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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
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First Prize in the Open Division

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*Song of the Sun and Moon*

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Erica Fryberg

*Song of the Sun and Moon*

“And all the tents can hear.” Tessa rolled her eyes. Thin, canvas walls were no barrier to her mother’s bitter diatribe down the mobile phone.

“You know there’s basically no reception,” her mother screamed, as Ben stuffed his face with chocolates from Tessa’s advent calendar for breakfast. “But you can’t play those games any more. The Court knows I’m available all day by phone. Tessa is fifteen and it’s clear who she’d rather be with. And Ben’s learning just what sort of father you are – or rather aren’t.”

The abrupt retort from Tessa’s father was distorted but audible: “We’ll see.”

Ignoring Ben licking his fingers in Tessa’s camp chair, their mother leapt into their SUV, yelled at Tessa to watch Ben for “what might well take all day”, and disappeared to somewhere with stable phone reception for the next phase of the custody hearing.

The swirling dust had not even settled its fine particles on the stack of kayaks when screeches penetrated the campsite. “And all the tents are glaring.” Tessa winced, hiding her head between her bony elbows. If only Ben had been in the year for ukuleles. Thinking the sound of waves may drown out his learner recorder Tessa restrained Ben and brusquely daubed his skin with sunscreen. They both knew from many a past blistering experience that when she tanned, his fair skin burned. He squirmed and painted tribal stripes on her cheeks in return. Annoyed, she scraped off what she could, stole cider from the esky and allowed Ben to drag her down to the shore.

The charred deadwood either side of the rough, coastal path still showed the ravages of last season’s bushfires and, while the campsite river was still swollen from recent floods, drab dry tinder stretched as far as she could see. Some Christmas holiday this was turning out to be.

She hugged her knees and dug her toes mutinously into the hot dune. “A babysitter for her eight-year-old, that’s all Mum sees me as.” Tessa glowered at the hardy pigface flowers near her towel. They nodded their cheery pink heads, as a gust brushed their leaves and covered her bare feet in sand. “I hate them both.” She reflected resentfully on

the tug of war her parents had been waging. “They don’t hear me; they don’t even know me.”

Ben planted himself in front of Tessa and performed the piercing three notes he’d been practising the past half hour. “O-My-God, go away,” she bawled. Ben flung sandy footballs of disappointed indignation at Tessa and withdrew. She rinsed out a mouthful of gritty grains with cider and blocked her ears with fistfuls of towel. “I hate them all. Well in a couple years I’ll leave and have nothing to do with any of them ever again.” She swigged the warm remains of cider and threw the bottle into the scrub.

Cracking recorder squeaks shattered her thoughts a third time. The shadows deepened and Tessa shuddered. “Just a cloud,” she told herself. But the sun was a sphere of blinding fire in a cloudless sky. She tasted salt, a stench of kelp assaulted her nostrils and the surrounding chorus of cicadas was suddenly deafening. It was as if something had fiddled with her senses and turned up the settings of her world. “Great light for photos,” she thought, pouting for selfies, “even if there’s no reception to send them.” Her heart muscles constricted as she envisaged her BFFs hitting the shops without her, forgetting about her. The streaked mascara under her eyes satisfactorily indicated her grief, she noted.

In the rotated camera lens of her phone, something moved.

“Tessssssa ...”

Tessa turned.

A carpet snake slithered over driftwood directly towards her. She froze, conscious of ants crawling over her ankles, a kookaburra cackling nearby.

“Ridiculous – I’m too old for Harry Potter and fairies,” she thought, but the sandfly bites on her legs were itchy and real. Where was Ben? Motionless, petrified, she watched the snake stealthily trace its initial on the canvas of the sand. Why couldn’t she hear Ben’s recorder?

Sinuously, steadily, the snake slid closer, and in one swift swish reared the supple rope of its body and wrapped across her shoulders.

“Tessssssa ...” A forked tongue flicked her earlobe. “For the sssake of your brother, liissssten ...”

Shock spun a strangling coil around her mind as she felt snake muscles moving on her neck.

“Tissss the Prophecy:

When the notes sound thrice, the Shadow Veil will tear,  
And the Boy-Child forsaken, by Moonbeam will be taken,  
And the Sun will Maid ensnare.  
When the Day Moon rises, the dragon will awake,  
And advise the Maiden Fair: Three Trials by Fire, Water, Air,  
Must Maiden undertake.  
When the Night Sun sets at the turning of the tide,  
All Trials must be won, or in the Realm of Moon and Sun  
Child and Maid forever more abide:  
Sun and Moon in syzygy hold, Child and Maiden now enfold,  
Bound by elements of old, as long has been foretold.”

The snake flowed off the breathless Tessa. It coiled at a respectful distance, bead eyes fixed unblinking on hers.

She backed unsteadily towards the ocean, swallowing bubbles of panic. “Ben?” Frantic eyes raked the breakers and dunes, and spied a partly submerged shaft glowing bright in the strange, intense light. Gasping, Tessa grabbed Ben’s recorder free from the sand. No way would Ben leave that; lately, he’d even been taking it to bed. “*Dragon? Boy-Child? Moon beam?*” Tessa found the snake now basking on her towel. Wary, desperate, she crouched close enough to touch its scaly diamonds. The words of the Prophecy came again. And again.

Then, “Tesssssa, beware: when the tide turnsssss ...” and, with a susurrus through the scrub, the snake was gone.

Tessa stood by the driftwood staring after it. All about her looked odd, as if through the “vivid” filter on her camera: the bruise-coloured shadows darker, sun fiercer, crab carapace underfoot sharper, birdsong louder. She spotted a sliver of moon suspended above the ocean, bright despite the midday sun. “*Day Moon rising,*” she thought, with wonder.

She sensed she was being watched. Sure enough, not a stone’s throw in front of her, motionless on the riverbank, squatted a tiny water dragon.

Ancient, reptilian, it assessed Tessa, then spoke:

“When Fire seeks to sear, think on what you hold dear:  
Protector from the rays, your shield against false praise.”

“What does that mean?” asked Tessa as a rush of frustration swept through her. But the dragon, inscrutable, said no more.

A silvery piping rang out overhead. It called again, three repeated chimes from the next tree, then the next – insistent, clear, familiar. Tessa had never seen a bellbird, but she knew their shy sound – and those three notes. They were the same Ben had played, although more melodious than she could have imagined. “When the notes sound thrice ...” Tessa stuffed towel and recorder into her beach bag and followed the pure sound.

Along the fringes of spinifex where the river ran down to the sea, the bellbirds guided her, into the Realm of Moon and Sun.

Then, silence. Parched, Tessa cupped her hands at the swollen river’s edge. The water tasted brackish, but drinkable. Thirst slaked, she felt the sun on her back and an overwhelming drowsiness. “Just for a moment,” she told herself, enjoying the fiery glow through her eyelids as she let them fall, and the Sun embraced her.

“Maiden, the time has come ...” Deep, sonorous words of calm enveloped Tessa. “You are where you long to be ... Stay ... I will kiss your limbs a honey brown and bronze your body.” Never had Tessa felt so safe. “Feel my power ...”

“Where is Ben?” Tessa stirred.

“The Boy-Child is at peace,” the Sun reassured. Eyelids flickered red to dark, and an image came to her: a silhouette of a hollow tree that had been blasted by lightning. She followed its sentinel-like figure skyward and fancied she saw Ben, lit by moonlight, held in the high fork of the tree. Tessa felt tingling in her toes and fingers from a surge of tenderness; Ben was always so much more bearable when asleep.

“He has been rightfully claimed by the Moon, and now I claim you. Your radiance, your fire within is strong, you belong with me ...” Tessa relaxed into the warmth of the Sun’s words, dazed and desirous of more. “They see you not; they care not for the sparks within you. I do. I will ignite them, and your beauty will glow and grow ...”

Tessa peered closer at Ben’s face in the vision. Streaks glistened silver on his cheeks from sunscreen smears – and tears. And, unbidden, another vision filled Tessa’s mind, from that morning, of his laughter as she had applied sunscreen to his face, and he had added it like war paint to hers.

The Sun’s golden brilliance blasted the vision. “Join your power with mine, and shine ...”

But Tessa felt stung by her vision and the tears on Ben's cheeks and shook off her lethargy. "No," she cried, scrabbling in her beach bag for the sunscreen and slapping thick spurts of it on her hot limbs and face.

"Then," the Sun roared, "face my wrath." And the Sun blazed on her bare skin, and bade the wind fan fast-spreading flames from the glass of Tessa's discarded cider bottle. A sharp crack from behind, then the smell of smoke filled her nostrils. Looking back she saw scrub and spinifex on fire.

Tessa fled the riverbank down to the ocean, and under the burning rage of the Sun then ran, flinching foot to foot, across the long stretch of hot sand to the next headland. Trembling, she hauled herself up the rocks of the cliff. As she reached the summit, she felt droplets of water on the backs of her hands, and collapsed, and a gentle shower rained down, quenching the Sun's fire.

As the thin arc of the Moon sailed higher above the ocean, out from the curl of a shell wriggled the water dragon. It spoke again to Tessa:

"When water seeks to drown, think on what once you found:

Protector from the waves, what you gave away now saves."

Tessa saw a white flash as an egret landed in front of her, eyeing the water dragon. She heard the egret's call on the wind: the same three notes as the bellbirds, as Ben's recorder. The egret took wing inland about twenty paces, and waited, and Tessa followed.

Along the gorge, to the waterfall where the river cascaded down to the sea, the egret guided her further into the Realm of Moon and Sun.

Then, Tessa could hear nothing but the thunder of the waterfall. The cliff's edge rose around her, and as the Sun lit wispy clouds in glorious apricot and orange, she gazed up. Stark against the sky stood the sentinel tree from her vision. The foetal ball of her brother was closer now and his fist was clenching something, but the vines holding him cast creeping shadows, and what, she could not see.

"Greetings, Maiden, I had not thought you would come this far." A high-pitched sound sliced the air, like when she used spit to make her mother's wine glasses sing. "He must be losing his touch."

Tessa's eyes darted from the sentinel to the evening star to the arch, smiling Moon, whose silvery light was beginning to vie with the Sun's for dominion in the sky.

"Give me my brother," Tessa demanded.

“He is not yours for the taking.” And the laughter that tinkled into Tessa’s ears was brittle and harsh.

“You do not love him as I love him. He is pure, and he is home.” The voice was sharp with emotion and breaking with passion. “You are not deserving. You should have stayed with the Sun, for you too are selfish, and vain. Depart! You are not welcome in my realm.”

Tessa focused on the short climb to the top of the waterfall. She had scaled it on previous summers, but never after the volume of rain of recent weeks. Securing her phone in its waterproof case, she studied the moss-covered cliff. She sought fingerholds under the slimy rocks, trying not to think what spiders might lurk there. But the torrent of water was too strong. She fell. A glimpse of Ben above her flashed in her vision: his fist unclenched and on his palm gleamed a perfect skimming stone. As she plunged into the swirl at the base of the waterfall, she gulped in recognition. It was the same stone she had selected, bounced ten times across that very river and bequeathed to him last summer.

The current had her now. Tessa was a strong swimmer, but she felt the weight of her bag across her body, and the Moon’s control of the rip relentlessly pulling her to the sea. She struck diagonally, as she’d been taught. She imagined the smooth, oval weight of the skimming stone, and her hands hit rock. She grasped it with both arms and the swell wrapped her body around the rock as the current surged to the sea. She clambered out, grazed and bedraggled, but defiant.

She lay panting on the sand and found herself eyeball to eyeball with the water dragon.

“Three Trials – by Fire, Water ... the third trial,” Tessa thought, glancing anxiously as the Sun stained the mountain tops blood-red, and the waters at the mouth of the river churned.

The dragon spoke a third time:

“When Sun and Moon with wind unite, think on the one you did fight:  
Your protector from the storm, he who you love in human form.”

And from the shadows arose the mournful cry of a curlew. Its eerie form ran about twenty paces in front of her and waited, and cried again, sliding between those same three notes. Tessa followed the curlew into the gloaming.

Along the cliff’s edge where the river met the sea, through the darkest shadows, the curlew guided her deeper into the Realm of Moon and Sun.

Then, the curlew's keening stopped. Tessa found herself at the foot of the sentinel now etched in silver against the sky. She looked up at her brother. No low branches. No way to climb or jump. How was she to reach him?

"Ben!" she called, and Ben woke. But the Moon had bound him with wait-a-while vine, and he looked around, and wailed. "Hold on Ben, I'm here," Tessa shouted, but in the rising wind her voice dwindled to a whisper.

And the Sun passed below the mountains and joined with the Moon in triumph and ecstasy. "Too late," their taunts encircled her.

But Tessa called to her brother a third time, and he heard. And Sun and Moon called too, summoning wind and storm, and they rained fire at the sentinel. The wind grew stronger, and Tessa, blinded by lightning, tried to shield herself from stabbing needles of rain and cricket balls of hail.

Faint, far above, floated Ben's boy soprano reply: three breathy notes. The same three cried by the birds ... from the lullaby her mother used to sing on car trips, by their bedside ... that Ben had played on the beach ...

Tessa whipped the recorder from the bag beneath her ribs and hurled it through the wind to Ben. He caught it with outstretched arm and played the three notes.

And the storm passed as fast as it had come, the branch cradling Ben broke, and as the tide turned the vine unfurled, tumbling Ben into Tessa's arms.



"I wasn't scared," Ben confided to Tessa. "More ... stuck." He stashed recorder and stone in Tessa's bag, then rummaged.

"And hungry," he said. "Don't you have any food?"

"Let's go, Ben. It's dinner time."

The children retraced their steps: where the curlew cried through the darkest shadows along the cliff's edge; where the egret called down the waterfall; where the bellbirds chimed along the fringes of the spinifex, and the river ran down to the sea; and out of the Realm of Moon and Sun.

And when they reached the shore once more, beneath their steps sprang thousands of stars wherever their feet ran on the now-cold sands, as phosphorescence from the outgoing tide gave the children their own galaxy.



As they turned towards the campsite, a snake met them on the scrubby path. Ben cried out. Tessa explained, “Stay still, it won’t hurt you; carpet snakes are our friends.” And the python hissed as it traced an infinity symbol around Tessa’s feet and disappeared into green shoots of regrowth.

“You know the rule is back by dark,” growled their mother as they stumbled into their campsite. “Get dry clothes on; you’re just in time for spag bol.”

Later, they toasted marshmallows with their mother. “Well done not getting sunburnt today. Do you want to know what happened? I think your father learned a thing or two!”

“Mum – no,” Tessa interjected. “It’s not a case of you or him. Or good or bad. Or day or—”

“Night!” interrupted Ben.

“Or Sun or—”

“Moon!”

“Or—”

“Hot or cold, or ping or pong” squealed Ben delightedly, taking over the game.

“What I mean is, Mum, it isn’t either/or. I want, I need both black and white, and the greys in between. I really don’t want to hear about it any more but, just so you know, I choose the in-between.”

Her mother appraised her, abashed, and said no more. Tessa claimed her camp chair and Ben climbed on top of her and snuggled. Tessa hugged him. They shared fresh water from her bottle as they warmed themselves by the flames of the fire.

And the family’s faces flickered, content in the shadows, as far beyond the mountains the Sun shone on, and far above the ocean glinted the small, crescent Moon.