

**Honorable Mention – Short Story**

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*The Adventures of Kiowynn  
and Podrick*

Once upon a time, there was a great kingdom beside the sea named Crescent Ridge. The king and queen were just, kind, and greatly adored. Though the nobility was human, the palace staff was a cute, friendly bunch of animals who loved to have fun. All the different species loved each other like family. Their light-hearted humor made the castle at Crescent Ridge the happiest place in all the land. The castle was guarded by the Knight Brigade, a legion of big cats- lions, tigers, panthers, cheetahs, lynxes, bobcats, and leopards. Though regal and graceful by day, the knights loved rough, tough wrestling matches at night. Sigella the owl was the wise counselor and the castle's librarian. Chache the llama and Alby the alpaca, the sassy palace maids, kept everything spotlessly neat. Biktor the goat was the groundskeeper. Haman the pig was the story teller. Among this silly crew were Kiowynn and Podrick. They were the absolute stars of the palace. Kiowynn, an adorable fawn pug, was the court jester. Podrick the chicken was the troubadour. Each night their goofy shenanigans brought endless smiles and filled the halls with laughter.

One night Kiowynn donned her jester hat and entertained the court by lying on her back to juggle ten stuffed animals with her tiny paws. The entire palace cheered and applauded with amusement. Afterward, Podrick sang an original troubadour song about the pug's incredible love for peanut butter treats. He had the whole palace laughing hysterically. When the dynamic duo finished performing, they walked up to the throne. The king and queen lovingly scooped them up and settled them into their laps. Podrick clucked a few times as he nestled in. Likewise, Kiowynn curled up and yawned a big sleepy yawn. She drifted off into a cozy sleep as the rest of the court performed.

The next morning, Kiowynn and Podrick made their way through the bustling village to a small tavern owned by a tabby cat named Carmen. The pug and chicken were her best friends. Although the tavern was crowded with hungry villagers, she had their breakfast ready in their usual corner spot. As

Kiowynn munched on kibble, Podrick chattered about his girlfriend, Peckah. He had been planning to propose for months. He just needed the perfect plan. As he tossed around proposal ideas, Kiowynn licked the crumbs off her whiskers and lapped up some water. Once her tummy was full and happy, she focused on important kingdom news. “Don’t forget, there’s no palace entertainment tonight. The king and queen are preparing the convoy.”

Podrick was confused. He didn’t usually pay attention to boring castle business. “What convoy?” he asked before scooping up a beak full of grain.

Kiowynn replied, “The king’s brother is marrying the princess of Lillendale. Our majesty is taking the newlyweds a carriage filled with riches as a gift. They’re preparing the royal carriages tonight. The convoy will depart tomorrow morning. The three leaders of the Knight Brigade are escorting them.”

Carmen’s electric green cat eyes narrowed sharply as she refilled the pug’s water bowl. “I don’t like that,” she whispered to them.

“Why not?” asked Podrick.

Her eyes scanned the tavern cautiously. “I saw an odd pair of newcomers a few days ago. I’ve never seen them before. They were dirty and wild. They paid for their meals with pure gold coins and had many precious stones in their money pouch. They mentioned a shipment of gold in the woods, so I suspect they are bandits. They must have been referring to the king’s convoy to Lillendale.”

Kiowynn sat up at once. Her floppy, little pug ears perked up at the alarming report. Her stocky chest puffed out in a sense of loyalty. Her mind raced with plans to protect the convoy. “Carmen, can you describe them to me? I need as much information as you can give.”

Carmen described the two bandits. They crept into town silently like evening shadows. They wore hooded ebony cloaks. No one even noticed them in the tavern that night— no one except

Carmen, that is. Her sharp cat eyes missed nothing. The merciless leader, Dain, was a silver possum with beady, black eyes and a ruthless snarl. His companion, a raccoon named Bardo, was crafty and sneaky. They drank much but spoke little because Carmen's ears listened intently.

Kiowynn thanked Carmen for her account and bolted out. Her curly tail and floppy ears bounced as she scuttled full force back to the castle. Podrick ran frantically behind her in a flurry of feathers and squawks. She bounded through the grand halls and leapt to attention in front of the king and queen. The Knight Brigade circled around curiously at the commotion. Huffing and puffing, the sweet, little pug anxiously rushed to tell the details of the hooded bandits waiting to attack the convoy. After she told them everything, she sat down relieved and panted to cool off. Podrick clucked to confirm her story.

After hearing her news, the hall erupted in laughter. The king squat down on his knee beside her and scooped her up into his arms. "Kiowynn, my precious and beloved pug, you are the kingdom's greatest jester. There's no one funnier than you, my dear one. You've spun quite the tale this time," he chuckled.

Her big brown eyes looked up at him with confusion. She didn't understand. He and his convoy were in danger, yet he thought she was joking. How could that be?

"Your majesty," she stumbled bashfully, "this is no wild tale, sir. This one is true! The bandits plan on attacking you on your journey to Lillendale."

The king scratched behind her ear and smiled at her. "Don't worry, little one," he assured her. "Everything will be just fine."

The three leaders of the Knight Brigade— Suntario the lion, Azkuhtar the black panther, and Akua the cheetah— nuzzled their noses on Kiowynn's soft cheeks. The knights promised they would

guard the convoy well. Despite their well-intended promises, however, Kiowynn knew they underestimated the danger. She had to do something. She had to do what no pug had ever done before—save the convoy from hooded bandits!

Kiowynn, Podrick, and Carmen had a secret midnight meeting in an alley outside the castle. “Alright, guys, we need a plan fast,” the pug began. “The convoy will set out for Lillendale tomorrow morning. The only path that leads east to Lillendale goes through the Bundergump Forest. The trees there are so thick and dense that daytime looks like night. It is dark, shadowy, and covered with heavy fog. I suspect the bandits will attack there. There’s plenty of shelter for them to hide. If we don’t do something, the convoy will walk right into their trap.”

“How do we stop them?” squawked Podrick. “No one in the palace takes us seriously. They don’t believe there’s a threat.” Podrick stopped to peck a worm inching across the ground. He gulped it down and continued, “Besides, how could a possum and a raccoon ever stand a chance against the lion, panther, and cheetah escorting the king? They’re mighty and powerful! They were born to be soldiers. If they can’t stop the bandits, how on earth will we? Look how small we are.”

“We may not be the strongest members of the castle, but we can still do mighty things!” declared Kiowynn nobly. “We don’t need to be a lion, panther or a cheetah to save the king. We can do it exactly as we are. Being different doesn’t mean we’re not good enough. We just have to solve this problem using the unique gifts we have. We will save the convoy our way!”

“Kiowynn’s right,” purred Carmen. “Don’t focus on what we can’t do. Focus on what we can do. Let’s get creative and use our strengths to accomplish our mission.”

“Alright, ladies,” Podrick conceded. “What’s our plan?”

They paced up and down the cobblestone streets in the moon-lit alley, probing their brains for a good tactic.

"I've got it!" Kiowynn finally exclaimed. "I have a plan. Right now, we must hurry to the grand library. We need a map of the castle so we can locate the old armory. We need a lot of gunpowder."

The pals took off as fast as their little legs could carry them. When they reached the castle, Kiowynn stopped. "Everybody, act normal. We can't let the guard know we're up to something," she whispered. She stepped forward leading the way. She moseyed through the gates, smelling around curiously. They sauntered up the stairs, and Carmen sat down to scratch. Luzaro the lynx greeted them warmly.

"Hello to my favorite pug, chicken, and tiny tabby! How are you this evening?"

Carmen crouched down with a playful smile and pounced on him. He plopped over on his side, feigning defeat. She climbed up for a hug. His giant paw patted her on the head, and Kiowynn and Podrick jumped in too. Luzaro laughed, his golden eyes glimmering kindly. After chatting with the lynx, they said goodbye and strolled inside. Away from the guard, they ran full speed to the library.

The library was a magical place. A roaring fire blazed in the fireplace, and rows of books lined the walls. The librarian was a western screech owl named Sigella. She hooted a greeting from a rafter overhead and flew silently to meet them. Tucking her wings, she welcomed them. "It's wonderful to see you! What brings you to the library, friends?"

"Sigella, do any books in the antiquity section contain a diagram of the castle? We need a blueprint."

“Certainly, dear! I’ll get it for you.” She flew to a lower row in the back corner and pulled out a thick volume with her talons. She flew it back to them. She flipped through pages with her feathered wings, bobbing up and down in circles to inspect each page. “Here you are,” she finally cooed.

It was drawn by the original builders of the castle many centuries before, and it showed every room. They studied it intently, committing it to memory. After thanking Sigella, they raced out again. Careful not to draw attention from the knights posted throughout the corridors, they made their way to the old armory. After locating a large container of gunpowder, Kiowynn revealed the next phase of the plan.

“Podrick, get this gunpowder to Peckah immediately. Convince the hen house to eat it and lay as many eggs as possible. We need all the explosive eggs we can get! We’ll sneak the eggs onboard the carriage carrying the treasure. Carmen, go back to the tavern and prepare enough food and water for our journey. Bring it to the Royal Stable. We must hurry! Only a few hours till dawn!”

The hens happily agreed to help with the mission. They ate the powder and hurried to lay the eggs. At dawn the hens had three full baskets of explosive eggs. The trio snuck the supplies into the Royal Stable while the knights switched shifts.

Inside Kiowynn told the royal horses about the hooded bandits lurking in the Bundergump Forest. “We will hide in the piles of treasure. The bandits are small and stealthy. If they get past the knights, they’ll sneak into the carriage to steal the riches. When they do, we’ll be ready. Horses, can we count on you? Will you keep our secret so we can complete the mission?”

The horses stomped their hooves in the dirt and neighed their wholehearted agreement. The pals got to work carefully hiding the eggs and provisions in the mounds of gold. They had just finished burrowing into the piles themselves when the convoy group entered the stable. They gave the horses

directions and prepared to depart. The king and queen climbed into the first carriage. Suntario jumped onto the roof, his golden lion eyes scanning alertly. Akua the cheetah rode inside the carriage for the king and queen's immediate protection. Azkuhtar leapt on top of the second carriage carrying the treasure. The black panther faced backward to guard the rear.

The horses began the journey to Lillendale. The road out of the castle followed the sea for several miles. Then it turned toward the hills and snaked East through the woods. As they went deeper into the woods, the forest grew dark under the dense trees and heavy fog. They reached the Bundergump Forest just as night fell on the third day. After rounding a bend, the tree branches arched over the road forming a long, gloomy tunnel. The horses slowed down nervously.

Alone in the second carriage, the tiny friends wiggled out from their hiding spots to peek out of the curtains. "Everyone get ready," Kiowynn whispered. "This is where the bandits will probably attack." They each hid in a separate corner with a basket of explosive eggs.

Suntario was on high alert. His eyes continually scanned left, right, and up ahead. Unbeknownst to him, the bandits were lurking in the branches high overhead. Bardo sprinkled sleeping dust on Suntario as he passed underneath, causing him to fall into a deep sleep. The horses marched onward completely unaware. When the second carriage approached, Bardo sprinkled sleeping powder on Azkuhtar as well. The panther drifted off into a deep slumber too. Dan and Bardo scurried down the tree, jumped onto the second carriage, and slid the door open. Through the dark they could make out the golden gleam of incredible treasures. Piles of gold and jewels awaited them. They snickered greedily and jumped onto the closest pile.

At once Kiowynn, Podrick, and Carmen began hurling the eggs at them. Upon contact, the eggs broke and exploded with flashes of light and loud thunder. The eggs didn't harm them or the carriage,



but it terrified the bandits! They took off running for their lives. The booms of the explosions sent Akua the cheetah running to the rescue. He saw the bandits and began a fierce chase, but they had the advantage. They climbed a tree and disappeared into the shadows of the Bundergump.

Akua returned panting and defeated. Suntario and Azkuhtar awoke at the explosions, but they were groggy and disoriented from the sleeping powder.

“What happened?” cried the king, climbing out of the carriage with a torch.

“It was the bandits.”

They turned to see who had spoken. Kiowynn and her friends emerged from the carriage and explained everything.

“Oh, goodness!” cried the queen with fright. They were all in shock. The little pug was right from the start, but they hadn’t believed her. Still she came to their rescue and saved the day. The king, queen, and knights embraced the three heroes.

“Kiowynn, my darling pug,” said the king humbly as he gave her a big hug. “I’m so sorry for not believing you. You were right. Thank you for saving us.”

The tiny pug licked the king’s chin and wagged her curly little tail. She jumped off his lap, sneezed twice, then jumped in the queen’s lap and licked her cheeks too. Everyone laughed with joy at the sweet, precious pug.

The remainder of the journey went smoothly. Kiowynn and her friends were appointed as protectors of the royal caravan. They remained on guard with the rest of their explosive eggs. They made it to Lillendale just in time for the wedding.

After the trip, Podrick made arrangements for his big proposal to Peckah. He told her to meet him on the beach an hour before dusk. He went early to prepare a spot. He laid soft blankets down on

the sand so they could watch the sunset. He brought tasty snacks to munch on. Since he was a troubadour, he wrote several poems and songs for her. He'd thought of just about everything. It was almost time for her to arrive when he realized he forgot the flowers. Panicking, he ran down the shore where the beach met the cliffs. He found some lovely, purple flowers growing on the vines there. He hurried to cut some with his beak.

He didn't know it, but Peckah was making her way down the trail on the other side of the beach. Creeping behind her at a distance were Dain and Bardo. When she got to the meeting spot, Podrick was still off picking flowers. The bandits snuck up and kidnapped her.

Meanwhile, Podrick clucked with delight as he made a bouquet. She would love it. He sprinted joyfully back to the campsite. When he arrived, he saw a note in the sand:

**We have your girl. If you want to save her, bring us the map of the castle. Meet us here tomorrow at midnight, or else. Come alone. Tell no one. – Bandits**

He dropped the flowers in horror. "Why would they do this?" he squalled in distress. What was he going to do? How could he betray his friends? He couldn't let her die, though. She was his true love! No matter what, he had to rescue Peckah! He quickly made a plan. He'd get the map for the bandits and bring Peckah home safe. Then he'd hunt the bandits down and get the map back. He'd return it to the library, and nobody would ever know. It seemed like a good plan, so he started back toward the castle.

The next day Podrick tiptoed quietly into the library at high noon. As planned, Sigella was sound asleep. Thank goodness the book was on a lower shelf! He quietly tore out the page with the map. He put the book back in its place, tucked the map under his wing, and crept out without waking the owl.

Podrick avoided his friends all day. He didn't want to lie to them. The suspense was killing him. He could hardly contain the guilt he felt for taking the map. Worst of all, though, he was hiding it from Kiowynn. He felt horrible for keeping a secret from such a noble, loyal friend. Once he rescued Peckah, he would fix it! He would make everything right, and they'd never know. When it was time, he anxiously made his way to the beach.

Bardo was waiting for him on the sand near the waves. Podrick was confused. Where was Peckah? Where was Dain?

The chicken approached nervously.

"Did you bring what we asked for?" Bardo giggled.

"Yes. Now where's Peckah?"

"Not so fast. The map, please." The raccoon smiled mischievously and held out his paw.

Podrick hesitated. His stomach was in knots. He had a bad feeling about this.

"If you want your hen," Bardo snapped with an impatient scowl, "then give me the map!"

Podrick handed it over reluctantly. Bardo's rotten smirk returned. "Very good," he snickered smugly.

"Where is Peckah?" Podrick demanded.

"Isn't it obvious?" Bardo sneered. "She's not here."

"What?" Podrick exclaimed furiously.

"She's with Dain. We didn't know if you'd keep your half of the deal. Had to make sure you didn't strut in to play hero. You gave us what we wanted, though, so I'll tell you where she is. Go to the cliffs north of the castle. Follow the trail until you see the waterfall. Behind the waterfall is a cave. The hen is waiting for you there. Go rescue her."

Podrick took off at once and followed the path through the seaside cliffs. He didn't care if it took all night, he had to save her. He heard the roar of the waterfall hours later and knew he was close. He followed the sound and went into the cave.

He yelled her name, but only echoes replied. In despair he called again.

"*Peckah. Peckah. Peckah. Peckah,*" the echoes repeated. He panicked. He searched every nook and cranny of the giant cave, but she was nowhere to be found.

"ROTTEN BANDITS!" Podrick raged. "Those tricksters. There's truly no honor among thieves!" They blackmailed him and went back on the deal. They never intended for him to find her. They sent him on a wild chicken chase in the wrong direction so they could escape. Now they had Peckah and the map. He had only one option left: Go home and admit the truth.

Podrick returned to the castle late that morning. He burst into the courtroom in aghast, feathers disheveled and catawampus.

"Dear Podrick, whatever is the matter?" asked the king in concern.

Weeping with grief, Podrick ran before him and confessed everything. "I'm so sorry, Your Majesty." He sniffled. "I shouldn't have betrayed you. This is all my fault."

The king hugged Podrick and smoothed his ruffled feathers. "Don't worry," he said comfortingly. "We'll rescue Peckah. Luzaro, take some knights with you and track Peckah down. Kiowynn, my brave and noble pug, you were right about the bandits before. The castle is in your hands tonight. Suntario, Azkuhtar, Akua- you and the remaining knights help Kiowynn protect the castle."

"Yes, sir." The court agreed in unison.

Luzaro and a third of the guards stormed the nearby cliffs and forest. Combing the region, the guards tracked every sight, sound, and smell in pursuit of the lost hen.

The remaining knights circled around Kiowynn for orders. The tiny pug lost no time. “The bandits are seeking one thing: treasure. They have the castle map, and they’ll aim for the treasury. They’re not fighters, but don’t underestimate their ability. They excel in stealthy tactics. They’ll seek a path that allows them to sneak in unnoticed. As we learned in the Bundergump Forest, they are in possession of sleeping powder. It can take out the most powerful guard. We must stay ahead of their game and anticipate their steps. Don’t worry, guys. I have a plan.”

Unbeknownst to the search party of knights, the bandits were already on the castle grounds. They’d snuck in through the woods while Podrick searched the cave. Hiding in a hollow tree trunk, they waited for nightfall. When they crawled out of hiding to make their move, they noticed the guards weren’t at their usual posts.

“That’s weird,” Bardo noted. “There’s no guards anywhere.”

“They fell right into our trap,” Dain cooed while rubbing his spindly little hands together. His evil plan was a success. “See, I told you it was a good idea to keep the chicken’s girl. I bet Clucky went crying to daddy. The king’s love and kindness makes him weak. That fool sent his entire guard to look for her. Now look, we have the castle all to ourselves. The royal treasure will be ours! Mwah ha ha,” He laughed greedily.

They scaled the walls and hopped over the edge. They quietly snuck inside. No one was in there either! The castle seemed completely empty.

“You were right, Dain. The king dispatched his entire Knight Brigade for the bird. This’ll be a piece of cake.”

They followed the map down several empty corridors. According to the map, they were approaching the treasury. Only a few more corridors to go. Abruptly, the raccoon froze in place.

“What are you doing? Hurry up!” Dain rushed.

“Wait. Look. The sign over this door says *Royal Treasury*,” said Bardo.

“It doesn’t matter. The map says the treasury is further down. We have to go.”

The raccoon’s curiosity got the best of him. Slowly, he pulled the door open inch by inch.

“Bardo! Stop! This isn’t right! The map says it’s the dungeon. We have to go!”

“That map was written centuries ago, Dain. Maybe they’ve rearranged since then. This sign clearly says it’s the treasury.” He poked his masked raccoon face through the doorway and peeked inside. “Hmm...”

“What is it?” asked the possum.

“It’s another long, narrow hallway with a door at the end. That door also has a sign saying *Royal Treasury*. Let’s go look.”

“No! We’re following the map. That’s final! Do you understand me?” barked Dain.

Bardo wasn’t listening. He was too greedy to pass up a room labeled treasury. He had to know what was behind that door. He inched closer and closer in a daze. He could feel the treasure inside calling to him. “Maybe they accumulated so many riches that they ran out of room in the original treasury. This one’s probably bigger,” he said dreamily.

Dain fumed in anger as Bardo wasted precious time.

Bardo tried opening the door, but it was too heavy. This door must have been made from solid rock. He tried with all his might, but it wouldn’t budge. “Dain, it’s stuck. Come help me!”

“No! Stick to the plan! Let’s go!” he argued.

“Dain, this is the treasury. Help me!”

The possum gave in and hurried to help. Together they pushed it open and went inside. The room was completely dark. They couldn't see anything. They fumbled forward, feeling around for piles of treasure. After they took several steps, the door suddenly slammed shut behind them. The bandits huddled together in fear.

“What's happening?” whispered Bardo.

“How should I know?” snapped Dain.

Suddenly, torches lit up around the room. This definitely wasn't the treasury. The map was right—they were in the dungeon! The Knight Brigade circled around them hungrily. The fierce cats were crouched to pounce, their sharp fangs bared ferociously. The bandits were crippled with fear. Kiowynn marched forward and retrieved the castle's map from the possum's trembling paws. When she walked out of the way, the knights sprung forward. The bandits were never a problem again.

Meanwhile, Luzaro's search party rescued Peckah. As soon as she was reunited with Podrick, he proposed in front of everyone. She clucked and fluttered ecstatically at their engagement, and everyone celebrated the good news.

When things settled down, the usual evening entertainment began. Afterwards the King gathered everyone close for a special announcement. Kiowynn was in her bed at the queen's feet gnawing on a bone. The bells on her multi-colored jester hat tinkled and chimed with each chew. The king summoned Kiowynn. At the sound of her name, the little pug perked her head up, the large bone still hanging out of her mouth. The king and queen fought back their laughter. Kiowynn quickly buried her bone, snorting as she nosed the blankets over her treat. When she finished, she ran before the rulers and sat down, her curly tail wagging.

The king gently cupped her precious face in his hands. "Sweet Kiowynn," he began. "Today you are no longer a court jester." Kiowynn's head tilted to the side, and her big brown eyes looked at him questioningly. He smiled lovingly as he removed her jester hat. He stood up and addressed the members of the court: "Today we celebrate Kiowynn for her bravery, courage, and wisdom. Though she is small on the outside, she accomplished an incredible feat- saving the kingdom twice. Even when we didn't believe her, she risked everything to keep us safe. Thank you, Kiowynn, for your loyalty and love. You deserve a place far greater than that of court jester. By the power given to me as king of Crescent Ridge, I hereby knight Kiowynn the pug and appoint her as Commander In Chief of my entire Knight Brigade."

Drawing his sword, the king touched both of her shoulders with the tip of the blade. The castle erupted in cheers. They scooped up the little pug and passed her around for hugs and kisses. In the entire kingdom of Crescent Ridge, Kiowynn the pug was the greatest, noblest, most dearly loved hero of all time. At Kiowynn's request, Carmen moved to the castle. The three friends went on many more wonderful adventures together, and they lived happily ever after.

The End. ♥