

“What’s this, Grandma?” a 4-year old Steven asked. His mom had brought him and his sister Sarah – barely a year old – all the way from Atlanta, Georgia, to Cincinnati, Ohio, to visit their grandparents, a Christmas tradition. They were unwrapping presents, and the one Steven had just opened was... well, he didn’t know what it was. It looked like a notebook, only the pages weren’t lined like loose-leaf, and flipped upwards instead of to the left.

Steven’s grandma smiled, patting him softly on the head. “It’s a sketchpad,” she said. “A place where you can draw whatever you’d like. Your mother’s been telling me how much you love the colored pencils Santa got you, so I wanted to get something you could use them on.”

“Good idea,” Steven’s mom said from the couch, holding Sarah as she messily ate her baby food. “Better than using printer paper.”

“Do you draw, Grandma?” Steven asked, staring in wonder at the blank pages. He had so many ideas about what to draw first he didn’t know where to start!

“Your grandpa does. He’s excellent.” She looked around the room, like a pirate out on the ocean searching for land. “Where is he, anyway? Still in the bathroom?”

Steven laughed. Being as young as he was, even mentioning the bathroom was hilarious.

“Steven!” his mom said, giving him a strange look. Steven wasn’t sure why. “Be nice. No more potty jokes, remember?”

“But I didn’t make a potty joke!” Steven said, laughing even harder.

“Oh, leave my grandson alone,” his Grandma said, kissing his cheek.

Sarah bubbled with delight, spitting up baby food in the process. Steven was laughing so hard now that he dropped the sketchpad and was rolling on the floor.

“What’s so funny, Steven?” Grandpa asked. Steven hadn’t noticed him walk in, but upon hearing his voice, laughing turned to wheezing.

Confused but happy, everyone in the room joined in with Steven, laughing just because he was laughing.

It was the best Christmas ever, and the first picture Steven drew in the sketchpad was of everyone sitting around the Christmas tree, tears of joy rolling down their faces as they laughed and laughed and laughed.

Remembering this memory now, Steven could only cry tears of sadness.

“Don’t be such a baby, Steven,” Sarah said, patting his head much like their grandma had on that day. “We’ll see Grandma and Grandpa next year.”

Steven sniffled, trying to calm down. The old sketchpad was on his lap. He’d filled its pages long ago, but it was special to him. By the time he’d reached its final page, on which he’d drawn a fairy and her pet snow leopard, he knew that he wanted to grow up to be an animator. There had been many sketchpads since then, and Steven’s artistic ability had grown much, but this was his first...

A fresh round of tears crawled down his face. He just couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing his grandparents for Christmas, not when they’d had such an influence on his passion for illustration – not to mention that not seeing them would break routine. Steven had gotten way better about that since the incident in the forest, but he still had his tendencies.

Someone knocked on the door. “Steven?” His mom walked in.

“Not now, Mom,” he said, slumping over on the bed. He and Sarah shared a room, but she was currently on his bed, attempting to comfort him.

Despite his protest, Steven’s mom crouched in front of him so that they were face-to-face even though he had laid down. “I know how much you’re going to miss Grandma and Grandpa this year,” she said. “Sarah and I will miss them too.”

“Why can’t we go?!” he yelled, grabbing his pillow and slamming it over his head so he didn’t have to look at anyone.

Gently, his mother lifted the pillow enough to look at Steven with one eye, like a telescope. She used to do it all the time when he was younger to cheer him up. It still worked, and Steven smiled as his mom removed the pillow. She brushed a strand of hair out of his eye.

“Your mom has been working very hard this year,” she said, “but there’s just not enough money to afford plane tickets for all of us. We can still call or video chat with them. I know it’s not the same, but... scooch over, would you?” Steven sat up, making room for her.

“He doesn’t get it, Mom,” Sarah chimed in. “I keep saying we’ll see them next year.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Mom said, reaching over and kissing her daughter on the forehead. “You remind me of myself when I was your age. I took care of Uncle Ike just like you take care of Steven.”

“Really?” Steven asked. Uncle Ike lived in California, so they didn’t see him often, but Steven always enjoyed his company. He did magic tricks, and prepared new ones every time they saw each other.

“Really,” Mom said. “The only difference is that Uncle Ike listened to me. But you!” She tickled Steven’s stomach, causing him to fall back laughing. “You’d better start listening to your sister more often!”

“Stop, stop!” Steven said in between laughs. He’d draw this scene later, he knew.

When she finally stopped, Sarah spoke up. “Next year for sure though, right, Mom?”

“Yes. Next year for sure.” She stood up, and as Steven looked at her, he realized just how much he loved his mom. She wasn’t very pretty, but she was strong and kind. Whenever Steven had trouble at school, she was there to help in a jiffy.

Wait... “in a jiffy?” Where had Steven heard that phrase before recently?

“I’m going to bed,” Mom said. “I know you two will be up since it’s Friday, so try not to make too much noise, alright? I haven’t slept well recently.”

“You hear that, Sarah?” Steven asked his sister.

“I only get loud because you annoy me,” she said, crossing her arms and marching over to her own bed. “So just... don’t annoy me.”

Blowing kisses, their mom shut the door. When Steven was sure she’d shut her own bedroom door, he smiled widely at Sarah. He’d remembered where “in a jiffy” came from.

“What’s that Joker grin for?” She narrowed her eyes for some reason. Reading facial expressions had never been Steven’s strong point, and never would be. “You’re creeping me out.”

“I think,” Steven said, “we can see Grandma and Grandpa this year after all.”

Steven waited for Sarah to respond, but she only raised an eyebrow. After about a minute, she rolled her eyes and said, “What’s this brilliant idea?”

“Remember that rock we threw under the waterfall? Grayson?” Steven asked. Sarah leaned forward, her mouth dropping open. “Uh... Sarah?” But Sarah didn’t move. She seemed locked in place, mouth and eyes opened wide.

Just as she was about to answer, Steven’s old sketchpad began to vibrate. Shocked, he chucked it across the bed.

“Don’t tell me the sketchpad is about to start talking,” Sarah mumbled, covering her eyes.

“Not quite,” a young woman’s voice said from the direction of the sketchpad.

The pages turned by themselves – faster and faster – to the fairy and snow leopard that Steven had drawn on the final page. Since he’d drawn them so long ago, they didn’t look very good, but they were... *changing*, right before Steven and Sarah’s very eyes. Sparkles of energy

rose from the paper like reverse snowflakes, and Steven's work transformed from childish doodle to lifelike illustration to...

Reality!

It all happened in the span of a few seconds, but there they were: a real, live snow leopard, curling up comfortably on the floor between Steven and Sarah's beds, and a fairy, her silver wings flapping as she floated above her pet. She wasn't a tiny fairy like Tinkerbell, either, but a woman, probably around the same age as their cousin Fatima, Uncle Ike's daughter, who'd graduated college last year. Noticing the snow leopard was right below her, she hovered to the side before landing.

"Hello, Steven, Sarah," she said with a smile. "Long time no see."

"Um..." He scratched his head, unsure of what to say. His vision trailed down towards the snow leopard; its sapphire blue eyes were trained on Sarah, who suddenly shivered like she was cold. It was definitely cold outside, but Mom kept the house warm enough, so...

The fairy-woman laughed. "Oh, Abiral doesn't bite. Do you, boy?" She crouched down and pet the spotted feline, who purred in response. "Want to pet him?"

Steven loved cats, and loved going to the zoo even more, so he hopped down from the mattress and –

Sarah stood in the way, arms blocking his path.

"Come on, Sarah," he said. "It's just a snow leopard."

"And Grayson was *just* a talking rock!" she said, not yelling but not sounding very friendly. She knew Mom was probably asleep by now. "You asked me if I remembered him, and you know what? I do remember. I remember him trying to manipulate and hurt you." She started tearing up unexpectedly. "I won't let that happen again."

“This isn’t Grayson, though,” Steven said, confused.

The fairy stood. She was actually much taller than Steven realized – definitely taller than his mom, who barely broke five feet. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but this Grayson you speak of…”

“Shut up!” Sarah yelled, this time not controlling her volume. “We don’t know you, and we can’t trust you.” She grabbed Steven’s hand and squeezed it tight.

“Ow! Let go, Sarah!” Steven said, shaking his hand from her grip.

“I’m sure Sarah didn’t mean to hurt you, Steven,” the fairy said. “She only wants to protect you. Just like Abiral wants to protect me.” The leopard growled, a low rumble.

“Grayson knew our names, too, you know,” Sarah pointed out, “and he turned out to be a bad guy.”

The fairy sighed. “The only reason I know your names is because I’ve lived in Steven’s sketchpad for almost ten years. I know you both quite well.”

Sarah crossed her arms, stepping aside. Without hesitation, Steven sat cross-legged on the floor and began rubbing Abiral’s tummy – which was somehow even softer than Fuzzybottom’s (the class hamster’s) tummy. The big cat seemed happy.

“My name is Cybele,” the fairy continued. “I apologize for not introducing myself sooner.”

“Cybele?” Steven asked. “Like the goddess I learned about in history class!”

Cybele chuckled. “Yes, though I am not her. Would you like to pet Abiral too, Sarah?”

Sarah sat on her bed, sticking her tongue out at the fairy.

“Sarah!” Steven said. “Mom said –”

“I *know* what Mom said,” Sarah said, cutting Steven off. “But until Cybele proves she’s not an evil monster, I don’t care how cute and cuddly Abiral is.”

Abiral lowered his ears and bared his teeth at Sarah. Somehow, Steven could tell the snow leopard was angry. He only wished he could read human expressions that well.

Sarah shifted backwards, but Cybele sat next to her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. Like I said, Abiral doesn’t bite. He wouldn’t hurt anyone unless he thought I was in real danger. He can understand everything we’re saying, though, so choose your words carefully.”

The cat relaxed, stretching out. Cybele’s words soothed him. Steven looked into the leopard’s eyes and wondered why he didn’t draw animals more often.

“Good idea, Abiral!” The fairy stretched too, wings included. They went more up than out, so there was no risk of them hitting Sarah despite sitting so close. “Ah! We both find stretching a great way to relieve stress.”

Steven stretched on the floor next to Abiral, mimicking the way the leopard let his paws dangle. Abiral licked Steven’s face like a kitten might.

“*I* find,” Sarah said, in the same sweet voice she once used with Grayson, “that proving you’re not a maniac relieves *my* stress.”

Cybele smiled, patting down her wings. “I don’t know this Grayson you mentioned earlier, or what he did to you, but I am not him.”

“Well... yeah.” Steven sat up, leaning against his bed. Cybele was nice, but he still wasn’t sure how to interact with her. This always happened when he tried making new friends.

“But you intended to use his power to see your grandparents, didn’t you?” Cybele asked Steven. “That’s what you were planning on telling Sarah earlier.”

“Mm-hmm,” Steven said.

Sarah nodded, a frown on her face. Surprisingly, she stayed silent.

“This is just a theory,” Cybele said, “but I believe Grayson somehow sensed how upset you were and brought me to life.”

“How?” Steven asked. “He’s under a waterfall.”

“I’m not sure, but there’s... *power* in the air.” She clapped her hands together. “Speaking of power, do you remember what you imagined for me when you first drew Abiral and I, Steven?”

Steven didn’t have a great memory, but when it came to art, everything was crystal clear. Suddenly, the prospect of talking to the fairy didn’t seem so hard after all. “Of course I do!”

Sarah looked back and forth between them, not in on the secret. “Spit it out! What evil powers did you give them? Fire breath? That’d be a *big* help.”

“Stop it, Sarah,” Steven said. “How could someone like Abiral be evil?” He rubbed the leopard’s tummy again, feeling the soft fur between his fingers.

Sarah crossed her arms, breathing out her nose like a rhino about to charge. “Just tell me.”

“Together, Cybele and Abiral can transport any object anywhere they want! But they can only do it once in their whole lives.”

“That’s... a weird power,” Sarah said. “Why only once?”

“At the time I drew them, I wanted a PS4 really badly.” Steven shrugged.

“You could’ve just...” Sarah smacked her forehead. “You know what? Never mind. Assuming this is true – and assuming they can actually do it – how does it help us? If they transport us to Grandma and Grandpa’s, how are we getting back? And how do we explain that we got there in the first place?”

“I think I know what Steven has in mind,” Cybele said, pressing her wings together.

Steven smiled. “Can you wait a day, then? Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve, so I’ll send it then.”

“Send what?” Sarah asked. “Send *what*?”

“You’ll see, Sarah,” Steven said. “I need your help, anyway.”

She shook her head. “You’re like a completely different person when it comes to drawing, you know that?”

Cybele laughed. “There are more sides to Steven than most people realize,” she said. “You know that better than anyone, Sarah.”

“Yeah. I guess I do.” She slid off her bed and opened the door slowly, checking that their mom wasn’t outside. The coast clear, she looked back at Abiral. “How’d you like a bowl of milk, kitty cat? I can’t stand how cute you are anymore.”

Abiral perked up, thumping his tail with glee as Sarah left the room.

“Your sister is a wonderful, understanding person,” Cybele said. “She loves you very much.”

“I know,” Steven said. Now that they weren’t talking about drawing, he found it hard to talk to Cybele again, but he tried anyway. “I realized that when we met Grayson.”

Cybele nodded, pumping her wings and landing softly on the floor. “Once Abiral drinks his milk, though, we’ll have to hide. Can’t have your mother seeing us.”

“Why not?” Steven asked. “I’m sure you two would get along.”

The fairy looked like she was about to say something, then changed her mind. Sarah walked back in at the same time, placing the milk down for Abiral. He lapped it up happily with his tongue, finishing the whole thing in seconds. Sarah laughed, scratching the leopard’s neck. “You’re cuter than any of the boys at my school. No competition!” Abiral purred happily in response.

“We’ll hide on the roof,” Cybele said. “The cold won’t bother us.” With that, she lifted Abiral like she was lifting a kitten, opened the window, and flew up towards the roof, wings shining in the moonlight. She was so quiet about it that Steven and Sarah didn’t hear her touch down.

Sarah looked at her brother. “So... what’s this master plan? Grayson had better not be involved.”

Steven smiled, taking out a fresh sketch pad and his pencils. “I’ll show you.”

The siblings worked throughout the night and into the next day.

Late on Christmas Eve, Cybele and Abiral returned. “Ready?” the fairy asked.

“Ready,” Steven and Sarah said together.

Knowing they wouldn’t be able to see Grandma and Grandpa this year didn’t mean they couldn’t give them a present. It took a whole day, but the siblings were proud of the final product. Steven redrew Cybele and Abiral, adding flourishes he never could have as a child: a snowy mountain in the background, swirls of magic flowing around the peak. The fairy and her snow leopard floated above the siblings, their mom, and their grandparents, who sat around a Christmas tree unwrapping presents with smiles on their faces. Honestly, it was the best picture Steven had ever drawn.

Sarah’s part, a freeform poem along with a short letter, was written on the back in a lighter pen that wouldn’t bleed through the page. She got good grades in English class and their grandparents would recognize her handwriting right away, so it was the perfect job for her. It went like this:

The fairy and her leopard look down from the mountain

The smiles of the family below they are counting

A mother, her children, and the ones they come from

Unwrapping Christmas presents, anything but glum

*It's a scene they've all seen many times before
Yet each year, it feels like something new is in store
This year, however, the family couldn't get together
Sadness washing over them like unpleasant weather*

*So the fairy and her leopard decided to help
For sadness was something with which they'd both dealt
They knew what it was to miss those you love
Their hearts flying off like two misplaced doves*

*Using their magic, their spells, their mysterious powers
They did in mere seconds what should've taken hours
Connecting the family, together again at last
Happiness restored, sadness long passed*

*Grandma and Grandpa,
We miss you very much, but we hope this drawing and poem put smiles on your
faces this Christmas. See you next year!*

Love,

Steven and Sarah

“It’s beautiful,” Cybele said. An adorable purr from Abiral said he agreed. “Your grandparents are going to love it.”

“Before you and Abiral do your thing,” Sarah said, “we should put it in an envelope. Grandma and Grandpa might be a little suspicious if a random gift from us appears out of nowhere.” She pulled out a big yellow envelope from behind her back.

“Where’d you get that?” Steven asked.

“Let’s just say I... *borrowed* it from Mom’s office,” she said with a weird smile.

“Oh, okay,” Steven said. “We’ll make sure Grandma and Grandpa send it back, then.”

Sarah and Cybele laughed. Steven wasn’t sure what was so funny, but he laughed with them anyway.

With the gift secured in the envelope, Cybele motioned for the siblings to stand back. “We’ll deliver it straight to your grandparents’ mailbox,” she said.

“I guess this whole thing could’ve been avoided if we’d sent a gift in the mail, huh?” Sarah said. Steven nodded.

“Well, you two didn’t know you wouldn’t be seeing your grandparents until yesterday,” Cybele said. “There wasn’t much time.”

Reminded of the fact that they had to wait a whole year to see their grandparents again, Steven frowned deeply. He didn’t even care about routine being broken at this point; he just missed his family.

Noticing his silent tears, Cybele kneeled in front of him so that they were face-to-face, much like his mother had done yesterday – minus the pillow over his head. “Just because they’re not here doesn’t mean your grandparents aren’t in your heart, always.”

Sarah choked up, crying quietly. “This is beginning to sound like a Disney movie...”

Cybele pulled Sarah over, and embraced the siblings tightly. “What you’re doing is amazing. Remember that.” Letting them go, she stood tall, once again motioning Steven and Sarah

out of the way. “Once we do this, Abiral and I will turn into drawings once again. We’re going to miss you, too.”

With the envelope on the floor between her and the leopard, she made complex motions with her hands – almost like drawing, Steven thought. Abiral made similar motions with his tail. The two looked at one another, and their eyes glowed like stars. And then, just like that, they – along with the envelope – vanished in a flash of light.

Sarah ran up to Steven, hugging her brother like she’d never get another chance to. “Merry Christmas, dummy.”

He hugged her back. “Merry Christmas.”

They usually had trouble falling asleep on Christmas Eve, but that night, the siblings slept better than they ever had, dreams of a fairy and her snow leopard filling their heads.