Lesson 5. The Bee Day

Some students my age like to play sports. Others love fashion or computer games. As for me, spelling bees are my biggest passion. Every day after school, I sit on the front steps of my house reading through my old dictionary. My training pays off when I get what my friends can hardly spell.

It’s 6:30 on a Friday morning. As soon as I open my eyes, I feel butterflies in my stomach. To calm my nerves, I remind myself of the fact that I’m one of the best spellers in my grade. In fact, I’m not aiming to win the national competition. All I want is to beat my biggest rival, Dan, at the school’s spelling bee. His passion for spelling isn’t as strong as mine, but he seems to be a good speller without putting much effort into it. Actually, his true interest lies in math and science. I bet he’ll be out in the first round, especially if he gets a literary word like “metamorphosis.”

My dad is already making breakfast in the kitchen. I tell him how nervous I am while he puts scrambled eggs onto my plate.

“Can you quiz me on some words, Dad?”

“Sure, Olivia. Let’s start with a hard one. ‘Serendipitous.’”

I make a face. “Well, that’s too easy for me. S-E-R-E-N-D-I-P-I-T-O-U-S.”

“Yes, you got it! How about ‘narcissism’”


“I’m afraid that’s wrong.”


“Sorry, dear. That’s not the answer. You can look it up in the dictionary if you want.”

I hurry to my room and get out my dictionary.

“K ... L ... M ... N!” I search the page and find it: narcissism.

I close the book and walk back to the kitchen.
"You were right," I say sadly sliding back into my chair.

"Oh, cheer up. Now you'll know how to spell it if you get it at the bee today."

At school, I spend the whole morning staring at the clock. The spelling bee is after lunch and I can't wait. The first class is math, which is Dan's favorite. Mr. Steven writes an equation on the board: $2a \times a = b$.

"What's a shorter way to write this?" Mr. Steven asks. Dan raises his hand right away and Mr. Steven calls on him to answer. "2a squared equals b," he says.

"That's right! Olivia, can you explain why that is?"

I take my eyes off the clock and look at Mr. Steven. "'a' and 'b' are just letters. They're for words. How can you say they equal anything?"

Dan puts up his hand again and says, "There are lots of letters in math, too."

I give him a nasty look. I'm definitely going to teach him what letters really are for this afternoon.

"Is everybody ready?" The bell rings and Ms. Hawking tells everyone to gather around. It's time for what I've been waiting for all day. She reads words from the list she's holding in her hands. There are a lot of bad spellers in my class, so they start dropping out of the competition. After three rounds, only four students are left. Finally, by the fifth round, it's narrowed down to just me and Dan.

"Olivia, your next word is 'studious,'" says Ms. Hawking.


"Excellent! Now, for you, Dan ..., 'tedious.'"


The tension rises as we continue going back and forth. My next word is 'algorithm.'

"A math term?" I'm not so sure about it, but I try anyway.


"I'm sorry, Olivia, but that's not correct. It's 'I' instead of 'Y.' If Dan gets his next word
right, he’ll be the winner. Dan, your word is ‘narcissism.’” says Ms. Hawking.

I can’t believe it! I know that word. It’s the word I couldn’t spell this morning. I bet Dan won’t get it right, either.


My heart drops in disappointment. It’s over. He’s won.

“Congratulations, Dan! You are the winner,” Ms. Hawking announces happily and a huge smile flashes across Dan’s face.

I start to zigzag back to my seat, and then, I feel a hand on my arm.

“Hey, you did a really good job,” says Dan holding out his hand to shake mine.

“‘Algorithm’ is an impossible word. I would never have known it if I hadn’t read math books all the time.”

“Narcissism,” I say weakly.

“Well, that was just lucky. I saw the word ‘narcissism’ in a book of Greek Mythology the other day.”

I’m surprised. “You like Greek Mythology? That’s my favorite! I thought you only read math and science books.”

“I usually do, but I also enjoy reading myths. They’re related to science in some parts.”

“I’ve never thought about that,” I say with a smile.

Dan smiles back. I guess Dan and I have more in common than I thought.