

Three Friends
By Tess Halpern

It was a beautiful day at the School for Extremely Talented Children, the sun shining on the fresh November snow, and three friends, Narnia Adams, Cat Wildefleur, and Isabelle Cours-de-Lent were walking down the halls of the school.

“We’ve got Swordistry next,” Cat remarked.

At first glance, Cat was an amiable looking 12-year-old girl, with nut-brown hair and a pretty enough complexion, but if you looked deeper into her cunning green eyes, there was a fire that was full of concentrated intensity, which she used to the fullest extent in her Swordistry.

There were not many teachers that could teach her much in that field.

“Come on, Isa!” Cat hollered, already halfway down the hall, her red sneakers squeaking against the newly waxed floors. “See ya at lunch, Narnia!”

Isabelle didn’t pause. She knew better than to keep Master Albracht waiting. Master Albracht, nicknamed “Hot ’n’ Cold” because of his apparent fatherly attitude and his rough style of teaching, was less than kind when the girls were late. She sprinted away after her friend, running in her comical way, almost as if her feet were hesitating as her body was barreling ahead.

Narnia smiled after her two friends, then sighed, turned around, and walked resignedly in the other direction, faced with Parkour alone. As she walked, she considered. A few months ago, she had been wandering the streets, not knowing where her next warm meal would be. At five years old she had run away from the awful orphanage that took her in after her parents had disappeared.. She had gotten a job at the circus as the flyer in the human pyramid*, and made friends with all of the circus performers. She left the circus at twelve to go into the world and see what it was like. It was not great. After 3 weeks of wandering, she came across the Academy, where she applied, was tested for talent, and miraculously, was accepted.

**Flyer: The person who stands on top of a human pyramid.*

The first few weeks of school were hard for Narnia. She had come late enough in the year that all friendships had been strongly bonded, leaving no such room for her in a group of friends. But then she had found Isabelle and Cat, who had accepted Narnia and had given her two

unquestioningly loyal compatriots.

“You’re late.”

The harsh voice, like a rock scraping along pavement, woke her to the present with a start.

Ms. Candoth, like Master Albracht, did not take kindly to her students being “unpunctual” (her word). Ms. Candoth was a slight, muscular woman, usually pretty agreeable, although she was very strict when teaching. “Sorry’m,” Narnia mumbled, then removed her shoes and padded into the classroom.

“Catherine! Isabelle! Catherine! Isabelle!”

A cry echoed along the halls of the inner west wing of the school. A damp, panting figure, clutching a stitch in her side, came into view. “Cather-er Cat!”

Her last exclamation had been cut short by Cat’s glare, her jaw clenched, growling “Don’t call me that.” Cat hated being called by her full name by her classmates. *Only* teachers could call her Catherine.

“Okay, ’kay, ’kay. *Sooo* -ry.” It was Stacey Carson, a socially clueless acquaintance from school with an aggravating habit for giving people the exact *wrong* nicknames. She explained that she had had orders from the principal, or the *prin-prin*, that she should send them to his office.

“Ohhhhhh-kay, Stacey. We’ll go to him right now,” said Cat with raised eyebrows.

“Good,” the aforesaid personage replied, and marched away, wearing an air of important pride that she had successfully carried out her orders.

Cat and Isabelle proceeded to stroll to the principal’s office. They weren’t nervous in the least, as the only thing harmful about the principal was the persistent smell of charcoal that insisted on lingering in his office.

He was a paternal, kindly figure, who had an unmistakably mischievous twinkle in his eye.

All of his students loved him. His wife, too, was a kindred spirit. She smelled of sweet lemons in the summer, knew all of the children personally, and often comforted the people who needed comforting on the long, miserable winter nights, when the children got homesick. Mrs. Alden was the most beautiful woman you could ever meet, but as well as that, she was very powerful, and could use almost any weapon. She and her husband together made the school a joyful place.

“Hello, children,” a tight voice that belonged to the strict secretary to the principal, Ms Anglebere, broke Cat and Isabelle out of their reveries. “The Headmaster will see you in just a moment, girls.”

The girls nodded and plopped down on the big, overstuffed couch in the principal’s waiting room, chatting about what the principal might be calling them for. Cat and Isabelle had both been at the school since they were eight years old, and they had bonded quickly on arriving, after they had been caught in the basement together looking through all of the antiques and dusty swords. After that, they had both developed a love of swordistry, and so the pair had been ever since. However, neither of the girls had had a happy past.

At the age of eight, Isabelle had been an immigrant from the small town of Annecy, France, shipped away in The Great War. The plane that carried her, being a flimsy one at best, had a lot of weight on it, so it broke down about 25,000 feet above the Atlantic. Isabelle, with pinpoint accuracy, had located the problem and fixed it before they were even 500 feet above the Ocean. An Irish fishing boat witnessed the miraculous event and told the news about it. The news featured an article about it, and the Academy then scouted out and found Isabelle, and welcomed her into the school, promising warm meals and good friends.

Cat, on the other hand, had been quite a happy child, in the beginning. Living as the only girl, and youngest of 5 brothers, she had become quite competitive, but she loved all of her brothers and they all loved her. They *had* been happy, but with only one parent to take care of them all, they had always been poor. Their loving mother had finally had to send all of her children to family members when they ran out of money, but no one would take the little girl who couldn’t work on the farm or be prim and proper. They had to send Cat somewhere else. Cat met Mrs. Alden, the principal’s wife at a small deli one day, where the owners had promised to keep her for a few weeks. Mrs Alden asked her about her predicament and convinced her husband to keep Cat at the school for a month or so, after which they discovered her natural talent for swordistry, and decided to keep her on as a student.

“So, girls, you are probably wondering why I called you in today.” The principal sat on the

other end of the great oak slab that served as his desk, his fingers pressed together.

Cat and Isabelle looked at each other and nodded.

“Yes.”

“Well,” The principal contemplated the floor, then looked up. He regarded the girls gravely.

“I have been seeing all of the most talented fighters in this school,” he said. His eyes were devoid of their usual twinkle, his hair, once all brown, had a few streaks of grey in it that the girls had never noticed before.

“You are both to protect your friends and enemies alike. There is something, or some *one* in this school who poses a threat to all of us.”

The girls stared at him.

“You’re joking,” Cat said incredulously.

The principal gave a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. He handed them a small slip of paper. It said:

Florence Widonbern, age 11, Student, June 4.

Estelle Ardany, age 16, Student, August 6.

John Fortenner, age 14, Student, September 1.

Albany Kaznivo, age 8, Student, September 8.

London Brown, age 32, Teacher, October 5.

Amarai Reche-Ley, age 12, Student, October 19.

“This is a list of all of the abducted persons and their dates of disappearance. The staff has been keeping the disappearances quiet, but now that more students and teachers are disappearing than ever, we found it necessary to reveal the news to at least a small percentage of the student body.”

Cat and Isabelle stared at him again, this time not out of disbelief, but out of apprehension.

“Catherine and Isabelle,” Mr Alden said, slowly and quietly. “I need you to be on guard. I would love to be mistaken about this, but I almost know I am not. Students run away once in a while, but I have not seen *this many* students vanish, ever, in all of my years of teaching. I know

you are both more than capable of taking on an attacker, and I want my school to be safe, so please, both of you, *be ready for an attack at all times.*”

“Yessir,” they said solemnly and in unison. They knew that there was no point in arguing further.

“Thank you, girls,” Their principal said to close the discussion.

“Well, that was weird,” said Cat to Isabelle and Narnia at long last, as they each sat cross-legged on their respective beds that night; Narnia, as she lived in a different bedroom, sat on Isabelle’s bed. After their encounter with the principal, Cat and Isabelle had retrieved Narnia from her room and now they all sat in Cat and Isabelle’s room, contemplating the mysterious visit to the principal’s office that evening.

“Maybe he will come back tomorrow and say that it was all a joke,” said Narnia hopefully.

“No, he seemed pretty serious,” Isabelle said. The trio thought in silence until it was time for Narnia to go to bed.

As she lay in bed that night after curfew, Narnia thought. She was thinking about the evening, and Isabelle, and Cat, when she heard a slight *thump* come from the direction of her friends’ room. *One of them must be awake, she thought. I could go talk to them.*

Narnia’s feet padded along the cold, hard floor as she silently made her way over to Isabelle and Cat’s room. She creaked open the door, wincing at the sound it made, and stepped into the room. The first thing Narnia noticed was a slight breeze, blowing into the room from the open window.

The open window? she thought, and did a double take. *It’s the middle of November!* As she moved closer, planning to close the window, she saw her friend’s beds for the first time. Empty. She looked around in fresh panic, wheeling around like a dog that had lost its tail. “Cat? Isabelle?” the poor girl cried. “Cat? Isabelle?”

Then she noticed something that made the bottom drop out of her stomach.

There was a smell of charcoal in the air.

Narnia’s breath was rattling against her ribs as she ran across the now dark school

grounds. Her flimsy bathrobe was not sufficiently warm against the early November snow, but she didn't notice. She just kept running and thinking of her friends, at who knows where, kidnapped by God knows who, and kept running. She had run blindly for hours, days, weeks, when a pair of strong arms caught her and said, "Hey! Where ya goin' Narnia?"

Narnia kept running, afraid, running into the fur coat, burying her head into . . . into . . .

"Miss Alden?" Narnia lifted her tear-stained face to meet the warm, sympathetic face of Rebecca Alden, who listened to the distraught girl's story, then took her hand and looked into her eyes and said, "Narnia, are you sure?"

Narnia looked back at her and said, shakily but assuredly this time, "Yes."

"Then let us hurry then," said the young woman. "They can't have gotten far."