

Short Story : Junior

Winner – Emily Dawson, Yr 9, Riccarton High School



Moments had passed when Birch slid into the den. “Are you ready?” Questioned Birch. Thorn looked up from his muddy paws and stared at Birch with his bright amber eyes. They always had that peculiar glimmer in them, but this time his eyes shined not with his spirit and soul, but from the tears welled up from his heart. “For what?” Questioned Thorn curiously. “We’re attending Embers burial ceremony. The others are waiting for us by the sacred Calaveras tree.” Birch barked roughly, but you could tell that his rough tone was just an attempt to hold back the tears. Thorn exhaled heavily as he rose to his paws. He was exhausted after staying awake for so long, and was in desperate need of rest, but he wouldn't miss his mother's burial for anything. “As long as petal is coming.” Thorn and Birch hauled her to her paws and began slowly guiding her towards the exit of the den, one paw at a time. Birch slid through the rocky entrance first, and Thorn pushed Petal through the gap between the rocks to where Birch waited on the other side. They began to walk up the slope towards the forested area of the sacred Calaveras tree. Thorn and Birch stood on either side of Petal, so that she could use their shoulders for support if she found it difficult to make her way through the ever increasingly rugged terrain. “I'll take it from here.” He murmured, noticing how tired Thorn looked. Thorn nodded cautiously, and hauled Petal onto his Grandfather's back, arranging her so that she wouldn't fall during the walk to the burial grounds. Padding through the forest that day felt so unbelievably different. Everything was so peaceful and serene. The animals, the insects and even the trees were harmonious, not a single gust of wind shook the great Calaveras tree that surrounded them. Every living plant and animal lived and breathed as one. Despite the beautiful scene that lay before their eyes, Thorn could feel tremors of terror shake his entire body as he recollected. He would never again feel safe and secure amongst the forest. The same terrible memories kept flooding back to him, but there was no shaking them from his mind. Eventually they arrived at the roots of a massive tree. Many foxes stood before them as they stepped towards the

group. Birch walked around the edge of the gathered crowd and gently deposited Petal near the front. She lay down on her side with an exhausted sigh. Thorn ran over to join his sister as Birch joined Blossom on the other side of the pack. Some of the other foxes stared at Petal, their sharp gazes penetrating her mind like a sharp rock cutting into a stream, causing ripples to spread out in every direction. Although their gazes were sharp with curiosity, it wasn't hard to see the glances of sympathy angled in the siblings direction. Yet Thorn didn't notice any of this, as his attention was fixed on the four frail foxes that had moved from their spots in the pack to surround Embers body. They climbed onto the tree roots, and sat down quietly. The largest of the old foxes stepped forwards, his fur was incredibly long, and the colour reminded Thorn of the sandy beach they had heard so many stories about. "warriors" He began slowly. "We, the elders, welcome you all. I am the oldest member of the pack, and my name is Speckle Fang. Today we are here to mourn for someone who did not reach my age, and has left us far too early. But we are also here to celebrate the life of Ember Heart. Mother of Petal and Thorn, daughter of Birch Feather and Blossom Flight. Even though her death had no point, her life had one. Today you shall witness Ember Heart joining our ancestors. We shall bury her inside of the very tree that my paws are resting on, but first we would like some friends and family to speak to Ember Heart for the last time before she is released into the care of our wise ancestors." Sun's voice echoed through the forest. He was loud and clear, despite his fragile body and old age. "Who would like to speak first?" He asked, surveying the crowd with two fading yellow eyes. A fluffy white vixen took a deep breath and took a cautious step towards the tree. Speckle turned towards Blossom. "Yes dear, come up to the front." He spoke softly and kindly to her. Blossom nodded quickly as she slowly made her way up to the front. Blossom just said what she had to say, before it was too late to say anything at all. "I'm sure Ember would have appreciated that you were all able to gather here today beneath the great Calaveras tree." She began with a slight quiver to her voice "I just want to tell my daughter how much I love her. How my heart sinks into the ground when I think of her, when I think of the life she's leaving behind." Blossom's voice was becoming increasingly unstable, and it was beginning to wobble and crack. Tears were rolling down her slim, delicate face and falling to the ground. "I just want to remind all of you to appreciate everything you've got, because you miss what you had so dearly when it's gone. I never fully realised how much I loved her, and how much I'd miss her when she was gone. I just knew that I loved her as much as I could possibly love something." Blossom was finding it increasingly difficult to finish her speech, and the constant fall of tears made it challenging for her to speak. "I also never really thought about how amazing she was as a mother and a daughter, and how beautifully unique she was." Blossom's gaze wasn't focused on the rest of the pack, but gazing far into the forest as memories of Ember came flooding back to her. "I would do anything just to hold her in my paws once more, just to tell her that we'll never forget her, and that I love her and I always will. I never got to say goodbye" Blossom had to summon all of her strength to finish the speech, to finally accept that her daughter wasn't coming back. Blossom slowly padded towards the patch of ferns where Ember had been laid down. She squeezed her eyes shut rejecting the situation. Yet no matter how hard she tried, it was impossible to hold the tears back. "I will stay strong for the Pack, but I will always hold your spirit in my heart." Blossom said as if she could persuade Ember to come back. She licked Ember cheek with a level of affection that only a mother could have for her kit, she placed a bundle of withered yet tragically beautiful flowers onto her blood soaked chest "I will let my daughter die as she deserves, and will not try and hold onto what is already gone. Let her be buried beneath the Calaveras tree, but don't let her great memories be buried beneath the sorrow."