INKLINGS BOOK

PREVIEW

TEACHER'S GUIDE

A Revision Tips and Tools Kit for Educators



society of young inklings

© 2018. www.younginklings.org



REVISING TOWARD STRENGTHS

Our goal in the Inklings Book Contest is to provide every applicant with an opportunity to learn and grow. Our feedback features at least one strength, and offers a strategy to help writers extend that skill. This approach reinforces the fact that all writing can be strengthened, and mirrors the professional revision process that authors experience with editors. Together, writers and editors make strong writing even better.

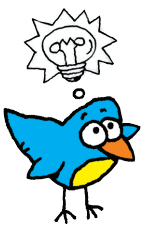
Revision is often a stressful part of the writing process for writers and educators. How can we make it a more productive, enjoyable experience all around? Here are some strategies we use at Society of Young Inklings as part of our Inklings Book revision mentorships.

HOW WE IDENTIFY STRENGTHS:

When reviewing student writing, we look for one of two things. First, we look for skills that are clearly the student's priority, such as humor. By framing a revision within the context of the student's own priority, we're able to bypass much of the resistance that might otherwise be associated with revision. Second, we look for skills that show up sporadically such as a few examples of interesting dialogue, or intriguing word choice, or characterization. We start by highlighting why we love these specific lines and help the writer explore how to use this skill elsewhere in the piece.

HOW WE DEAL WITH WHAT DOESN'T FIT:

A revision toward a single focus can't help but overlook problem areas. Sometimes, our mentors choose to leave the problem untouched in order to help the writer build confidence in the area of focus. Other times, we use the focus area as a lens to work on the additional issue, such as adding description of a character's action as part of new or revised dialogue. When it comes to mechanics, we often copy edit as part of publication and track changes so the writer can see where we're changing spelling, punctuation, or word choice. Again, this approach mirrors the professional editorial experience, while also offering our youth writers an opportunity to learn and grow.



© 2018 Society of Young Inklings

WHAT IS THE INKLINGS BOOK CONTEST ALL ABOUT?

The Inklings Book contest is an annual, international writing contest held each winter. Youth writers in third-ninth grade are invited to submit short stories and poems. Winners receive a one-on-one revision mentorship with one of our pro writer team and are published in the Inklings Book. Finalists receive an editorial letter and their finished pieces are published on our website. All applicants recieve personalized feedback. Learn more about the contest, including how to submit a class set of entries, at www.younginklings.org/inklingsbookcontest.



WHAT'S IN THE INKLINGS BOOK?

MENTOR LETTER:

Each section kicks off with a letter from the mentor about their revision focus. These letters illuminate the process of revision, and are rich with strategies and suggestions.

INKLING INTERVIEW:

Many of the interviews include interesting realizations and insights from our youth authors about the purpose, value, and "wins" of revision.

STORIES AND POEMS:

Each story or poem featured in the Inklings Book is a revised version of the winning piece that the youth author submitted to our annual contest. The book features writing by third through ninth graders.

HIGHLIGHTED PIECES & PRINTABLES

In this preview, we've highlighted one story, pulling an excerpt that shows revision skill in action. In addition, we've paired the story with an Inklings printable that you can use to further explore the skill in your classroom. The full guide includes five pieces and lessons.

© 2018 Society of Young Inklings

#1

CHARACTER DETAIL:

"Kai and Gerda" by Anna Birman

PAGE 133



MENTOR ADVICE:

"Take time to imagine your characters. Draw them out... Sprinkle details through the action, instead of using a whole paragraph to describe a character. Use the character's dialogue and reactions to tell the reader even more about the character. Trust your vision."

— PHILOMENA BLOCK

EXCERPT:

"Are you ... talking?"

"Why, of course I am!" The crow protested with a hurt look on his face and scrunched up his eyebrows.

She noticed he was constantly licking his wings and smoothing out his black feathers. His large eyes seemed to protrude from his head, and he wore a vest in a stunning shade of deep blue. The crow's little dialogue and his appearance left Gerda bewildered and utterly confused. Whoever heard of a well-dressed and groomed crow that was quite sufficiently verbose? She looked around to ask someone else if they could hear the crow talking, but there was no one around except an ant. Gerda did not want to risk her sanity by conversing with an insect.

The crow cleared its throat. "Pardon me for the impertinent behavior of these, um, birds." Gerda looked up and squeaked in surprise. Lining four branches right above her head were about ten pigeons. "Let me properly introduce myself. I am Sir Krakowsky Petrev Crow. And you are?"

TRY THIS:

1. Use the *Draw Your Character* printable to brainstorm details about a character.
2. Draft a short scene that uses action and dialogue to show the character's appearance and personality.

© 2018 Society of Young Inklings

Draw Your Character

In the space below, draw a larger-than-life character. Label key details. Think about how the clothes they might wear, or the items they might carry will help reveal their personality.

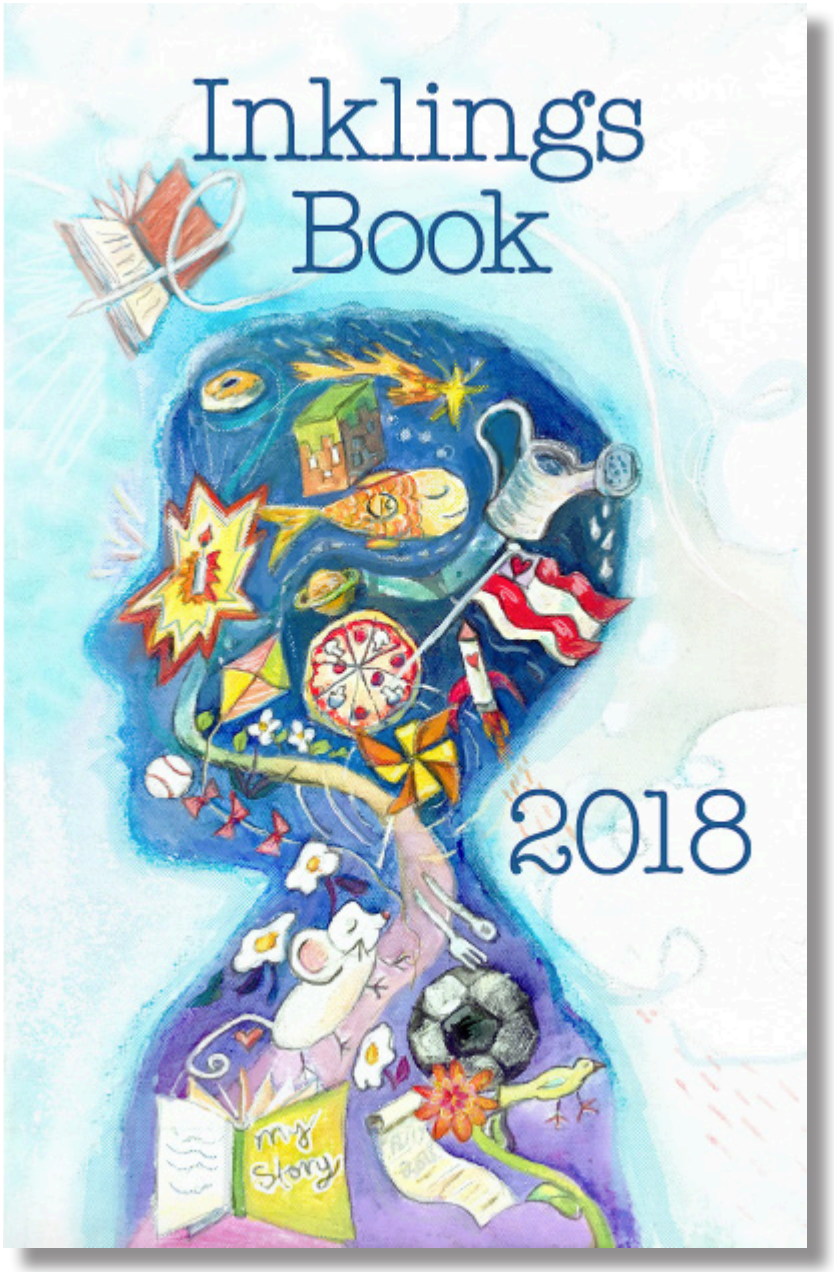
EXTRA DETAILS:

Brainstorm other details about your character that you might show through action and dialogue.

HABITS	OPINIONS	FAVORITES

© 2018 Society of Young Inklings

PREVIEW



Character Detail

Philomena Block advised Anna Birman on a revision to bring characters to life with specific details in her story, "Kai and Gerda," a retelling of the fairy tale "The Snow Queen."

Dear Reader,

One of the biggest ways you can relate to your reader is with your characters. How do you help your reader invest in a main character within the first few pages? How can you add details to make each character a clear image? Anna did such a great job with imagery in the setting of her story. When Anna and I met to revise her story, "Kai and Gerda," a retelling of the fairy tale "The Snow Queen," we decided to expand on character detail to help make each character jump off the page, as well.

Anna's story involves the infamous Snow Queen and other characters from the original Danish tale. We brainstormed to see how Anna's version of the Snow Queen, Kai, Gerda, and the other characters looked in her mind. We noted how Disney's Frozen was most children today's first introduction to "The Snow Queen" and we worked to show how Anna's version of the characters

are very different from the movie. I suggested she sketch out the characters to get a whole picture of each character in her mind. She identified descriptive words for each character and worked to integrate them into her story. Anna also integrated character reactions, thoughts, and opinions so we get a better idea of their personality as well. You'll see her final version on the next pages.

In her revision, Anna did two great things that all writers must do. First, she allowed her newly found details to morph her story. Sometimes, when you finish your story, it's scary to allow new ideas to change the scenes. We can be attached to certain details or parts that may no longer serve the story best. A "final draft" can always be added to. Ideas are so precious, but sometimes you need to let older ideas go so that a stronger version of your story can be told.

Next, she trusted herself and her vision. If you are writing a story with familiar components, like something inspired by another story, allow yourself to shine. Anna's retelling of "The Snow Queen" is different from anyone else's because she allowed her life and experience to motivate her own version. I was so impressed with Anna's ability to use imagery and description to paint a picture, while still keeping the story active and moving forward.

If you are writing a story, you might try Anna's revision approach. Take time to imagine your characters. Draw them out. Take a pencil and write as many words as you can that relate or remind you of the character's physical description and personality.

Sprinkle details throughout the action, instead of using a whole paragraph to describe the character. Use the character's dialogue and reactions to tell the reader even more about the character. Take a break. Come back and see what parts of your story might need to be changed or removed to better fit the new details. Trust your vision.

Remember, like Anna, you might end up with some very different sections from your original draft, but you might discover these details and changes make the story so much more complete and engaging for readers.

Happy writing,
Philomena Block

Philomena Block is an actor, writer, and comedian raised in Santa Cruz, California. Philomena holds two bachelor's degrees—one in musical theatre, the other in psychology—and is trained in playwriting, sketch comedy, and improvisation. Philomena has always been drawn to storytelling and loves developing characters onstage and on the page. Philomena worked as a teacher with Society of Young Inklings for two years and is so happy to get to keep supporting young writers with the Inklings Book Contest. When Philomena isn't writing or performing, she works as a marketing professional and loves exploring nature.

Anna Birman

Anna is in seventh grade at Castilleja. She loves to read, write stories and poems, and spend time with her family and friends. Some of her hobbies include tinkering with art supplies and digital tools, performing in musicals, swimming, and most definitely making others laugh. She enjoys traveling, meeting new people, and exploring nature. Fun facts: She loves the funny and lovable *Peanuts* characters and is fluent in Russian!

Philomena Block: How did you feel when you found out you were selected a winner of the Inklings Book Contest?
Anna Birman: I was really excited because my friend, who also entered with me, told me that we had won! I found out from her at school, and that was really exciting. I needed to check my email first before I believed her!

Q: Your story is based on "The Snow Queen." What inspired you to write about this and retell this story?
A: In English class, we were doing a unit on children's books and my teacher told us to write an introduction to a book and I started the prologue. I had done *The Snow Queen*, this musical–I played Gerda when I was six–and I got a lot of images in my head from that. And when I got home, I got really excited about this, so I just kept writing.

Q: What did you first think when you heard we were focusing on character detail?

A: Let me try and remember . . . hmm. I read your notes first and it registered with me that I had focused a lot more on the imagery of the setting than the characters. And I was like, "Oh, yeah!" I kind of had a vague image of the characters and I tried to make it more in focus. I got to imagine more what they were wearing and looked like.

Q: What were some of the ways you decided to add character detail?
A: First of all, I added physical descriptions when we first meet the characters. When we first meet Krakowsky and Lily, I added dialogue in the forest of them bickering. So you kind of got their personalities more. I also added some of Gerda's thoughts of her while they were bickering. And I added more interactions between the characters. So, I added Kai and Gerda playing more together and interacting more together when they saw the Snow Queen.

Q: Do you have a favorite character detail you added? And why?
A: I really love the parts I added when the Snow Queen first came in. And I love the interactions immediately before she came in—where Kai and Gerda are playing their game and when Gerda is asking Kai what he thinks of the snowflakes.

Q: Do you ever feel blocked when you're writing? What do you do?
A: If I don't know what to write, I like to go back to the story and try and write more about other stuff I've already written. Or I add more imagery somewhere. Or kind of like . . . think about my original idea or the characters and add on to them. But if I can't think of anything else to do, I just leave it completely, and then I come back later. Sometimes I have new ideas. And sometimes you get in a "zone," kind of. So if you're out of it, then you might want to take a break, just to let your mind not be as focused.

Kai and Gerda

A Retelling of the Fairy Tale
"The Snow Queen"

by
Anna Birman

Prologue

The stars shone brilliantly onto the glowing faces of two little children, a girl and a boy. Their names were Gerda and Kai. The girl's long chestnut hair was splayed out and her green eyes were sparkling. Staring up into the same stars were Kai's brown eyes, and on the same cement was his tousled dark brown hair. As they lay there peacefully, they made a promise to each other: "I will always protect you and be true to you. If you are ever lost, I will travel across the world to find you." That was their oath of brotherhood.

The Uninvitee

"Kai, Kai, do you want to play before the guests come?" Gerda climbed through the window, right into Kai's apartment**.** They were like brother and sister and lived in two apartments in two adjacent buildings, but they found that if they stretched out, they could place the very tip of their toes on the other's windowsill and pull themselves across.

"All right, all right, I'm ready," he yelled across the room, pulling a red vest over his button-down blouse.

You see, today was New Year's Eve, and children's spirits were soaring with the prospect of oranges and sweets as presents and the dancing that usually lasted the entire night through. However, tension was high among the adults as they scurried and whirled around the
kitchens preparing the feast, so the children did their best to stay out of their way. Here in Slovakia, New Year's was taken very seriously.

" . . . and the knight jumps onto the dragon's back!" yelled Kai.

"I'm up here, knight!" cried Gerda from on top of the couch.

"I am coming, my princess! The knight stabs the dragon!"

"Don't get crushed, knight!"

"Have no fear, princess!"

"Throw me the sword, knight!" Kai tossed a stick to Gerda. "We will attack from both sides!"

Suddenly, the fanfare sounded, and within seconds, the two could hear a faint stampede of footsteps running down the hallway. Kai nonchalantly jogged over to the door, following all the other guests. In truth, he was so excited, he could hardly wait.

"Come on, Gerda!"

"Wait, Kai, we'll go in a minute. Don't you want to finish?"

"All right." He turned away from the door and dragged his feet over to the couch.

"Hiiiiiyaaah! The princess blasts the dragon into smithereens!"

"Good job, princess!"

"Thank you for coming for me, knight!"

The dragon fallen and the princess saved, Kai wrapped a red scarf around his neck, and Gerda tied her white pinafore over her red dress. Next, she tightened the white bows in her two braids. They both ran down to the courtyard, but were dismayed to see that the party was already well under way. Instead of the usual klezmer band, however, there seemed to be a strange woman, dressed all in white.

The woman looked young. Gerda guessed that she was maybe in her early thirties. Even Kai, not always the most observant, immediately noticed that she stood out from the crowd. She had dark skin that stood out against her white gown, beautiful raven hair, and deep, cold, brown eyes. Suddenly, Gerda realized that snowflakes, that had not been there just minutes ago, were hastily floating over and whirling around the mystery guest, as if blown over by a great gust of wind. It was as if Grandpa Frost himself was carrying them through the air with his great big puffs. Gerda also noticed that the air had become significantly colder. She thought nothing of it until it really could not be dismissed. Gerda thought that she heard the snowflakes singing. Gerda looked to her right at Kai and saw a look of fearful admiration on his face.

"Kai, what are those?" she whispered.

"They are beautiful. But I feel . . . almost scared of their beauty."

The others glanced around, sharing long puzzled looks with their friends. The snowflakes were like a slightly dismal, haunted orchestra. Then, with a huge gust of cold air, the woman began to dance—or rather float—around and around, barely skirting the edge of the crowd. Whenever she got too close to Gerda's liking, Gerda quickly shied away, but not Kai. Gerda tried to grasp Kai's gaze, but he seemed mesmerized by the unordinary presence.

"Will anyone dance with me?" the woman's voice echoed. "Anyone who does will get a kiss—from me."

As if pulled by a string, Kai calmly walked over to the woman and took her hand.

"No! Kai!"

"There's a good, brave boy."

As they waltzed in circles, Gerda had a terrified look on her face.

What is Kai doing? Why won't he look at me?!

She had an urge to run over to Kai and yank him out of the woman's arms. The woman was tall, but although Kai was just a few weeks older than Gerda, he was almost the woman's height. Then, just as quickly as it had begun, the music stopped and the raging wind assumed the role of accompaniment.

The woman kissed the top of Kai's head, and instantly, Kai's eyes glazed over and he stood frozen, as if in a trance.

"I am the Snow Queen," the mysterious woman majestically announced, "and he," she said, pointing to Kai, "is going with me. I could use some company so high up in the mountains." She wrapped her snow-white cape around herself with a flourish and with Kai still on her arm, she disappeared in a puff of gray smoke.

Gerda's First Encounter

With the Snow Queen gone, Gerda's small shoulders were quaking, and she was gasping for air, almost as if she had been submerged in ice cold water for much too long.

"KAI, NO! COME BACK, COME BACK!" Gerda cried as her body tremored and shook from the still-fresh shock. The scene was replaying over and over in her head. She didn't hear the sobs of Kai's mother or her own screaming her name.

Her mother swept her up into her arms and whispered in Gerda's ear, "It's okay, we'll find him, it's going to be all right," but Gerda could hear the quaver in her voice. Gerda's thoughts seemed to be just as muddled as the fog that was beginning to settle just below the horizon.

What were the chances of finding a boy cast into an unknown corner of this world by a white, stormy, and villainous stranger? The kind that can brew a storm inside you with just a single glare. That glare can destroy any mortal and turn their insides to ice, but with a kiss, their very heart will be frozen forever.

Facing the woods, Gerda unleashed all her sorrow in a burst of energy and ran and ran and ran. Her hair whipping in all directions with not so much as a knapsack on her shoulders to weigh her down, Gerda stumbled. With a start, she woke from her daze and was almost suffocated by the realization of what she had just done. She was in the heart of the forest, a dangerous place, with no food, water, or companion. The events of that evening jolted right back to her, and exhausted, Gerda fell into a tormented sleep.

s

"Kakraw, Kakraw! Birds of the forest, wake up! And I mean right now! How can I fail to demand attention with my glamorous presence? This is outrageous, the amount of disrespect I am receiving! Humph!"

Through Gerda's blurred vision, she saw a very well groomed crow mumbling to himself and screeching at others.

What on Earth!? Is he talking? Of all the possible things she could have thought after yesterday's ordeal, this crow seemed to dominate her mind. Gerda looked up at the crow with a sort of inquisitive look to ask whether the bird could repeat itself, just to make sure she heard right.

"Are you . . . talking?"

"Why, of course I am!" The crow protested with a hurt look on his face and scrunched up his eyebrows.

She noticed he was constantly licking his wings and smoothing out his black feathers. His large eyes seemed to protrude from his head, and he wore a vest in a stunning shade of deep blue. The crow's little dialogue and his appearance left Gerda bewildered and utterly confused. Whoever heard of a well-dressed

and groomed crow that was quite sufficiently verbose? She looked around to ask someone else if they could hear the crow talking, but there was no one around, except an ant, but Gerda did not want to risk her sanity by conversing with an insect.

The crow cleared its throat. "Pardon me for the impertinent behavior of these, um, birds." Gerda looked up and squeaked in surprise. Lining four branches right above her head were about ten pigeons. "Let me properly introduce myself. I am Sir Krakowsky Petrev Crow. And you are?"

Still gaping, she replied, "Umm . . . Gerda?"

"All right then, Gerda. Firstly, close your mouth. Capisce? Good! Now, move a little to the left; I look best from my right side. Okay, wake the birds? Check. Waste time on little girls? Check. Next, I need to finish constructing my bath. Ta ta!"

"Wait, wait! Stop! Come back, I need your help."

"Fine," Krakowsky sighed. "You have two minutes to give me a reason why I should care."

With Krakowsky's consent, Gerda recounted all of the events of the past day and struggled to keep the tears that were welling in her eyes at bay. She told him about her brotherhood with Kai, the party at New Year's, the icy stranger, Kai's disappearance, running away to find him; everything gushed out.

"That was so moving, my dear child," choked Krakowsky, wiping away his tears and pulling out his handkerchief. He submerged his face in it and emitted a great honk. "And so tragic. I know who that villain is; she wiped out all of the other crows. Only I and my wife remain with these moronic pigeons."

Gerda glanced up at the pigeons and decided that they could not understand anything Krakowsky was saying.

"Long ago, she was called Elizabeth, and was so innocent, kind, and gentle. I used to be her footman. But then she got rid of me, and began her reign of the north. She began with lightly frosting all of the crops around her; she rather enjoyed a season of famine. Still, she was not satisfied. No one knows what made her evil and poisonous towards everything living. Wherever she wanted to settle, she would freeze everything around her and construct an enormous ice castle. She has also frozen people before. Her kiss makes a person evil and gives him a heart of ice, just like hers."

Gerda's eyes widened.

"I think that is what happened to Kai. I'm so sorry, Gerda." Krakowsky hung his head.

"About what, my dear Kraka?" came a shrill, teasing voice from somewhere in the trees.

"That's my Lily."

With a questioning look from Gerda, he continued. "She's my wife."

"I see . . . " Gerda replied.

"Oh my Krakowsky, how I've missed you! And who is this lovely little girl you've got? Is she an addition to our little colony of ten?" A slightly smaller but equally black crow emerged from the branches, wearing a thin periwinkle ribbon around her neck.

"No, my dear. She has lost her friend Kai, who was taken by the Snow Queen."

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry. I know how you feel. Our entire crow population was taken, but I know who can help us. You see, Gerda, I work for Her Majesty Rachelle, and she used to be very well acquainted

with Elizabeth before she iced over. Her Majesty may know where the Snow Queen resides."

"Thank you so much for your help, Lily! You too, Krakowsky." Gerda was suddenly overcome by a wave of emotion, and hugged the crow couple so tightly that Krakowsky gasped for her to let them go.

Collecting themselves, Gerda, Krakowsky, and Lily set off to Her Majesty's castle.

Meeting Her Majesty

On top of the high mountain, visible from any point in Vysoky Kingdom, loomed an enormous, thin castle. There were but two towers rising up from the west and east points of it and its once-deep elegant lavender color had faded into a worn-down and dreadful-looking shade of beige-gray. The desperate, hopeless exterior of the castle perfectly matched Princess Rachelle. Restless and trapped, on many occasions, her many maids, Lily included, could see her pacing across her chambers and stopping occasionally to give a yearning glance towards the gray sky.

Gerda knocked, sharply inhaled, and pushed open the door. Inside Her Majesty's chambers, every shelf was filled with old, dusty books that looked like they had not been read in a long time. Books occupied everything except Her Majesty's bedside table. On it rested a frame with a painting of two rosy-cheeked girls, maybe fourteen years old, and a couple of snowflake candle holders.

"Your Majesty, I'm Gerda. My closest friend, Kai, was taken by the Snow Queen yesterday. He is my best friend and is like a brother to me. We had so many things we wanted to do together, and now . . . he's gone. I need to track him down. I need to find him!" Gerda blurted out.

"Gerda wishes to ask you about the Snow Queen's whereabouts," Lily clarified. Rachelle instantly turned a shade paler than she already was. "Un-unless, of course, you are not feeling well," Lily stammered apologetically.

"No, no, it's perfectly all right. I pondered that question for many years myself. If you will excuse us," Rachelle waved all of the other maids away. "Years ago, probably when I was five years old, I first left the castle. Just as we passed the gates into the market, a little girl ran right up to me and said, 'Hi! I'm Elizabeth. What's your name?' She grabbed me by the hand and led me deeper into the market. Stunned, I followed. Even though my nanny trailed behind us, I felt like I was unsupervised and free. From then on, I asked my nanny to take me into town every day, and Elizabeth would wait for me by the peddler's cart that sold citrus."

Gerda's thoughts strayed from Her Majesty's story, and instead thought about her friendship with Kai.

"Later, probably when I was sixteen or so, I was allowed to go into the market without any supervision. On that day, I first heard Elizabeth mention how much she loved ice, which was odd because it never snowed in Vysoky. When I asked her where she had seen ice, she explained that over the summer, she and her family lived in their cabin in the woods for a little while. She had somehow been able to freeze some water for her to suck on during the heat wave. Out of nowhere, a bear in the forest approached her and asked Elizabeth to come to the tallest mountain in Visota, a neighboring region.

"A bear?" asked Gerda.

"Yes. She evaded my questions that day, but I later found out that Elizabeth turned the brown bear into

a polar bear, and he became her guard and pet. Since then, many people and animals met the same fate: pets, guards, and accomplices. So, on that cold October morning, I found out that my trip to the market had been made only to say goodbye. Elizabeth disappeared and never came back."

Like Kai, thought Gerda. She started to put the pieces together: the desolate castle, Her Majesty's sad face. *She understands. Elizabeth was taken away from her and she never recovered.*

"The next day . . . "

Rachelle had been interrupted by heaving sobs coming from somewhere under the table; Krakowsky had hidden underneath his wings.

"Oh, don't cry, Krakowsky. That's life, you know. You just have to keep going." Even while comforting Krakowsky, Gerda couldn't help but notice that Rachelle looked rather sad.

"I haven't seen her in years, but I have heard that she continues to live on the mountain Maguchi in the Visota kingdom. My maids will provide you with warm clothing and a warm bath before you go on your way; it is deathly cold up there. Her castle is hidden, but I can assure you that it lies just on the other end of a tunnel made of rock. Please, be safe. You don't know what Elizabeth is capable of."

The Bandits

Her Majesty Rachelle's castle was right in between the plains, where Gerda's little town lay, and the forest. The only way to Maguchi was through the trees. The deep forest was yet another of Krakowsky's fears, and Gerda could hear Lily and Krakowsky bickering, surely for the first twenty minutes. Krakowsky was constantly pulling twigs out of his feathers, and Lily was scolding him for being so fussy.

"We're in a forest, for Her Majesty's sake! There are twigs!"

"Yes, my dear, but that does not mean that we must abandon all forms of hygiene," Krakowsky snapped back.

Exasperated, Gerda spun around, ready to give the pair a piece of her mind when she heard a cry. All too quickly, the bandits were upon them. *Ugghh! Why was I so stupid? I led us right into bandit territory,* thought Gerda.

They were a terrifying bunch with ragged shirts and baggy trousers. The bandit that had overtaken Gerda, seemingly the leader of the group, had a bald head and a scarred face with one small gold earring in his left ear.

Holding a knife up to Gerda's throat, he rasped, "Our commander Alexandra wants to see you now."

Rightly so, he guessed that Krakowsky was unwaveringly loyal to Gerda, and would never leave her. Lily and Krakowsky were equally devoted to each other and would never leave the other, so the bandit didn't bother tying their wings.

He shoved the trio down onto their knees. Just beneath her nose, Gerda saw a pair of boots that seemed to go all the way to the knee, then a red skirt, then a billowing black blouse, and finally a bandana around a head, exploding with a mass of dark brown curls. The leader had two gold earrings and an emerald pendant around her neck.

"Good work, Antonin," she said as she tossed him a gold coin. He caught it and retreated behind the trees.

Alexandra spun slow, lazy circles around Gerda and Lily. She seemed to have completely forgotten about Krakowsky.

"I rather like your muffs. Oh, and that hat. Fancy. Boys, she probably has more. I can smell quality soap on this one."

The other bandits jumped out from behind the trees and shuffled around in search of more goods. Finding nothing, they sulked back to their leader.

"Fine, hand those over and you can go," she snarled at Gerda, grabbing her arm. Gerda slowly took off her hat and muffs and tossed them to Alexandra. Alexandra let go of Gerda, but Gerda noticed that she kept a tight grip on Lily.

"Let her go," Gerda said in a quavering voice. Alexandra ignored her.

"I know most everything that goes on in this kingdom. I also happen to know that you," Alexandra said, jabbing Lily in the chest, "are a maid to Rachelle. Her family outcast me to these desperate woods. I have to live here with these idiots." She glanced around at her flunkies. "I want you," Alexandra spat, again pointing at Lily, "to tell Rachelle to let me back in. I get the clothes and a ticket back into the kingdom, and you get to continue through these woods. Those are my conditions. Accept them, and your friends can go. If not . . . " Alexandra let that last sentence linger.

Krakowsky sprung protectively to Lily's side. Staring straight ahead, she mulled over Alexandra's ultimatum. "Fine. I will ask. But Her Majesty might not consent to it."

"Ah, but she will." Alexandra's eyes flickered and Gerda was starting to think that maybe Alexandra had some unfinished business with Her Majesty Rachelle. "You must leave now. Antonin, go with the lady crow to the castle."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded from somewhere behind her.

"Now?" Lily gasped.

"No!" cried Krakowsky.

"I guess that girl and your crow will have to journey on their own. Unless, of course, you would like to stay with us," Alexandra suggested, feigning generosity.

All eyes were on Lily. Alexandra's eyes were burning, daring Lily to challenge her. Gerda's eyes stared imploringly at Lily, knowing she would never reach Kai unless the bandits let them through. Antonin looked on the scene with frustrated eyes, not wanting to make the long trek to the castle. Krakowsky's eyes were open wide and he shook his head to Lily, trying to make her refuse the ultimatum. Lily sadly nodded her head, sighed, hugged Krakowsky tightly, whispered something in Gerda's ear, and took off, with Antonin yelling as he struggled to keep up.

"You may go, and I will keep these as tokens," Alexandra said as she waggled the muffs in front of Gerda's face. Boys, leave them be. They can go."

As Gerda and Krakowsky continued through the forest, Gerda couldn't help but wonder what other encounters lay ahead of them. They hadn't even reached the mountains yet. Who knew what dangers awaited

there? Gerda refused to accept or even think about the horrible things that may have happened to Kai in the past two days. She refused to think about what she would do if Kai wasn't at the Snow Queen's castle. Right now, it was her only plan and her only hope to reach Kai in time, before his heart froze completely. Throughout the journey, she recognized the aching in her heart and the whirling thoughts as she was falling asleep to be deep worry and love for Kai, and she missed him terribly. Often, Krakowsky suggested turning back, but with Kai's face in mind, Gerda was driven onward. She knew it was too late to turn back, and too early to give up.

To be continued . . .