens in towers from wicked stepmothers.

"Why, the legend that if a maiden invites a prince to her sixteenth birthday party, and wishes when she blows out her candles that the prince will propose to her..." the mare's eyes glittered, and she paused for a breath. "...it will come to pass. And thank goodness, because it's about time that she be relieved of her curse."

What?

She...Porchina...my prince...married...?

No!

I scraped my hoof against the door. Maybe if I rattled the latch hard enough, it would open. I had to stop this! Prince Ralph running off to visit the maiden was bad enough, but I hadn't allowed myself to think...to even consider...

Ugh! Imagine! There would be no adventures ever again, nothing. Nothing but lugging around a princess' trunks of clothing and jewels. Nothing but standing in the stable, alone. Nothing but heartache! Why couldn't he think about anyone but himself?

“What on earth are you doing?” The mare’s voice, steeped in shock, slowed my kicking for a moment.

“I’m getting out!” Wasn’t that obvious? “I have to stop the maiden from blowing out her candles!”

“But...why?” She grabbed my mane in her teeth, holding me back. “You’re the prince’s horse. Surely you want him to be happy?”

Happy? I let my hoof fall still. He was happy. I had been too, before this whole mess. “You don’t understand,” I spat.

She snorted softly. “I’m not sure you do either. Haven’t you seen his eyes? The emptiness in them? The way they brightened when the stable hand spoke of the maiden? He longs for love.”

“He has love,” I snapped, jerking away, “From me!” With a final crash, the latch broke free. As I galloped from the stables, I just caught the mare’s final words:

“I’m not sure he does.”

I’d found the cake. It sat on a table in the back of the tent, its frosting flowers a bit droopy from the heat. I glanced around, trying to steady my breathing so it wouldn’t be so loud. What should I do? If I hid the cake, someone might find it again, and that wouldn’t do. I couldn’t carry it anyway. Cake stands weren’t meant for party-crashing horses. Horses aren’t even meant to eat cake...are they?

Well. Apparently it was the Charley horse’s destiny to discover the taste of human food.

Deep breath. Bite number one. Hmm. Odd...but not bad.

Bite number two. Actually quite enjoyable. The frosting wasn’t much different from the sugarcubes Prince Ralph used to give me, although it was a good bit sloppier.

Bite number three. The inner part, though, was a little—

Someone screamed.

I jerked my head up, choking and spluttering on a bit of cake.

“Get—get that horse out of here!” Porchina hopped in the entrance to the tent, pointing at me and fanning her face with her other hand. “Father, my cake! He’s ruining my beautiful cake!”

The tent flaps rustled as her father and Prince Ralph appeared beside her. Frosting dripped off my chin.

“Oh, Father! That horrid horse is destroying my wish! And the curse...oh-oh-ohh!” And, with that, she fainted.

Her father caught her, and Prince Ralph gasped, glancing between her and me, his face flashing between pitiful and angry with each turn of his gaze.

I’m sure you can guess who the angry glances were meant for.

“Charley, you—you rotten scoundrel!”

Ouch. Maybe being ignored was better after all.

Crickets chirped from the bushes along the path, so inappropriately cheerful that I would have liked to smash them all. But I’d already smashed the cake and had my heart smashed, so maybe that was enough smashing for one night.

I’d failed. I had ruined everything but her desire to marry my prince. Her wish would come true, candles or no candles.

The prince’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “You completely dashed my chance to propose to her, Charley.”

Yeah, that was kind of the point. The point was that he wouldn’t propose to her, so that I—we—could be happy. Like we used to be.

He tightened his grip on my mane. “You’re just jealous, aren’t you?” Well. His mind reading was getting a bit better. Uncomfortably so. “Why can’t you think about anyone but yourself?”

I—but—

Prince Ralph snorted. “Well, you won’t get your way this time. Why should I try to please a spoiled horse when I can please a princess who will love me?”

But...

He has love! From me!

I'm not sure he does.

Oh, good oat mash, the mare was right. I *had* been rotten. All the adventures we went on together, I enjoyed only because they meant I wasn't bored. All those visits he paid me, I enjoyed only because he brought me treats. All this time when he had been seeking his true love, I was angry because I never really cared about his happiness—only mine. I was...so...*awful*.

I stumbled and pain flashed up my left foreleg, but I barely noticed. It wasn't until Prince Ralph dismounted and plucked something off the ground that I realized I'd lost my shoe. Probably due to all that kicking and smashing I'd done earlier. The prince sighed, peering through the dark at the rocky trail ahead. "I suppose we'd better go back to the village, then."

By the time we re-entered Porchina's village, it was well past midnight and my leg ached as much as my heart. Prince Ralph lifted his head for the first time since he dismounted, leading me towards the stable where he'd left me earlier.

"Locked," he muttered, rattling the latch. I scanned the village for signs of life and glimpsed candlelight in a cottage three buildings down. As we neared it, my ears pricked at the muffled sound of voices within its walls.

"Oh, Father! I think he's going to fall into our trap, even after that incident with the nasty horse!" *Porchina?*

"Shh! It's after curfew!"

"Oh, bother curfew! I'm going to be a princess! All the jewels, and nice clothes, and one day I'll be queen! And I'll turn that wretched horse into dog meat!"

Wretched horse? *Me?* I suppose I deserved it. Wretched, *wretched* horse.

Prince Ralph stiffened and tightened his grip on my reins.

Porchina's father chuckled. "And if he does, I'll never have to work another day of my life. Quite a good deal if you ask me. Princes fall for everything much too easily these days."

“I’ll be rich! Rich! The joke shall be on the witch that cursed a princess! How silly of her to think that no one would marry me just because of my character. Ha! A prince will.” Her voice rose to an animalistic squeal. “I’ll finally be free of the spell as soon as I take my vows!”

Prince Ralph crept towards the window, his face twisting in disgust.

Porchina stood with her back toward us, still wearing the same gown and hat as before. But somehow she seemed a little shorter, and fatter, and the golden curls that Prince Ralph had so profusely admired were now wiry and grey. What? How—

Then she turned around.

Dark, glittering eyes. A long, pink snout. Two large, grey nostrils. I pressed my eyes shut and reopened them. She couldn’t have...had she...she’d...turned into a *pig*? Good oat mash! It had to be a hallucination.

Prince Ralph dropped my reins and staggered against my side.

So, maybe not a hallucination.

The Porchina-pig’s jaw slacked and the candlelight reflected off the whites of her eyes. She stood there with her gaze locked on mine, snout quivering. I winced, bracing myself for the outburst that was sure to come—

“He saw me! Father, he saw me! Him and his nasty horse are in the win—wind—” The rest of the sentence was lost in a deluge of wheezing squeals.

That was the one moment in the history of horses that anyone ever rejoiced over losing a shoe.

BANG! The stable door shuddered, waking me ten minutes earlier than I would have liked. My bored yawn was cut short when the Battering Ram thumped up the aisle and dropped a handful of sugar cubes in my oat bucket.

Ralph? But...I thought...Why was he...?

“Well don’t just stand there and look at them.” Prince Ralph crossed his arms and tried to force his grin into a frown. “You deserve it. You saved me from a lifetime of misery yesterday, Charley. Imagine! I almost married a woman who turns into a pig!” He leaned his head against

the stall doorpost and laughed until his face turned red and he snorted very much like a pig. Such a dignified prince. Thank goodness the King couldn't hear him. But dignified or not, he was back and he was mine again, and I'd never take that for granted.

My heart swelled, and I leaned out towards him. If only I could speak to him, to tell him...*I'm so sorry. I've been a horrible, selfish friend.*

Prince Ralph patted my neck, wiping tears off his reddened face. "I forgive you, Charley. Sorry I made you jealous."

Good oat mash, his mind reading was definitely back in touch. I grinned at him while the sugar cubes dissolved on my tongue.

"So, back to business." Prince Ralph pulled a parchment out of his cloak. "I found a treasure map. Are you up for an adventure?"

Up for an adventure?

Whoopee!

Judge's Comments:

I love the cliché subversion of the prince always getting the princess. I thought it was slightly contrived, but otherwise really well done. One thing I would have liked to see a little more would be a little more of a character arc in Charley. He didn't seem to really learn from his jealousy. Sure, it helped because he ruined the cake and helped Ralph find out about the "princess's" plans, but I would have preferred to see him a little more repentant at the end.

Overall, I thought the story was well done and had a good plot idea behind it.

EREKDALE {2nd Honorable Mention}

Bob was a frog.

He hadn't always been a frog. Once he was Prince Bobert, Fifth Son of the Sixth Son to the King of the South Kingdom, Eleventh in Line, And Only Called a Prince Because His Grandfather Wanted His Grandchildren to Feel Special. (Yes, that was his actual title.) But now he was Bob the frog.

Why was Bob a frog? Well... that was a bit complicated. But at the moment, he needed to stop a prince from climbing the tower and also getting turned into a frog.

Built of white stone, the tower cast a menacing shadow against the clear sky.

"Hey," Bob croaked. "Don't climb."

The prince ignored him. *Rude.*

Bob launched himself at the prince, and bounced off. "Hey! I'm talking to you!"

The prince began to climb.

Bob jumped onto his head. "I'm warning you. Don't do it."

The prince grabbed Bob, stuffed him into a bag that hung around his waist, and continued climbing. Idiot prince. Thought he could do whatever he wanted just because he was a prince and Bob was a frog. He could hear the prince muttering under his breath.

Oooo. She wasn't going to like him.

After several minutes, the prince reached the top of the tower and heaved himself through the window. His bag spilled open and Bob tumbled out under a table.

Gertrude cleared her throat.

She stood in front of the prince, hands on her hips. Her black hair was so thick and frizzy it almost obscured her face, but her fierce green eyes pierced through. She had a wart on the end of her long nose. Bob didn't remember it from last time.

"Who are you?" Gertrude demanded. "Where are you from? What is your favorite book?"

The prince drew himself up and puffed out his chest. "I am Prince Rupert of the Faraway Kingdom. Where is the princess, *you witch?*"

Gertrude smiled and flicked her wrist. “Wrong answer.”

All at once, Prince Rupert began to change. First, his face turned green, like he had smelled Bob’s Aunt Bernice’s socks. Then he doubled over, and his eyes popped out like he had actually eaten Aunt Bernice’s socks. Then he was gone, like Aunt Bernice’s socks would be if he had eaten them. Only his clothes were left.

Gertrude stalked over to the pile of clothes and Bob sidled further under the table. Gertrude moved the clothes and lifted the former Prince Rupert by a slimy leg, dangling him in the air.

“I *am* the princess,” she said, and threw him out the window. When he landed with a satisfying *plop* in the swamp below, she turned on her heel and stalked downstairs.

Bob liked Gertrude, even though she had to be lying about being the princess. She had standards for her men, unlike some of the ladies that hung around his grandfather’s castle. And he didn’t really mind being a frog. It was better than alternating between doing nothing and jumping out of windows to avoid the fawning girls.

But there were a lot of frogs at the base of the tower, and some of them had things they really needed to be doing. For example, Frederick was the only person in his kingdom who understood the tax code. And James, the bullfrog, could be fighting the giants that threatened his people. And that was just two of them. Bob had to do something to help.

He hopped after Gertrude.

The room below smelled of rotten cabbage, but he didn’t really mind. The stone walls were wet and slimy. This was a dungeon if he had ever seen one. Built for pure evil. Like kidnapping princesses and changing men into frogs.

Gertrude bent over a pot of mossy green liquid, her green robes making her look almost froglike. She sprinkled some mysterious objects from a bottle into the pot.

“Gertrude!” Bob shouted his tiny voice across the *big* room. “Turn us back.”

Gertrude turned and frowned. “Didn’t I just throw you out the window? Robert or something?”

“His name was Rupert, and no, that was someone else. I am Bob and I demand—”

Gertrude held out a finger. “I’m sorry. Hold on.” She took a crystal bottle off the shelf and took a sip. “You were saying?”

“I am Bob and—”

“You look like the frog I just threw out the window.”

Bob huffed. “Well, I’m not. He *clearly* was a darker shade of green.”

Gertrude shrugged. “You all look the same.”

“No, we don’t! Look, Frederick has yellow spots on his back, and James has five toes on one foot. Rupert, as I said, is a much darker green than I am.”

“What’s your distinct feature?”

“I don’t know. There aren’t exactly any mirrors lying around in the swamp.”

Gertrude tossed her head. “There are puddles, aren’t there?”

“I have no neck.” Bob said flatly. “And my eyes are on the top of my head. How am I supposed to find the right angle to see myself in a puddle?”

The witch waved her hand. “My *point* is: I threw you out the window, yet here you are.” She raised one of her thin, black eyebrows. “How did you climb the tower? How did you get in here?”

Bob let out the frog version of a sigh, which was a slow ribbit that sort of sounded like hiccuping.

“Persistence.” He paused for what he hoped was dramatic effect. “And pain.” He blinked his bulging frog eyes at her.

“Ah, hm.” Gertrude let out a snort and turned back to the brew. “I threw you out the window for a reason.” She poured some of the liquid from the crystal bottle into the pot, and stirred it in with a giant spoon.

“Honestly, you shouldn’t have returned.” She turned back to Bob, bent over, and squinted in his face, her nose a mere inch away. “Because I will throw you out the window again.”

“That would be wonderful.” Bob croaked.

Gertrude’s smile faded. “I’m sorry. What?”

“You can throw me out the window. I like it. It’s like flying.” Bob let out a happy little ribbit. “After you turn the other princes back, of course.”

“Those snobs?” Gertrude laughed. “You plan to get me to turn them back so they can come up here and rescue you? Do you really think I am that stupid?”

“No.” Bob hopped on her head, which she didn’t seem to mind much because she just stood back up and tinkered with her potions. “You successfully lured princes here with rumors of a captured princess. You have standards, even if you only ask three questions. You can turn princes into frogs and you’re making who-knows-what in that pot. So you can’t be that terribly stupid. In fact, you’re probably pretty smart.”

Gertrude froze. She froze like the princesses that visited the castle would freeze when they had a frog in their hair. Those princesses would start thrashing their arms about and panicking. Sometimes they screamed. Bob braced himself.

“What?” Gertrude whispered.

Bob swallowed the fly in his throat. “I said you’re smart.”

“Oh.” Gertrude was quiet again, and Bob waited for her to scream, or grab him, or turn him into something that had even less chance of flying than a frog. Like a snail. But she didn’t do any of those things.

“I’m not going to turn those princes back,” she announced.

“But...?”

“But... I think I’ll keep you around.”

Over the next few days, Bob tried his best to get Gertrude to turn the other frogs back. He jumped on her face while she was sleeping. He hopped into her pot when she made potions. He told her really bad jokes. Normally when he told those jokes, the gaggle of ladies surrounding him would disappear and started following one of his less awkward brothers.

But Gertrude laughed at his jokes, and scooped him out of the pot when he tried to hop in. And she was a really heavy sleeper.

Bob was running out of ideas.

He hopped along the shelf in the potion room, hoping to find a turn-into-a-human potion. The glass bottles reflected his bulging features disproportionately. They weren’t labeled.

“What’s this potion?” He put his foot on a blue bottle with creamy swirls inside.

Gertrude glanced up from the mossy green potion she had been working on when he arrived. The sound of the boiling liquid was louder than it should have been and there weren’t many bubbles.

“Dust removal. Sprinkle it over the room and all the dust will disappear. It stains clothing, though.”

“And this?” Bob pointed to a black potion that looked like it was moving.

Gertrude wrinkled her nose. “That’s in case a really nasty prince comes along and I can’t deal with him on my own.”

“This one?” The third was pink and shimmered slightly.

“Beauty potion.”

“Why don’t you drink it?”

Gertrude stared at Bob, and what he had said slowly sank in.

“Not that you—uh— *need* it or anything—”

“Shut up,” Gertrude said.

She walked over to the shelf and picked up the bottle, swirling it. It glowed softly, bathing her face in pink light.

“Why should I drink it? To woo some stupid prince and be the most beautiful witch in the realm? But I don’t need to be pretty in order to follow my dreams. Sure, it isn’t fun that every prince who climbs the tower thinks, ‘*She must be a witch! No princess would look like that!*’ I just...” She sighed, and glanced at Bob. “I should probably just drink it, shouldn’t I.”

Bob opened and closed his mouth before answering. “No.”

“You just implied I was ugly.” Gertrude gave him a flat stare.

“I wasn’t thinking. I like you the way you are.” She really wasn’t bad. Now that he was thinking about it, he couldn’t imagine her looking any way other than how she did now. He liked her the way she was now.

Gertrude eyed him and set the bottle down. She turned back to her bubbling pot, and there was a spring in her step that wasn’t there before.

Thoughts of a human potion forgotten, he jumped down after her. Something she said stuck out at him. *No princess would look like that!*

“So you really *are* the princess?”

“Um, yeah.” Gertrude tossed him a look, and seeing him on the floor beside her, scooped him up and placed him on a stool next to the pot. “I’m pretty sure I mentioned that. Right before I threw you out of the tower? I usually mention it at that point.”

“I didn’t think you were serious!”

“Because I’m ugly.”

“Because you turned me into a frog!” Bob settled in his seat and turned the idea over in his mind. “You must be special.”

Gertrude grinned, and added a lizard tongue to the pot.

By the next week, things had settled into a routine. Bob woke up before Gertrude, hopped on her head until she awoke, then set off in search of flies while Gertrude made her own breakfast. Sometimes while he was exploring, he would write: “Turn the princes back” in the slime of the dungeon and leave it there for Gertrude to find later. It kept things interesting.

Then Gertrude would work on her green potion in the potion room, and Bob would search among them for a human-potion. They ate lunch together, and afterwards Gertrude would read—sometimes to herself and sometimes to Bob. Bob hopped around the room. Sometimes he shouted, “Let the princes free!” and jumped on Gertrude’s head, but he hadn’t really done that lately.

Late one afternoon, Bob pushed through the last of the bottled potions. There wasn’t a human potion. His heart sank. His annoy-Gertrude-until-she-gives-in plan wasn’t working, and now his find-a-potion-and-do-it-himself plan had failed. Bob could enjoy being a frog for the rest of his days, but the others...

“Done!” pronounced Gertrude.

Bob looked over at her. She stood proudly over the pot, which had turned from mossy green to lime green with dark swirls. “What?”

“I finished the potion!” Gertrude beamed. She was happier than Bob had ever seen her.

“Oh. Good job!” He hopped off the shelf. His problem could wait. “What is it?”

“A turn-frogs-into-humans potion.”

Bob gaped at her. “Really?”

“It’s not that you convinced me or anything,” Gertrude added hastily. “I had started it because I thought it might be good to have leverage over the frogs if they tried something. But now... It’s getting pretty noisy at the bottom of the tower and I’m losing sleep. It’s time for the princes to go home.”

Bob knew for a fact that she was not losing sleep over the frogs at the base of the tower, but that wasn’t the point. He had succeeded! Frederick would be able to file tax returns, and James could save the village! He hopped a happy hop.

Then Gertrude waved her hand, and Bob found himself eye-deep in swamp water outside the tower. Gertrude stood beside the pot, lifting her robes out of the water.

“I always forget about the water,” she muttered, then raised her voice. “Princes! Jump into the pot and you will turn back into a human!”

In an instant, they were mobbed by frogs. They swarmed into the pot, there was a series of blinding flashes, and Bob blinked several times. When he could see again, he was surrounded by human princes, royal robes and all. Thankfully.

The princes eyed Gertrude, and she bowed without a word. They ran off in all directions, and Bob watched them jump from tussock to tussock through the swamp. Perhaps the frogness took a while to wear off.

“Aren’t you going to jump in?” Gertrude asked.

Bob looked back at her. He hesitated. He liked being a frog. More than he liked being human, in fact. But there were advantages to being human, and they included a certain green-eyed witch.

“Don’t you want to be human? Isn’t that what you have been bugging me about?”

“The human stuff wasn’t for me.” Bob said. “I like being a frog.”

“Oh.” Gertrude looked disappointed. “I thought...”

“In fact, there is only one reason I would consider being human.”

“What’s that?”

Bob looked into Gertrude’s eyes. “You.”

Gertrude gasped. Then she smiled.

“Right answer,” she said, and flicked her wrist. Her face began to turn green - just as if she had smelled Aunt Bernice’s socks.

In another moment, the witch's robes had fallen to the swampy ground, and Gertrude hopped out with a muffled croak.

"Human stuff isn't for me either." she said.

"Really?" Bob gaped at her. He felt like jumping and spinning and shouting and laughing and crying all at once.

"Really." Gertrude confirmed. She croaked happily, and it was the most beautiful thing that Bob had ever heard.

Judge's Comments:

I think it's funny that there were two fairy tale type stories. This twist on the Princess and the frog was definitely interesting. However, the ending was still somewhat cliché in that the two MCs did end up with each other in the end. The other three stories had slightly better twists to the endings. Overall, the story was very entertaining.