



2021 Fresh Fiction Winners

2021 7-12 year old category winning entry:

Sharknappers

Bertie Atkin

It was the best, and worst, day of my life. Instantly, me and Grey were rich. I still remember it clearly. I hid inside the aquarium, disguised as a scuba diver hoping to get face-to-face with the tawny nurse sharks. I hadn't paid of course. If I was hoping to get my old mother rich enough to stop working and retire then I couldn't waste her money on a cover story. So I counted on one of Grey's favourite rules, there's always a bozo who loses the ticket. There's always an idiot who gets lost. Be the idiot, be the bozo, and no-one will suspect you. Grey was tall and old. His name matched his hair, his clothes and even his mood and his piercing blue eyes still held a fire that age couldn't extinguish. I hurried quickly through the corridor, barely noticing the information signs that said things like "What to do if a Shark Attacks". I didn't know what was coming. I didn't know how badly I'd need those signs. I was rushing along, hoping against hope that the shark was asleep, or too tired to notice the tasty humans jumping right into it's tank. Wait. Did sharks even sleep? So preoccupied with my thoughts, I almost smashed right into the security guard. The guard wasn't threatening. He was young, around five years older than me, but his sad eyes made me think of an otter. "Um... are you, I mean... uh... Are you supposed to be here?" he stuttered. I tried to read his face to determine who he was, just like Grey taught me. First day? Job experience? Perfect. "Um, is this the way to the sharks? Only, I went with my dad to dive, and we got seperated." "Oh. OK. This is the passageway to the Oceanarium, and if you take a right, you get to the nurse shark pool. Are you over 15?" "Yes, I'm 16. Turning 17 in July." "Good. I see you've got your scuba gear," (at this I winced; I had stolen the gear) "Have you got the ticket?" "No, my dad has it. Oh, there he is, bye!" The guard started trudging back the way he was going. My 'dad' was in fact Grey, who had appeared in the passage. "Hey, kid," he said, "Jo pulled out of the operation, got cold feet when 'em coppers came around. I gotta fix the truck to get you and that stinkin' fish outta here, so you're on your own. Good luck." Then just as I opened my mouth to ask him when he could pick me up, he vanished behind a family of tourists

carrying cameras. How did he do that? When the cloud of tourists had cleared, I found something on the floor where Grey had been. A hose connected to a canister of water. I picked it up (how could the water be so heavy?) and noticed a note taped to it. Spray the gills. Great. I also noticed something below the hose. Two weather balloons with a canister of hydrogen and a tranquilizer gun. No. No no no. The plan had changed. I turned over the note and saw more of Grey's hasty handwriting. Tranq shark and float it up. Spray gills to keep it breathing. Don't get caught. So that's how I ended up in the massive shadowy room with the gigantic fish tank after the aquarium had closed. I had gone behind the "staff only" sign and had climbed the stairs with my equipment. I had pinched a few dead fish and, clothed in my scuba suit with my tranq gun, was dangling the fish over the dark water. The only light came from the next room, where the janitor had quite a problem after I spilt shark feed all over the floor. "Come on, Sharky, heere Sharky, be a good boy little Sharky and come." I whispered under my breath. I thought I saw a shadow stir, and not just one of the tiny shoals of colourful fish or the lazy, dead-eyed ones, an actual Sevengill Broadnose Cowshark. I dipped the fish into the water, which, I had noticed, had kelp seagrass stretching all the way to the top of the water where it formed a carpet of leaves and kept muttering. The ripples danced across the surface of the water and the janitor stopped swearing so I realised that he must have finished and left. Phew. Bless his laziness. Then something happened. Well, many things happened all at once but, chief among them, was the shark ripping my arm off. I screamed then I was pulled in and everything was darkness and my screams echoed in my mask making bubbles and there was the pain and the feeling of absence on my left arm, or left stump. I turned on my torch and surveyed the damage. It wasn't as bad as I'd thought, just my hand, but there was a lot of blood. The shark was huge. It looked to be 3m long and looked so old, like a grey pickle with fins. It had bloodstained jaws and dead eyes that held a wild expression. It didn't have the classic triangular fin, only having one further down it's back. That was my thief's brain, it was what Grey had been drilling into my head. The one that kept thinking when you were missing a hand. It glided with ease through the kelp forest, it's mouth open wide. It's eyes rolled back until they were just the whites and I closed my eyes, sure of my doom when... I opened my eyes. Strong hands were lifting me out of the tank. Grey's hands. "You did good, kid. Now get this sucker 'n go!" he shouted, holding my tranq gun. "No," I managed to croak, "I lost a hand. I get 100%." And I pushed him. Into the tank.

Dedicated to Mitchell
Beloved Nurse Shark at Melbourne Aquarium
Rest in Peace

2021 13-18 year old category winning entry:

The Introspection of the Weaver: Siege

Celine Chai

Nephele crouched on the outcrop with the Sun setting at her shoulder, her cloak of crows' feathers drawn tightly around her-- and the city of Yue burning on the horizon. It wouldn't be long until the smoke that festered from the pagodas and pavilions would sweep across the plains; dark riders on darker mounts that would rot the fingers of dusk ash-blue. There was something that crackled in her damp palms like kindling, still sweetly scented with the characters tumbling down the page like nimble acrobats, that easily unfurled in her hands as she spread it over her knees. I await your return; I look forward to hear of your travels once more-- She did not dare to read more, crushing the letter into her hands as if she could disintegrate the ink and paper into her palms. "Enough," she muttered to herself. Nephele willed her hands to relinquish the letter, settling herself into the grass with the letter rattling in the wind next to her in her silent vigil. How many more? she wondered. The blue paint on her cart was slowly chipping away to dark wood, the soles of her shoes worn out, and yet the inscriptions that traced their golden lines behind her eyelids never ceased. Always drifting over mountains, moors and oceans long since carved into her memory, each falling before Nephele like a length of thread to be weaved into a tapestry. Go to Edris and bury three silver coins. The Emperor of Xingol is not meant to die yet, make sure he is not assassinated. Yue's fall is nigh, watch over the city and save no one. On and on, scribbled in the darkness of her sleep, one route after another and a task for each line etched by the goddess who pondered at her desk, her hand always hovering over the glittering miniature castles, cities, the figures of monarchs, ready to send them clattering to the floor with the flick of her wrist. The cool swell of wind -- perhaps by her imagination-- already tasted like ash, the bitterness landed on her tongue and spread to the roof of her mouth like plague. Save no one. Over and over, she turned those words in her head, looking for some crack, some loose string that had escaped her deft fingers, some exception in those words that seemed as looming as the walls that once ran around the perimeter of Yue. Nephele did not miss it when she arrived, the slight tremor in the air, caught in the periphery of her vision. She knew well not to turn her head to face her goddess and ruin the mirage that was delicate as a dragonfly's wing. But she could see it all well enough, red silk and brocade, the goddess Severin settling in the grass next to her, nimble hands folding themselves into her lap. "I thought you said this would be a quiet revolution," Nephele said. "I did not say that," Severin answered mildly, "I said it would start quietly, I could not guarantee the same for its end." Nephele picked at the gold thread along the hem of her dress, "but you cannot deny you would've at least seen a little of what is to come." She inclined her head, "perhaps-- I did have my guesses." Nephele saw the flashing of gold jewellery and knew that Severin had turned to briefly glance at her, "but what does it matter? As long as Yue falls, it does not matter how it does." "If you had your guesses, you should've told me," Nephele said, forcing the bitterness from her voice. "I think both you and I know that it would be making too many exceptions, yes?" She did not wait for Nephele to answer, leaning back on her palms, "'save no one' was and is still a requirement for the Thread to run smoothly, for the Great Plan to be fulfilled-- tell me, if I told you, would you

have still adhered to my wishes?" She thought of the letter, still quivering at her side, brushing against her shoe. Of the young scholar who had only ever seen the sea through her drawings, whose letters she kept in a box in her cart. Page upon page, upon page, all but the one that laid like a withered flower. "No," it felt as if a stone was dropped into the stagnant pond of her soul. "Then you have answered your question." Yue was all ashes in the making, the sky darkening as the sun covered further into the arms of the horizon. Even the palace, once the centerpiece of the diadem that crowned the plains was reduced to shambled opulence, scoured ashen by the fire that replaced the cityfolk in the streets. Where would the scholar be now? She pondered. Dead perhaps? Hiding? Cursing her name so that it smouldered like hot coals? The plain remained untouched by the coup that raged within the encampments. She was to go to Prinn next. Yue had fallen, there was no need to stay any longer. The call of the road was loud in her ears, the golden etchings twisting through the dense foliage of the bamboo forest, over the stretch of aquamarine river and into the moors of Prinn. I await your return, I look forward to hear of your travels once more-- What use was a great weaver if she could not weave her tapestry when there is a kink in the thread? The grass sighed as Nephele rose to her feet, already Severin began to slide from her vision. "Where are you going?" she demanded. Nephele shook blades of grass from her cloak, the black glossy feathers hissing against one another, "there is more than one way to make the Thread run smooth." She retrieved the letter, smoothed it out and tucked it into her pocket. When she straightened, the goddess was gone.