

Second Prize, Grades 7-8

“She Is the Desert Sand”

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As sand whirled around the car I, Khaldun Kereesh, stared out at my homeland of Egypt. I was returning home after spending most of my 15 years in America. Suddenly I saw a teenaged girl whirling and dancing barefooted on the scorching sand along the road. Though the sand was whirling around her, the girl’s long black hair and her bright white dress were not covered with sand at all. Startled, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to clear my head. As I looked back, all I could see was more whirling sand—the girl had disappeared.

Soon the car bumped to a halt, and my Uncle Johl ran up and gave me a bear hug.

“Khaldun, my boy! How have you been?”

“Very good, Uncle, and you?”

“I am quite well, my boy.” I could tell my uncle was bursting with excitement; he was bouncing on the balls of his feet and smiling very widely. As I looked around however, I noticed a wizened old man in the corner staring at me and looking as if he wanted to scream. Then as we walked into what was to be my tent, I noticed a large brown box in the corner. Before I could peep into it, Johl reached in and picked up a small Egyptian Mau kitten. Her sandy-golden fur was spotted with black.

“Khaldun, I thought I would get you a welcome present. Her name is Eshe.” As I took the small kitten from him, she looked up at me with the strangest deep golden-brown eyes. Something in her eyes scared me, however: they looked smart—almost human. I silently shuddered at the thought.

As I lay back onto my bed with Eshe, I thought back to Johl’s warning, “Just stay away from old man Paki.”

“Why?”

“He is a little crazy.”

Suddenly, I heard a scuffling sound outside the tent. As I went to investigate, a croaky voice whispered, “Boy, you have to listen to me.” I could see old Paki crouching in the shadows. I turned to leave; but he reached out and grabbed my arm with his boney fingers. “Boy, get out of here while you can. They are planning to make sure you...”

“Keep your warnings to yourself, Coot,” I said as I wrenched my arm away.

When I ducked back into my tent, I saw Eshe curled up on my bed with a soulful look in her brown eyes. As I fell asleep, I heard the wind whisper, "Sleep well, my Love."

The next day Johl bounced up to me with obvious jolliness. "Khaldun, how about I give you a GPS and you and Eshe can wander around. There is not much of anything interesting to do around here, but you might be able to find something." After I thanked him, I got out my backpack and loaded it with all of the necessities: water, snacks and the GPS. When I stood up, Eshe bounced to my side ready to go. Paki, his face wrinkled and pleading, slouched over to me as we left the tent. "Boy, I am telling you the truth, you have to..." Paki stopped talking as Eshe glared at him, her eyes full of dislike. Before I could say anything, the old man was in a full sprint away from us. He was going a lot faster than I thought he could.

Suddenly Eshe made a strange sound that almost sounded like a giggle. "Come on, Eshe, let's get going."

We had been wandering around the desert for a couple of hours when I decided to head back to camp. When we were about a mile from home, Eshe suddenly ran off in a full sprint. "Eshe, Eshe, come back!" I called, but my cries were lost in the howl of the wind. Sand whipped around me like a wall. I frantically looked for a way out.

Suddenly I saw something to my left. Out of the swirling wall stepped the dancing girl, the one I had seen before when I was in the car. Her hair was still gleaming, her dress was still the same bright white fabric and as she opened her eyes I realized with horror they were Eshe's eyes. As she stared at me, I saw her eyes fill with tears. Suddenly she stepped toward me, her arms stretched out, her face full of joy. Alarmed, I turned around and leaped into the wall of sand. As I jumped, I saw Eshe's face fill with rage and heard the wind give a loud cry of pain. I ran as fast as I could to the campsite, hearing Eshe's anger in every howl of the wind. When I pelted into the campsite I slowed down, letting myself rest. While I was panting, Johl ran up to me.

"Khaldun! Are you ok? And where is Eshe?"

"Uncle, Uncle," I gasped "Eshe, we were..." However, as my words were cut off by a howl of wind, I looked into Johl's cold, angry eyes. For the first time I was truly afraid.

"Boy, how could you break her heart like that?" he whispered.

As I backed away, the sand around him swirled, enveloping his whole body. Suddenly a large wildcat that seemed to be made of sand burst out of the swirling sand and lunged at me. I darted away as fast as I could, and as I turned the corner, I noticed old Paki in the shadows.

"Paki, I am sorry; please help me!" I cried. Paki just gazed at me with grim amusement.

“I tried to warn you, Boy, but you wouldn’t listen!” As I gaped at him the old man began to laugh, a loud, raspy laugh—one that seemed to mock and taunt.

Right before my eyes his body crumbled, turning into sand. The sand swirled around me too, while a voice laughed and whispered in my ear. “You should have listened to me. I tried to help, but now they are going to get you!”

Suddenly I heard a growl behind me, and as I turned around, I realized the cats had me surrounded. Before I could even try to scream, one of the cats pounced and everything went black.

When I woke up, I found myself staring at Eshe. She was petting Johl. As I tried to move, I realized that my mouth was covered and my arms and legs were bound with sand that was as smooth and hard as stone. As if she heard me trying to scream, Eshe turned to look at me. Her eyes were now filled with happiness as she kissed my forehead. And then as she stepped back, I felt the sand at my feet begin to suck me into the ground. I began to sink while Eshe mumbled quietly in Arabic, her voice growing louder and louder, until she reached a horrifying wail. As the sand was almost over my head and as dark dots bloomed in my vision, I recognized what she was saying. Eshe, the ancient Egyptian Mau cat, was singing an ancient Egyptian spell, a spell that spoke of bringing the spirits of the dead back to the mortal plane!