

Grades 5–6: 3rd Place
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Human Traits

“I just don’t understand,” whispered Jane, pushing her glasses up on the bridge of her nose and peering at the newspaper in front of her. “Who took those people?”

“I know,” Paul replied, “and what’s the point? They didn’t even know each other and if one wanted company, they could have made some better choices.”

“I don’t even see how the kidnapper could have gotten in. I mean, the first night they got through a seventh-story window without making a sound, and the gashes in the windows don’t exactly tell us much,” sighed Jane.

“Nor do the odd footprints on the fifth floor and the forced door in the second building,” added Paul. “There was no trace in the third house.”

The two children sat around a small wooden table in their town library and discussed the abduction of three townspeople: Peter Smith, a businessman who had made his money through a series of hostile takeovers; Gerald Eden, a personal injuries lawyer; and Sarah Johnson, a gossip columnist for the newspaper. After several hours of discussion, the children decided to sneak out that night and look at the sites of the abductions.

They spent the rest of the day searching for two flashlights, hiking boots, jackets, trail-bars, cameras, pocketknives and backpacks to stow everything else in, but as they searched, Jane started to have misgivings. “I just don’t think it’s safe,” she said, pulling her long dark hair away from her face.

“It will be fine; don’t worry—all we are doing is looking at the clues, because no one will let us during the day. We just want to take a peek and then leave,” said Paul in a would-be calm voice, but the look in his gray eyes said that he too was scared.

That night, after everyone else was asleep, the two children snuck out of bed, changed into regular clothes and met in the village square. They crept as silently as possible through town to the place of the first abduction, to examine the open window more carefully.

When they reached the site, Paul looked up at where the window had been and said, “We aren’t going to get any closer than this; no one could climb that wall.”

As the two children gazed up at the window, Jane remarked, “You know, those two gashes look a lot like wing marks to me, but that’s all I can really see from here.”

Just then, the children simultaneously felt chills run down their spines and whipped around to see something disappear into the shadows of a building to their left. “What was that?” whispered Paul.

“Probably just a stray cat,” said Jane, shivering, “But if it wasn’t, we need to be careful.”

“We should go,” whispered Paul.

As they moved on to the next house, the children seemed to become hypersensitive to every sound and movement that occurred. And as they walked they wondered what bird could have kidnapped three full-grown humans. Suddenly, about half way there, Jane’s flashlight went out. Both of them jumped, and again they saw something move, this time only a few feet away. They both felt at that moment like abandoning the mission and returning home, but they both were determined to carry on.

When the two brave children reached the house of Gerald Eden, they ducked under the crime tape and entered through the front door, which was hanging crookedly on its hinges. Reaching the bedroom door, they creaked it open and saw the footprints the newspaper article had described. Then they noticed something that the article had not mentioned: the footprints weren’t oddly shaped at all, but they were clearly scaly. As Jane and Paul bent to examine the footprints, there was a sudden noise from downstairs. The children looked at each other, nodded, and crept slowly toward the noise. They arrived on the bottom floor just in time to see a scaly but human foot leave the front doorway. Again they looked to each other before following this strange creature.

Through the streets and out to the outskirts of town, Paul and Jane followed the creature, rarely catching more than a quick glimpse of it, but from what they saw, it looked like their quarry was part man in form, with a rat tail, snake scales and vulture wings and head. The two children followed, terrified, and soon they came to a small country road which they followed for five minutes before they turned into a small grove of trees. Inside, they found the three missing adults, sitting in a row, enclosed by a strong cage.

Concealed by a large bush, the children watched as the Creature settled down to sleep. As it finally drifted off, Paul pulled out the small camera from his backpack as silently as possible and caught several pictures of the strange animal lying there. Then the two children examined the scene carefully, without leaving their bush. “It must be a cross breed,” said Jane, “but for some reason the pattern of creatures sounds familiar.”

“You’re right. It must have been discussed in that Mythology class we took!” exclaimed Paul.

“I know! Said Jane suddenly. “It’s a Sphinx, there must be different types!”

“I don’t know if I’m up to riddles right now,” said Paul anxiously. “Let’s try to get its prisoners out before it awakens.”

“I guess it’s worth a try,” whispered Jane.

The two children silently moved forward with their pocketknives and prepared to cut the sleeping people free. Jane worked from one side and Paul from the other, and finally the cage came apart in their hands. Ever so gently they woke the sleepers so as not to startle them into making noise. Then the small party began to wend its way up the narrow road, longing for home and bed. Jane was just thinking how nice it would be to be home and safe, when she heard footfalls to her left and stopped short. Paul almost ran into her in the dark and for a second there was pandemonium. A second later all was quiet as they realized the sphinx was standing before them, blocking their path in the dark. A voice emerged from the gloom and growled, “You tried to trick me, but now I’ve caught you. No one leaves here until you have answered my riddle. The sphinx then demanded:

What walks on four legs in the morning,

Two legs in the afternoon
And three in the evening?

“Why, it’s the old standby!” exclaimed Jane, and then hurriedly added, “It’s a human!” With that, the sphinx slunk off, and the small party departed.

The walk back after that was a merry one, but as Jane and Paul returned to their own houses, they shared the same thought: the sphinx was gone, but were they really safe?