

# First Prize

## The Skydance of Whitecloud

### Dominic Romito, Jeannette, PA

Sarah Whitecloud stood atop the sun-baked mesa, her long black hair whipping in the hot wind. Dark clouds roiled the horizon, unusual for the dry season. As the tribal elder's daughter, Sarah knew what those clouds meant: The thunderbird was coming.

A shiver ran down her spine despite the scorching heat. No one had seen the legendary creature in generations.

Sarah's fingers brushed the turquoise pendant at her throat—a family heirloom said to have been blessed by the thunderbird long ago. The smooth stone pulsed with an electrifying warmth.

A screech pierced the air. Sarah's eyes widened as an enormous winged shape emerged from the storm clouds. Its wingspan must have been a hundred feet across. Lightning crackled along its obsidian feathers as it wheeled through the sky.

This was no ordinary thunderstorm. The great spirit had awakened.

Sarah knew she should run for shelter in the village below. But she remained rooted in place, heart pounding, as the majestic being drew close. Its eyes locked onto her, electric blue orbs peering into her soul.

The thunderbird landed before her with earthshaking force, head cocked curiously. Sarah could see the second head on its abdomen, scanning watchfully. She fought the urge to flee as the main head lowered to her level.

Its beak opened, revealing teeth like jagged bolts of lightning. But instead of attacking, it spoke: "You wear the stone of my blessing, young one. The time has come for you to earn it."

Sarah gaped in shock. "W-what do you mean, great spirit?"

"A great drought threatens your people," the thunderbird rumbled. "The rains will not come unless you undertake a quest to restore balance."

"But why me?" Sarah asked. "I'm no warrior or shaman."

"You have been chosen. Will you accept?"

Sarah's mind raced. This was madness. She was just an ordinary girl, not some mythical hero. And yet ... if she refused, her entire tribe could perish.

She squared her shoulders and met the thunderbird's piercing gaze. "I accept."

"Then climb upon my back. We have far to fly before the moon rises."

Heart hammering, Sarah clambered onto the thunderbird's broad back, gripping the obsidian feathers tightly. With a deafening shriek, it launched into the air.

Sarah's stomach lurched as the ground fell away. The mesa shrank to a tiny speck as they rocketed into the storm clouds. Rain pelted her face, but she hardly noticed. She was flying on the back of a legend!

They emerged above the clouds into star-studded darkness. The thunderbird's wings beat steadily as they soared over moonlit landscapes far below.

"Where are we going?" Sarah shouted over the wind.

"To the heart of the drought," the thunderbird replied. "An ancient evil has poisoned the rain spirits. You must cleanse them to restore the natural order."

Sarah's grip tightened. What evil could be strong enough to corrupt nature itself? And how was she supposed to defeat it?

Before she could ask, the thunderbird suddenly banked into a steep dive. Sarah's stomach dropped as they plummeted back through the clouds. A barren wasteland stretched below, cracked earth extending to the horizon.

They landed beside a desolate mesa riddled with caves. The second Sarah dismounted, the thunderbird took wing once more.

"This is where your test begins," it called. "I cannot interfere further. Trust in yourself, young one." With that it vanished into the clouds, leaving Sarah alone in the wasteland.

She took a deep breath and headed toward the caves. Whatever trials awaited, she would face them. Her people were counting on her.

As Sarah ventured deeper into the twisting caverns, eerie whispers echoed off the walls. Creeping shadows danced at the edge of her vision. An oppressive weight pressed down as if the very air was tainted.

She emerged into a vast chamber illuminated by an unnatural black glow. Twisted forms writhed in the shadows, wailing and reaching out in agony.

At the center stood a figure shrouded in writhing shadows. The air shimmered around it, heavy with what smelled like iron and mud.

"Welcome, little hero," it rasped. "Have you come to fail like all the rest?"

Sarah's blood ran cold, but she forced herself to stand tall. "I've come to stop you and free the rain spirits."

The being laughed. "Bold words. But you are no match for me, child. I am Drought incarnate and will reduce your lands to dust."

It lashed out with tendrils of dark energy. Sarah dove aside. The attack scorched the ground where she'd stood. She scrambled behind a boulder as more blasts exploded around her.

What could she do against such power? She was no warrior or mage. She was just ... Sarah.

Her hand brushed the turquoise pendant. It pulsed with a static warmth, filling her with sudden clarity.

Sarah stepped out from behind the boulder. "I'm not here to fight you," she called. "I'm here to help you."

Drought paused, confusion flickering across its writhing features. "What trickery is this?"

"No tricks." Sarah approached slowly with palms raised. "You're a force of nature, like the rain. You're meant to bring necessary change, not endless destruction. Let me restore you to your lost self."

She placed a hand on its shadowy form. Light blazed from her pendant, flowing into Drought. It thrashed and wailed as the corruption burned away.

Sarah gritted her teeth, pouring all her strength into the cleansing. Just when she thought she could give no more, it was done.

Where the dark being had stood was now a tall, slender figure of silver mist. The tainted atmosphere dissipated as the rain spirits returned to their proper forms.

"Thank you, brave one," the renewed spirit of Drought said. "You have restored the balance. The rains will come again."

Sarah smiled wearily as the cavern filled with soft light. Her quest was complete. The thunderbird's cry echoed from above as if summoned by her thoughts.

It was time to go home.

**Dominic Romito** is an aspiring fiction writer with a passion for crafting compelling stories. He draws inspiration from his life experiences and vivid imagination to create richly detailed worlds and memorable characters.