

Athena Lin, 4th Grade, Village School

"Alright students, time for class!" Called Mr. Stewart from his weathered, old desk standing in the front of the classroom. The bell had rung, so I, as the best student in class, had my writing notebook out first. "Today," Mr. Stewart continued, "We will be writing to the following prompt: What makes you yourself?"

The class chatterbox, Layla, immediately raised her hand and called out. "What does that mean? Are we writing about this physically or emotionally?"

I sighed in my head, feeling impatient with such incompetence. *How come these people know nothing about anything?* I wondered. This was why I worked alone and refused to work with a partner. They would always mess things up. However, I knew that I would have to deal with this for another day. So I cracked my knuckles, and prepared my mind for another boring day.

Time flew by-my class had gym, reading, Spanish-all of those easy things. It seemed to me that the school had never thought that the curriculum could be more challenging. But I was patient. Finally, at the end of the day, our last subject was math. Math was interesting to me. It was so intriguing that I could just put a few symbols and numbers together and make a complex equation. As always, Mr. Stewart handed me a challenge sheet to keep me active for the period. This one was a copy of a page from a pre-algebra book. Luckily, it kept me busy for the rest of the day.

After school, when I entered my house, there was a strange silence in the air. I carefully looked around the house for my parents. But there was nobody. Just as I was searching my room for a clue, a whooshing sound came from behind me. I quickly whirled around and found a scroll on the ground. I read it. It said, "*Hello, Isabella. We see that you are looking for your family. But you will never see them again.....unless you open this box.*"

Right on cue, a silver box with ornate decorations and carvings dropped from...nowhere. But I actually cared about my parents, so I opened the box.

A golden light blinded me. The next second, I was in what seemed like a magical world. There were nine doorways in front of me-each showing a different world. Before I could wonder why this was happening, another letter dropped at my feet. It said, "*Choose the lava world.*" So I did.

I found myself at the edge of a cliff. Below me, there was a 50 foot drop into a pool of red-hot lava. I supposed I had to cross over the lava, but I didn't know how. Just then, a voice spoke right into my ear. "Greetings, friend. I assume you need some help?"

I screamed and nearly fell into the lava, but an invisible force tugged me back. I looked behind me to see a majestic unicorn. I was stunned. "Oh yes, I do need help." I managed to squeak. The unicorn silently channeled more of its invisible force, and I was sent flying onto another rock jutting out of the lava.

At least this time there was a bridge. But much to my dismay, Half of the bridge was broken. But I would calculate it there. So I made my way across the half of the bridge that was still intact.

This time, another voice startled me. "Need some help?" This time, it was a snake. Again, without saying anything, it stretched its long, scaly, body across the bridge. The next rock spire was below this one, so I simply slid down the snake's body.

The third challenge seemed to be much easier than the first 2. There was a golden key lying on the ground, and a thick steel door. I picked up the key and unlocked the door.

I found myself in a throne room. There was a masked man on the stone chair. The only thing I could make out was his eyes. Next to his throne, there were 2 cages, each one containing one of my parents. They were both gagged and bound.

The masked man's eyes registered a look of surprise. "How did you get here?" He snarled.

I opened my mouth to answer that I was the one who made it here with my excellent brain. But I hesitated and actually thought of the truth. Those 2 animals were the reason I had made it here. I pondered for a few moments and wondered what I would say. Should I tell the truth, or make myself seem like a hero?

I didn't know what to do, so I let my heart answer. "I didn't make it here alone. There was a unicorn and a snake that helped me. "

The masked man was silent for a few moments. Finally, he said, "Very well. You may return with your parents." He pointed a ring on his finger at us, and we reappeared back home.

The next morning, I was a different person. I was now willing to help people. In fact, they even helped me! Layla fired off writing ideas, and they were actually good. George turned out to know even more vocabulary words than me. In science, Mia observed some things I had never even noticed.

Mr. Stewart even noticed the change. One day, after school, he told me to stay for an extra 5 minutes. "So I've noticed that now you are willing to work with others, is that right?" I nodded. "So why is that?" He asked. "Didn't you use to feel like partners were bad?"

I simply smiled and shrugged. "Mr. Stewart, if there's one thing I have learned this year, it's that there is strength in numbers."