

Junior Short Story – Winner 2026

PRINCE

By Octavia Ford

“And the prince married the princess and they all lived happily ever after.” Five-year-old Prince Siegfried Theophilus Horatio Charming cuddled up closer to his mother in contentment. “Mummy, why do so many stories about brave princes and beautiful princesses end in ‘happily ever after’? Will that happen to me?” His mother slipped a dainty arm round his shoulders. “Of course, Sieg!” she assured him. “That always happens to young princes. Haven’t you heard the story of your father and me?” A dreamy look spread over her face as she told her favourite story.

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At twenty-one Siegfried had not forgotten his mother’s story. His parents were hinting about him getting married, so, one fine spring day, he saddled his horse, collected twenty knights in shining armour, stuffed all their saddlebags with food and camping gear, and rode off into the blue. It was pleasant riding. The birds were singing, the sky was bluer than it had been in ages, flowers were coming out, and does with wide-eyed fawns were watching them

from a distance. At midday, the company stopped for lunch. That was where things started going wrong.

Nearby, the witches were having their annual meeting. They were exchanging gossip and preparing for their competition, the most fantastic concoction of the year. The empty cauldron was sizzling over the fire. In the dense trees, just outside of the witches' little clearing, the witches' cats were chatting about the scarcity of mice and what a crying, crying shame it was that all the wrens had evacuated the woods. The brooms were stacked in a corner. Even though it was mid-day, it was pitch dark in that part of the forest. The trees were thick on every side, even creating an extraordinarily dense roof overhead that blocked out all the sunlight. The branches all around the clearing were festooned with the witches' hats, all black, crooked apparitions, taken off so that the greasy foreheads could feel what little sticky breeze there was in the forest. Overhead, some bats were flying lazily, woken by the light of the fire. Mabs, the leading witch, was busy laughing over a joke with a series of vicious, malicious, maniacal cackles.

Her under-witch, a very young witch, was trying to calm her down in approved witch fashion, walloping her on the back with a broom stick and yelling in her ear. Quite a racket was being made, but, when Mabs had calmed down and was calling for silence, they heard in the distance songs, friendly shouts, and the rattle of spoons. Siegfried and his men were making a terrible din. The witches' eyes gleamed. Quietly they tiptoed over to the edge of the campground, keeping well in the shadows. Suddenly, a young, energetic witch called Prunice snatched up the cat nearest her and hurled it into the centre of the hubbub. It landed on Siegfried's lap with its claws out. Being very sharp, they dug through his fine leather breeches and into his thighs. Siegfried yelled and leaped in the air, swiping at the cat. The cat yowled, sprang upwards and took a very firm grip on his wrist. Another cat had been hurled into the clearing. This one fixed itself on a different knight. This had all happened so fast that the other knights were startled, rather at a loss for what to do. One drew his sword but got a cat to the back of his neck and forgot about it. Mabel, a very small witch who tended to get rather caught up in things, was about to hurl her broom into the clearing and had to be restrained. The knights were frantically stuffing things in bags, leaping on their horses and galloping away to rally in a nearby field. A cat landed lightly on the back of a wild looking

black charger and sunk in its claws. The horse neighed and galloped away, cat still hanging on. The black horse startled the other horses, who followed him across three hedges, round a herd of cows, through several trees (missing them by inches), and over two ditches, to stop very suddenly, landing their chalk-white riders in a babbling stream. By this time every other cat had retreated, and the knights were too scared to try to approach the witches. Within half an hour, however, the prince had gathered all his bedraggled knights from streams and trees, and they hastened along the road. As evening was coming on and the road began to wind into dense thickets and clumps of trees, Siegfried led his tired knights over to a small gingerbread hut just off the path. He knocked politely on the door and waited until it was opened by a gnarled old woman who had on a ragged patched dress, a filthy apron, and a wooden spoon in her hand. She was charred and black. She was leaning on a stick.

“Well?” inquired the old woman. Siegfried nervously asked the way towards the lair of the Dragon of Loch Hammock. “Nothing to do with children, is it?” she asked hopefully.

“Why?” asked Siegfried suspiciously.

“I like children, but I can’t eat a whole one,” said the witch.

“No...no definitely not,” said Siegfried hurriedly.

The witch gave directions, then marched back inside her house. Siegfried called his knights, and all of them jumped on their horses and rode off.

Tired as they were, none of the knights had any wish to spend the night anywhere near the old witch’s gingerbread house. It was getting dark, but they were not yet ready to camp. Siegfried wanted to push on to the lake and, seeing that would be a nice spot to camp, the knights agreed. So they switched on their horse-mounted flashlights and continued.

Whether it was by coincidence or because the witch in the gingerbread house had warned them, the witches just happened to be having aerobatics practise on that road at about the same time that Siegfried came along. They were all over the road, in the most literal sense of the word, zooming, diving, swerving, loop-the-loops, and, because of the trees, they could not be avoided. They were spectacular to watch, but the knights were tired and fractious, not in the mood to watch a performance that was blocking their path, late at night when their camping place was still some way away. Siegfried stopped his horse and held up his hand for peace. The witches hovered in the air, making an impassable wall.

“Well?” inquired a witch just above his head. She looked down at him threateningly.

“We wish to pass,” said Siegfried. A witch cackled.

“Well, you’re not going to,” said another one. Siegfried sighed.

“Ladies, ladies, we do not wish to have to resort to violence, but we may have to if you do not allow us to pass. We wait for no man.”

The witch above him eyed him.

“Make up your mind, will you?” she retorted. “Are we ladies, are we men, or are we none of the above?”

Siegfried was tired. He was losing control of his temper. “Move!” he shouted. “Or we will make you!”

A witch on the bottom row, hovering just above the ground, left her place and flew upwards. She whispered to the witch who had been talking. A wicked smile broke across their faces.

“Where are you going?” inquired the witch.

“To Loch Hammock,” said Siegfried resignedly.

Remaining in a wall, the witches levitated upwards like a portcullis, then zoomed off into the blackness. Siegfried and his men went on their way.

They were almost at their camping place. They could just see the trees opening out ahead. Suddenly, there was a scuffle in the trees, and a red light flashed on in the path in front.

“Halt!” shouted a voice.

Siegfried groaned. He rode on a little way until he could see what was happening. A desk was set up in the middle of the road. Three witches were at the desk. A large piggy bank was on the desk.

“Tollbooth!” hollered the middle witch. “Each of you must pay ninepence as you ride past.”

Siegfried bristled.

“Definitely not! You will get out of the way of the prince, or you will be run through with our spears. Take your pick.”

More witches marched out of the trees. Siegfried took this for an answer.

“Forward, men!” he bellowed. Brandishing his spear, he spurred his horse and

galloped forward. Oof! A broomstick hit him in the chest. Behind him, the knights frantically tried to stop their horses colliding. The column halted with a squeal of brakes. The witches were still standing with their broomsticks lowered. He tried riding forward again and hacking at the broomsticks, but he got a cat in the face for his efforts.

Siegfried and company paid.

They continued on their way. It was midnight by the time they set up their tents, lit a watch fire, rolled up in their blankets and fell asleep. Siegfried woke late, leapt out of bed, and roused his knights. They ate a hurried breakfast and started the long trek up Ben Hammock. They had to make their own path. No plants were in their way because everything had been burnt out, but the ground was rough and rocky, not to mention steep. By the time they had dragged up their belongings and horses over the final cliff, it was midafternoon. They found a sheltered gully that was not burnt and even had a stream running through the middle. There they made their camp, ate a meal and rested before having an early night.

The next day, they woke with the sun, took their weapons and set out to rescue the princess. Everything was still; not a breath of wind stirred the air, and no bird or beast moved. And then they saw it. Far away in the distance, a huge expanse of water lay. On the other side was a towering mountain of rock with smoke rising and wafting away gently. All hearts sank.

“Now for it,” said Siegfried. “You brought the ropes?”

A murmur of voices answered in the affirmative. They crossed the last stretch of land, then began tying ropes together in order to cross the water. They tied one end of the completed rope round a charred and blackened tree stump, looped the other end, and threw it clear across the water. They did this three times before it caught on something, then they tested it, and, finding it secure, began sending men across. The other side was dead and bare, and it stank. Skeletons were strewn across the rocks and from the mouth of a dark, dank, but truly massive cave a human skull hung from a rope, grinning in the despair of a long dead prince.

Siegfried clenched his sweating hands and said grimly, “Come on. Let’s get it over with.”

They filed in silently. A glow showed at the end of the tunnel. Dreading every step, they went on. The tunnel opened. They peeked into the huge room. There lay the dragon. He

was snoring softly in peaceful slumber. They formed around him, and at a sign from Siegfried, stabbed him. He woke, let out a breath of fire, lashed his tail, and, spraying gore everywhere, writhed. A battle ensued. It was short and sweet. Everyone was covered in muck, but the dragon died. Letting out whoops of delight, they followed Siegfried up the long winding staircase. An oaken door was at the top. Siegfried opened it. There, in a small room, was sitting a beautiful flaxen haired princess. Her large blue eyes turned towards them. Siegfried went towards her.

“My darling,” he said. “Tomorrow morn you’ll be my bride!”

The princess’s pink cheeks went white. Her lips quivered.

“You.....killed the dragon?” she questioned in a faltering voice.

Siegfried nodded, enjoying the splendour of victory. The fragile face crumpled. Tears spurted from her eyes.

“You killed him!” she sobbed. “He was my boyfriend!” She dissolved into her tears. Siegfried stared in horror at the puddle on the floor that the love of his life had turned into.

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Prince Siegfried went on to write many books, including the best-sellers, *The Joys of Bachelorism*, *The Single Prince*, and *Who Needs a Queen?*