

Best in Show Winner

Desks

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The darkness hung as thick and black as India ink, though sometimes words would flash in the air, illuminating shadowy figures as wispy as smoke, hunched over wooden desks, pens in hands. Purring on laps or slinking around desks or bounding after stray words were the books. Sometimes one would slink off into the darkness, but it always returned to its writer, growling at word choice or purring at style.

It was an ancient book, around for as long as all the others could remember, nursing its creaky paper-bones or swiping spitefully at the lean, more energetic novellas. The ancient book sighed and stretched its back before padding over to one of the last desks in the row, a desk that hid its plywood interior under a cherry varnish.

The book peered with inquisitive eyes at the paper on the desk, grumbled at the sloppy, slanting handwriting. The writer stretched down a beseeching hand, but the book snapped at it and the hand quickly withdrew as the writer redoubled his efforts. The book gave the hand a look of satisfaction, lay down, curled around a leg of the desk and slept.

Around it the other books carried on as usual. A book dozed on top of its sequel, and the little short stories clambered over each other in their attempts to catch the floating, dancing words. Still, the ancient book slept on.

What was that? The short stories stopped in their tracks. Every book was still, looking toward that plywood desk. The pen was motionless on the table, the page only half-filled. Slumped over both was the snoring author. He had stopped writing. As the other books watched, transfixed, his shadowy figure became less and less distinct until he disappeared from the desk altogether, now only a faint puff of smoke from an extinguished candle. Slowly the desk also became less solid, and soon it too disappeared, leaving only the sleeping form of the book. It rubbed its head against the nonexistent desk leg. Awakening, it realized what had happened. Its pitch-black eyes glowed in the darkness.

The short stories trembled, then tumbled over each other as they ran on short, stubby legs to hide under desks. The novellas all found laps to jump on, and even the longest novels ran to their writers and pressed their bodies against their legs. The ancient book bared its fangs, turned its head to the sky and howled. The shortest story whimpered, and the book stalked over, slapping its face with a well-placed paw. It then stalked back to the gap in the desks and wrapped a twitching tail around its haunches, thinking. After a short while, the book got to its feet and purred softly. It was time for some hunting. It gave its tail a quick lick for luck and disappeared into the gloom at the edge of the desks. The other books stole glances at each other, then resumed their inspection of their words. The short stories tumbled back out from under their desks.

Books rarely venture into the lands beyond the desks, but the book was determined. Anger and spite flashed in its ink-black eyes. It sat down on the damp ground and waited. From time to time, indistinct figures materialized through the fog, not writing now, but driving, sleeping, laughing, running, reading. The book hunkered down. It was vital that the writer not sense its presence. Its bones hurt from the cold, and its sinewy paws were raw and red, but still it waited. It wouldn't be long now.

Soon enough, the writer came strolling through the gloom, hands tucked into jacket pockets, head bent against the wind that he alone in that world could feel. The book stiffened, jaws chattering, tail swishing back and forth. The writer stepped closer, and the book crouched to spring. Then it soared through the thick gray air, landing on the writer's chest and forcing him downward, backward. Soon, the writer was flat on his back, barely able to breathe, powerless to stop the determined book, which crouched on his chest and stared into his eyes.

Then it struck. Powerful jaws clamped on his neck, teeth piercing veins and tasting blood. That was not enough, though; it needed to taste the words that flowed into the writer's veins, unwritten. At first lick, it tasted an 'a,' then a 'the.' The book bit down harder and closed its eyes, the last unwritten words flowing from its mouth, a flurry of articles and nouns and verbs, castles, horses, and cloaks, filling the writer up until he was something not quite human and not quite book. A jumble of ideas and settings and plots: a finished story. The book withdrew its bloody muzzle, leaving the story lying in the mist. It was tired, so tired. With shaky legs it stepped off

the body and lay down, closing its eyes for the last time. Back at the row of desks, a new figure and desk materialized, filling the empty space.