“The Youngest Raccoon”
by Makenna Smoliak
1st Place, Short Story 13-15
The Youngest Raccoon

A pale, silver moon gleamed like an unblinking eye up in the darkening sky. The last pale streaks of sunset-orange and taffy-pink had vanished, replaced by the crystalline gleam of a thousand diamondesque stars.

In a quiet, breeze-ruffled glen, a mother raccoon emerged from a dense grouping of bushes near the edge of the forest. She paused, turning around, and then three tiny raccoon kits emerged from the undergrowth after their mother.

The mother raccoon twitched her whiskers. "Come along, kits!"

The eldest kit shoved past his siblings and trotted to the edge of the pale, silver pond that was in the center of the glen. "Are you going to teach us to fish?" his gray fur was fluffed in excitement, and his whiskers were terse with eagerness.

Mother Raccoon nodded. "Yes; tonight will be the first night that you learn how to fish."

The tiniest kit squeaked in excitement. "I wanna see the water!" he cried. He waddled after his mother as she made her way down to the shore. He gazed into the rippling water with eagerness in his eyes. "Wow," he whispered. The water was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It perfectly echoed the indigo sky above and the ethereal gleam of the stars. It was like staring down into the sky.

"Are we going to learn how to fish now?" Eldest looked up at his mother with gleaming eyes, breaking Youngest from his thoughts.

"Yes," Mother smiled at them. "But first, let me teach you the rules."

For a while, Youngest was content to listen to his mother talk about the rules of fishing. But then, something else grabbed his attention. Near the edge of the forest, a rustling sound made his ears twitch. Youngest turned, and his bushy tail gave a short, inquisitive swish.
“Remember, you do not know how to swim yet.” Mother’s voice was just a faint echo in the back of Youngest’s mind. “Do not go far into the water without me.”

The rustling in the bushes grew louder. Youngest glanced over at Mother. She was still talking and not paying any attention to Youngest. Flattening his ears, Youngest turned and started across the grass to the edge of the forest.

As he got closer to the bushes, the rustling grew louder. This time it was joined by the sound of faint chirping noises.

Youngest paused. Perhaps he should go back to Mother. What if terrible danger lurked beyond the bushes?

But the rustle was so tiny, and the chirping sounds were so pitiful. Youngest’s curiosity got the better of him. Without a second thought, he slipped through the and stepped out into the forest.

When he got through the bushes, Youngest looked around for the source of the noise. There seemed to be nothing here but damp leaves and slithering moonlight. Then he heard the chirping noise again; it was faint and as quiet as the breeze that was gently sifting through the leaves. Youngest turned around, his whiskers twitching. There, sitting in a patch of leaves, sat a baby bird. It was covered in a thin layer of gray fuzz, and it stared up at Youngest with wide, terrified eyes. As Youngest crept closer, it flared its wings in defense, opening its mouth as though to cry for help.

“It’s okay!” Youngest said softly, and his heart flared with pity. “I won’t hurt you. Where is your nest?”
The little bird didn't answer; it just sat there shivering like an aspen leaf caught in a gale of autumn wind.

Youngest looked around. His tiny black eyes lifted to the branches above his head, and his heart jumped as he saw a large nest cradled in the branches of an elderly oak tree. It had to be the nest this baby bird had come from.

"I'm going to return you to your nest," said Youngest silently. All the while, his heart was pounding. Mother had only just taught him to climb; what if he forgot something?

Reaching out, Youngest took the bird into his paws. It was bigger than most baby birds, and it was heavier than he had expected. Grunting quietly, Youngest shifted the bird to a more comfortable position. The baby bird squealed in fear, beating its featherless wings violently.

"It's okay!" Youngest cried. "I'm helping you." He spoke in a soothing voice, and the baby eventually calmed down. Youngest winced as its sharp talons dug into his fur. Then, he started towards the tree.

Youngest gripped the trunk with all fours, cradling the baby against his chest. Then he started up, digging his claws into the soft bark and hoisting himself up. He tried to remember the steps that Mother had taught him.

*Dig your claws in... pull yourself up... don't let go...*

*Don't look down.*

Terror pulsed in Youngest's veins as he climbed higher and higher. Leaves rattled softly all around him in the gentle breeze.

It seemed like an eternity before Youngest reached the nest.
The branches were thicker up here than they were down below. Youngest balanced himself on the branch that held the bird nest. He looked down, and felt his mind sway as he saw how far up he was, but he was able to regain his balance and keep moving.

Finally, Youngest reached the nest. He smiled to himself as he saw the other babies. They all stared up at him with open mouths, and their bottomless eyes were filled with starlight.

"There you go," whispered Youngest, putting the baby bird back in the nest. Happiness swelled in his heart as the baby bird nestled among its siblings. It gazed up at Youngest, seeming to give Youngest its thanks.

"You're welcome," Youngest said softly, reaching out to pat the baby on the head.

"Don't you ever forget me, all right?"

Climbing down was easier than going up. Youngest reached the bottom with a joy-filled heart. He knew that he had saved the baby bird's life, and he was proud of himself. He scampered across the starlit forest floor towards the bushes that lined the entrance to the glen. He was eager to get back to Mother and his siblings.

Youngest burst through the bushes and raced across the grass towards the pond.

"Mother!" he called. "Mother!..."

A burst of gray blinded his vision, and thick fur smothered him. "Oh, Youngest!" cried Mother's warm voice. "I have been looking everywhere for you! I thought I lost you!"

"It's okay Mother, I'm safe!" Youngest pulled away from her arms. "I saved a baby bird!"

Mother's dark eyes widened. "You... what?"

"Yeah!" Youngest cried. "I found it on the ground and returned it to its nest! Aren't you proud of me?"
Mother reached out and sniffed Youngest's fur. Her lip curled in disgust. "Owls!" she cried. "You saved a baby owl?"

"I..." Youngest stammered.

"Owls eat raccoon kits!" Mother cried. There was fear and anger in her eyes. "You have saved our enemy!"

Youngest's pride was squashed, replaced by sadness and fear. "I'm sorry," he whimpered. "I didn't know."

"We must go." Mother said coldly. "The mother owl will not be far, and she will be angered by the scent of raccoon in her nest."

With a hanging head, Youngest trotted slowly after Mother and his siblings as they vanished back into the forest, away from the moonlit glen.

Three months later...

Youngest sat at the outside of the den, gazing into the forest. His siblings were tussling in the leaves nearby and Mother was sitting in the den, watching her kits fondly. Suddenly, a loud screeching sound filled the air. The sound of wingbeats made Youngest freeze.

Mother's ears flattened, and she gazed up into the sky with panic. "Kits, get in the den now!" she cried.

Youngest's siblings scampered towards the den, squealing with fear, but Youngest was too late. He felt wind woosh above his head, and feathers flashed at the edge of his vision. Sharp talons were reaching towards him...

"YOUNGEST!" Mother screamed. "Get out of there now!"

Youngest was frozen. He turned his head and came face-to-face with an owl.
The bird was about to lunge for him again. Its eyes were bright with hunger. But then, all at once, the owl froze. Its talons receded, and it landed in front of Youngest, curiosity in his eyes.

Youngest gasped. He recognized those eyes. It was the owl that he had saved.

The owl stepped forward slowly. Fear sang in Youngest’s heart. Then, the owl reached out and gently nuzzled Youngest on the head.

Youngest gasped in surprise. He looked up at the owl. It recognized him!

The owl gave a warbling hoot and stepped back. Youngest looked up into the face of the bird that should be his enemy. His whiskers twitched in happiness.

The owl opened its beak and spoke softly. "A life for a life," she said.

Youngest looked up at her and smiled. This time, it was his turn to offer thanks.