

Years 7 & 8

2nd Place: Daniel Booth

Year 8, Carey Baptist College Harrisdale

Orphan

I learned two things about the world before I even knew how to write my name.

First, hunger was an enemy that didn't show mercy. It'd sneak up on you when you thought you were safe.

Second, powerful people could rewrite history, making the dead into heroes, and no one would ever question it.

The first lesson was easy. I spent most of my life running through the streets of Madrid, trying to stay one step ahead of the guards. If you weren't quick, you didn't eat. If you weren't clever, you didn't stay free. And if you weren't ready to fight, you didn't survive long.

The second lesson wasn't something I understood at first. People talked about the battle near Barcelona – the one that changed everything for Spain. They said the prince died there, and Spain became the power it is now. I never liked the stories. They never told the whole truth. Not that it mattered to anyone. The important thing was that Spain had won. And Gabriel Serrano III, some spoiled foolhardy prince, died in the battle.

My parents had sent me to that battle. Told me it was my duty to fight. They'd sent me off like I was just another soldier. The battle changed everything. I ended up an orphan, and no one seemed to notice or care.

The battlefield near Barcelona was pure chaos. Smoke, blood, and dying men all around, though the worst part was the smell. I was too young to be there, but no one cared. They shoved a sword into my hands and told me to fight. So I did.

Now, I'm Diego. Just another orphan, just another thief. The name I used to have didn't matter now.

These were my thoughts as I sprinted across the smooth concrete floors of the market, carrying a seven-kilogram leg of ham under my arm. The butcher whom I'd stolen the meat from, a surprisingly fast man considering his slight frame, raced after me with a meat cleaver tucked into his grip. He looked to be a Chinese immigrant – always more of them in Spain nowadays, with the war between China and India.

The meat cleaver whooshed past me, nicking my ear as it embedded itself into a wooden post only a metre away from me, literally cutting off my thoughts.

I was only a couple of blocks away from Mr. Strikler's Orphanage for Underprivileged Boys. About fourteen of us lived there, ranging from ages eleven to sixteen. I was nearly sixteen, and I'd be kicked out in a few months.

Anyway, I knew how to disappear at the orphanage. And I might've made it except for the bald man standing next to the tavern I was running by, who was kind enough to stick out a leg, sending me flying to the floor.

I heard panting from Mr. Strikler. He ran into view, and his pathetic voice started to attempt to reason with the butcher. Obviously, the man, not speaking Spanish, couldn't understand a word he was saying. Eventually, Strikler, using all two of his brain cells, asked in something close to Chinese, "How much for this?", patting the ham that I still wouldn't let go of.

The butcher mumbled, "Uh, fifty gold."

I looked down at the ham, wondering if the man was trying to rip Strikler off. A label on the packaging identified the meat as *Jamón Ibérico*, a meat so expensive I'd never tried it, at least not after the war.

Strikler huffed reluctantly and said, "I'll pay you seventy for this boy and the meat." The meat-headed butcher, after having to get Strikler to repeat his offer multiple times, finally asked, "Seventy?" and with one final confirmation from Strikler and one final blow to the gut, I got up and walked away to the orphanage, trying not to limp. Mr. Strikler trailed after me, calling, "Not even a thank you?"

I hated him. I know that he saved me from a beating, and I was glad for that, even grateful, but his complete lack of awareness of the advantage and privilege he'd been given made it so easy to resent him. Quite honestly, I was surprised he saved me at all.

I called to him without even turning my head, "No."

He ran to my side and shouted into my ear, throwing spittle all over the side of my face, "An entire ham! What were you thinking?"

I didn't dignify his question with a response until he huffed and said under his breath, "Stupid boy."

That was enough. I strode in front of him and drew myself up to my full height.

Strikler was a short man, so even though I wasn't particularly tall, it was easy to loom over him. He stared up at me, with one eyebrow lifted, unimpressed.

I said, "We have a lot of hungry boys at that orphanage, and it doesn't help that you're illegally selling the charity and government donations."

I intentionally voiced that last part particularly loudly, earning me a hard slap over the head. Strikler looked around nervously. I flashed him a slight grin after I went back to walking by his side, leading him to grab me by the collar and yank me closer, his breath hot with the stench of stale beer as he hissed,

"You'd do well to keep that mouth of yours shut, boy."

"You too," I responded, "your breath stinks."

Strikler's eye twitched, and for a second, I thought he might hit me again. Instead, he shoved me backward with a frustrated grunt.

"Just get inside before I change my mind about saving your sorry ass."

I thought about giving him a hard punch on the nose, but as I was aware that the leg ham was likely to be confiscated by Strikler, staying on his good side seemed like the best way to fill my empty stomach. Not that he was likely to feed any of us orphans before he satisfied his protruding belly, especially after the way I'd already treated him. He'd eat all the food in the market before offering us a stale crumb.

As we entered the orphanage, the smell of old, mouldy bread and damp wood wafted into my nose. Strikler recoiled in disgust, but I inhaled deeply and silently. This smell was familiar. I knew that this scent meant safety – well, at least safety in comparison to the streets.

I still had the ham tucked snugly under my armpit, but as I predicted, that didn't last long. Strikler snatched the ham from under my arm and huffed with the effort. Even minor movements were a struggle for this man.

Strikler smirked at me, no doubt thinking about the amount of money he could sell the ham for, or more likely, how it would taste. He was a pig. Actually, no. That'd be an insult to pigs. I spat on his boot, causing him to rage in anger, drop the ham, and lunge at me. When I simply stepped aside of his path of flight, causing him to crash into a pile of boxes, I smiled to myself.

The other orphans, who'd been lurking in the shadows of the poorly lit hall until that moment, burst into fits of laughter, transforming into cries of terror as Strikler whirled around and roared, though still struggling to untangle himself from the pile of boxes of wheat and grain he'd spilled on himself. We probably wouldn't eat for a few days, but I thought everyone would agree, it was worth it.

He stared at me, his eyes bright with fury. He pointed a thick, shaking finger, as red as his face, at me and said, "You –" He wheezed, brushing away the grainy dust staining his shirt. "You think this is funny, boy?"

I leaned against the wall of the hall, tilting my head slightly, "Well, yeah, a little."

I heard more laughter. Strikler's face darkened as he stared at me. I wondered if he might start chasing me, but no, he wasn't fast enough, and with the rest of the boys watching, I doubted he'd risk making even more of a fool out of himself. He instead settled for another curse. He got up, snagging the ham from where I lay on the floor, and stormed off to his quarters, muttering words not fit for the younger orphans. I wondered if he was going to eat the whole thing himself. Probably.

I turned back to the orphans and shrugged innocently, "Well, that was entertaining."

I waited until the sun had set, and everyone was settling into their beds. Only a few minutes later, the sound of soft snores filled the sleeping quarters. Good, I didn't want to wake anyone, and the noise would mask any sound I might make. I knew this place. I knew every squeaky spot on the notoriously loud wooden floorboards and how to open the door to avoid the hinge's screech.

I rose from my bed silently and made my way towards Strikler's office. Once I'd made it to his door, I attempted to open the latch on his door, only to discover that he'd locked it. Strikler never locked his door, so as not to seem as if he was afraid of us. *So why start now?* I asked myself silently.

I pulled a thin sliver of metal out of my pocket – a filed-down paperclip – and worked the lock as quickly and as quietly as I could. After only a few seconds, the lock gave a dull click, and I pushed open the door.

As I entered the room, I tried not to gag on the stench of old whiskey and mouldy floorboards. I'd never grow used to that smell. My eyes quickly locked onto Strikler – and my ears – he was a boisterous snorer. As I walked past him towards his pantry, I saw it.

A glint of red amongst his donation receipts and other useless documents. As soon as I looked to check what it was, my heart stopped. Red wax. Red wax embroidered with the Spanish coat of arms. A royal seal.

I opened the letter and found a black and white photograph with a glossy lamination. In the middle of the image sat a blank-faced boy wearing a formal uniform. I knew that face. I glimpsed it on the rare occasions when orphans got to see their reflections. In the murky river water, in the broken glass panes that lined the walls of the orphanage. It belonged to me.

The boy – I – looked to be around twelve years old. On his left stood his father, and on his right, his mother, King Rafael and Queen Lucia. Their expressions would have melted the will of even the bravest soldier.

I felt a small inscription along the bottom of the image. It read:

The boy has been assigned to the battalion, as requested.

Let him serve in death what he could not in life.

If my heart had stopped before, now it was beating so hard that it was a wonder Strikler didn't hear it and wake up. I read the letter again, and once more, and over and over until the tears in my eyes forbade it.

I was the prince who was supposed to die in the battle. My parents had sent me to die, and so I had. Gabriel had died, but Diego lived.

I didn't care what happened to Spain now. I only cared that I wouldn't wear the Spanish crown on my head and wouldn't hear them call me by my real name ever again. I felt myself running. Running through Strikler's door, then through the door of the orphanage. Running, and running.

I knew what I had to be. Not a prince, not an orphan, not a soldier. A ghost.

And so, I would be.