

The Lantern Team.



The Lantern Team

For every young teammate who brings something special—may you listen, help one another, and always find your way back to the light.

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A Challenge in the Blanket Roll

Lina stacked one cushion on another, then added a third sideways to make the pile look like a lopsided castle.

“Picnic supplies,” Eli reminded her.

“Picnic castle,” Lina said.

Their unfinished board game waited on the table. Across the room, Eli checked two backpacks, touching each zipper in order. Lina hummed as she rescued another cushion from beneath a chair. The warm afternoon air drifting through the open window smelled faintly of herbs from the community garden below.

Then Lina saw the camping lantern.

It stood among the picnic things, small and familiar. At once, the

sunny room seemed to hold another evening inside it—the night the power had gone out during their board game. Their grandparents had helped them find blankets, and Lina and Eli had built a shelter by lantern light. Lina had crawled out wearing a cushion on her head.

Eli noticed where she was looking. “Cushion captain,” he said.

Lina touched the yellow hair tie on her wrist and grinned. “You were jealous of my excellent hat.”

“It covered your eyes. You walked into the sofa.”

“The sofa moved.”

Their grandparents laughed from beside the picnic basket. One of them lifted a thick rolled blanket tied with string.

“Could our two helpers take this to the garden setup area?” their grandparents asked. “Put it in the basket there, then come straight back.”



“For more cushions?” Eli asked.

Their grandparents exchanged a look.

“For a special task.”

Lina stopped humming. Suddenly, carrying a blanket downstairs did not sound ordinary at all.

Eli lowered the blanket roll into the garden’s setup basket and

checked that it would not tumble out. “Done.”

Lina stayed beside the basket, watching their grandparents with narrowed eyes. “Not done.”

She was right.

One grandparent produced a yellow envelope. The other pointed to the empty space among the picnic supplies where the camping lantern had been.

“We’ve hidden the lantern at the end of a clue trail,” their grandparents explained. “It winds through the shared parts of the complex. If you follow it together, you should find the lantern before the twilight reading picnic.”

Lina bounced on her toes. Eli looked from the envelope to the winding paths beyond the courtyard. A puzzle sounded much better than carrying supplies. It also sounded like something that needed rules.

“The trail only uses public areas,” their grandparents continued. “Obey every sign, stay on the paths, and never step into the planted beds. Nearby adults can help if you need access or directions—but don’t ask them to solve a clue for you.”

Eli nodded at each rule. Lina nodded too, though rather faster.



Then their grandparents held out the envelope to both of them.

Eli almost took it automatically. He was older. He could keep it flat and make sure nothing was missed. But Lina's hand was already halfway up, her face bright with ideas.

"You hold it," he said. "I'll read with you."

Lina blinked, then grinned. Together they opened the envelope.

The card inside read:

Begin where green leaves flavor the air.
Find the small yellow mark hiding there.

“The herbs!” Lina cried.

“Probably,” Eli said, although he was already smiling. “We check the clue when we arrive.”

They raised their fists and tapped knuckles twice—their signal for a shared task.

“One step at a time,” Eli said.

“One fast first step,” Lina replied.

They hurried side by side toward the courtyard herb labels, while the lantern waited somewhere ahead.



Arrows, Herbs, and Wheels

Warm scents drifted over the courtyard path. Lina smelled mint first, then something sharp and woody. She crouched beside the herb labels, humming as her eyes skipped over green leaves, white signs, and dark soil.

There!

A crooked yellow mark crossed the corner of one label. It bent like a tiny lightning bolt, pointing toward the nearest winding path.

“I found it!” Lina sprang up and raced after its sharp end. Her yellow hair tie bounced against her wrist. She had spotted the mark before Eli had even finished reading. This clue hunt clearly needed quick eyes—and hers were quickest.

“Lina, wait!”

She stopped three turns along, beside a lavender bush buzzing with bees. Eli caught up, holding the clue card carefully by its edges.

“That mark pointed this way,” she said.

“It might,” Eli answered. “But look at the whole clue.”

Lina’s happy fizz shrank. “I did look.”

Eli did not argue. He led her back to the labels and placed the card beside them. Beneath the riddle, in very small letters, were three herb names: mint, basil, rosemary.

“The mark is on mint,” he said. “Now read them in order.”

Lina rubbed her hair tie and crouched again. Mint’s label had the yellow bend. Basil’s label stood farther right, and rosemary’s farther right again. Together, the three labels made a line—not down the winding path, but across the courtyard.

She followed it with one finger.



Straight toward the bicycle racks.

“Oh.” Lina glanced at Eli. “My mark and your order.”

“Both halves,” he said.

That felt much better than being wrong. They hurried across the sunny courtyard together, wheels and silver bars flashing ahead. Lina grinned. The next tiny detail would be hers too—and next time, she meant to solve the whole clue first.

The bicycle racks were crowded with wheels, baskets, bells, and one bright yellow helmet. Eli read the next line on the card: “Count the resting places, then seek the yellow twist.”

“A counting puzzle,” he said. At last, something orderly. He touched each metal space as he counted. “One, two, three—”

“Yellow helmet!” Lina darted behind a green bicycle. “Nothing here. Yellow bell!”

“Four, five—Lina, I need to concentrate.”

“And I need to find the twist. Look, yellow paint!”

“That’s part of the bicycle.” Eli reached the final rack. “Sixteen. We need space sixteen.”

There was no envelope there.

Lina folded her arms. “Maybe because you counted wrong.”

“I counted twice.”



“And I checked every yellow thing.”

They began again, both explaining at once. Eli’s finger traveled along the spaces while Lina listed helmet, bell, paint, sticker—until he noticed a small red notice tied to an empty rack.

OUT OF USE. REPAIR NEEDED.

They had both passed it without looking. Eli had counted it. Lina had searched past it because it was red.

“This one doesn’t count,” Eli said. “So the answer is fifteen.”

“But space fifteen is empty too.” Lina crouched beside it. Then she pointed beneath the rail. “Not completely.”

A tiny twist of yellow thread was knotted around the metal.

Eli smiled despite himself. “Your yellow twist.”

“And your correct count.”

Together they pulled a slim envelope from under the rail. Inside was a card stamped with a little open book.

“Library room,” Eli said.

“I knew the yellow would matter,” Lina said, already starting across the courtyard.

Eli tucked the clue safely into his pocket and followed. He was glad she had spotted the thread. He was also determined to reach the library door first.



The Cushion Captain Returns

Lina reached the library door half a step behind Eli. She decided it did not count as winning if he had longer legs.

Inside, the little room smelled of paper and sun-warmed carpet. Ms. Chen sat at the desk, sorting returned books. She smiled but did not interrupt as Eli opened their clue.

“Where stories rest under covers,” he read. “That means book covers. We should check by category.”

He began with the picture books, sliding each one out just far enough to inspect its jacket. Lina watched him move to animal stories, then adventures. At this speed, the sunflowers would be asleep before they found the lantern.

She read the clue again. Under covers.

Across the room, a soft blanket lay over the reading nook.

“Or it means this!” Lina sprang onto the cushions and wriggled beneath the blanket. Her hand found only a cushion, so she shoved upward and popped out with it balanced on her head.

Eli stared. Then his serious face cracked into a grin. “Cushion captain.”

The words carried them straight back to the power-cut evening—the lantern, the blanket shelter, and Lina crawling out in almost exactly the same ridiculous hat. Lina laughed so hard that the cushion slid over one eye. Even Ms. Chen hid a smile behind a book.

“Captain reports no clue under the blanket,” Lina announced.

As she removed the cushion, she noticed a corner of paper beneath the blanket’s stitched label.



“Wait.”

Eli knelt beside her. Together they eased out a flat envelope containing a folded route guide.

“So,” Lina said, “the wrong cover was nearly right.”

Eli tapped the cushion. “Excellent work, Captain.” This time, neither hurried to be first.

They carried the folded guide into the courtyard, still grinning. Eli expected it to show a simple path to the next clue. Lina held it up between them.

“Let’s open it near the wall,” he began.

But her thumb was already under the fold.

The paper opened with a crackle. Lines, colored dots, and tiny writing flashed into view. Then a warm gust swept between the buildings.

The guide snapped like a little sail.

“Hold on!” Eli grabbed one edge. Too late. Three sections, joined only by small paper tabs, tore apart. One slapped against his shirt. Lina trapped another beneath her sneaker. The third spun over a bench, skipped past a flowerpot, and sailed across the courtyard.



Eli ran after it. The scrap danced just beyond his fingers, turned sharply around the bicycle racks, and vanished.

He stopped, breathing hard. The sunny courtyard suddenly seemed full of hiding places: under benches, behind pots, among rows of wheels. The light had begun to soften, too. Twilight was not here yet, but it was coming.

Lina approached with the two rescued pieces pressed to her chest. "I should have waited."

Eli wanted to say yes. He wanted to list everything they should have done: stand by the wall, check the folds, keep both hands on the guide. Instead, he straightened the two pieces and made their torn edges meet.

“One step at a time,” he said. “First, we search this courtyard. Every bench, every pot, every public path. Together.”

“We could ask our grandparents for another guide,” Lina said quietly.

Eli looked toward the apartment building. A replacement would be easy, but it would not be their clue trail anymore.

“We can find it,” he said. “We caught two.”

Lina nodded. She rubbed the yellow hair tie on her wrist, then pointed toward the bicycle racks. “It went that way.”

Eli folded the two pieces safely and held them tight. “Then that’s where we start.”



Searching Apart

At the bicycle racks, Eli studied the courtyard. Searching together was too slow. Every time he checked beneath a bench, Lina was already three flowerpots ahead.

“We’ll divide it,” he said. “You take the library side. I’ll take the garden side. Then meet back by the bench.”

“Got it.” Lina darted away before he could say which bench.

Eli checked carefully: behind pots, under bicycle wheels, along the edges of the public path. He kept the two rescued pieces folded safely in his pocket. When he reached the wooden bench near the herb path, he stopped.

Lina was not there.

He waited. He checked under the bench again. The courtyard shadows stretched longer. After several minutes, worry began to fizz inside his chest. Had she searched past the library? Had she forgotten their meeting place?

“Lina?”

Across the courtyard, Lina popped up beside a different bench, waving a white scrap. “I found it!”

Eli hurried over. Lina’s grin vanished as she unfolded the paper. It was an old notice about watering days, faded and crumpled.

“You were supposed to meet me,” Eli said.



“I did! At the bench by the library.”

“I meant the herb-path bench. And you were meant to come back when you finished your section.”

“You never said when!” Lina folded her arms. “I was actually searching.”

“So was I. I wasted all that time waiting.”

“Well, I wasted time following your plan!”

The two real pieces crackled in Eli’s pocket as he stepped back. The third was still missing, and now the space between them felt wider than the whole courtyard.

Lina rubbed the yellow hair tie on her wrist. Through the library door, she could see Ms. Chen straightening books. Asking for help would mean admitting their search had gone wrong.

But standing outside arguing was not finding anything.

“I opened the guide too quickly,” Lina said. The words came out small, so she tried again. “The wind caught it because I rushed. I’m sorry.”

Eli’s folded arms loosened. He looked toward the two benches, then down at his shoes. “I’m sorry too. I announced my plan without checking that you understood it. I should have said which bench and when to come back.”



“And we stay together now?” Lina asked.

“We stay together.”

The fizz of annoyance inside her softened. She began to hum, staring at the useless watering notice. Then a question popped into place.

They went inside. “Ms. Chen,” Lina said, “we’re not asking where our clue is. But if a loose paper blows across the courtyard and

someone finds it, is there a place they put it?”

Ms. Chen considered this. “That is a very careful question. The garden volunteers collect stray papers in a blue basket near the herb-path entrance. Your missing piece might be there—but you’ll have to decide for yourselves whether anything you find belongs to your puzzle.”

“Thank you,” Eli said.

Outside again, Lina held out her fist. Eli tapped it once, then twice. Their familiar signal felt better than winning an argument.

“Blue basket,” Lina said.

“One step at a time,” Eli replied.

They crossed the courtyard side by side, leaving both meeting benches behind.



A Map Made of Smells

The blue basket waited beneath a sign shaped like a watering can. Lina hurried the last few steps, then stopped so Eli could reach it with her.

Together, they looked inside.

There were seed-packet corners, a crumpled shopping list, and a notice about Saturday compost. Lina lifted each scrap carefully. No torn edge matched their guide.

“Not here,” she said. The hopeful bounce inside her went flat.

“Maybe we can still learn something.” Eli placed their two recovered sections on the basket’s broad lid. He turned them until their torn edges nearly met, leaving a gap where the missing piece belonged.

Lina crouched beside him. At first she saw only pale paper, broken lines, and colored dots. Then she noticed a dusty green smear near one corner.

She rubbed the yellow hair tie on her wrist and hummed. The smear smelled sharp and piney.

“I think this might be rosemary,” she said. Instead of snatching up the paper and racing toward the plants, she pointed. “Could you check?”

Eli leaned close and sniffed. Then he glanced at the herb labels beside the path. The rosemary label carried a green dot—the same green as the one beside the smear.

“You’re right.”

“And look.” Lina held the paper toward the light. Tiny holes pricked a curving line through it. Farther along sat a bright blue dot and then a purple one. “Maybe those match more labels?”

They walked the short row without leaving sight of the basket. Mint had a blue dot. Lavender had purple. On the second guide section, a soft leaf-shaped stain smelled sweet and cool, exactly like the mint Eli rubbed between two fingers.

Eli returned the pieces to their neat row. “So this isn’t a picture map.”



“It’s a smelling map,” Lina said, then paused. “Or maybe a smelling-and-color map?”

“With pinholes showing the path.” Eli traced the curve without touching it. “We don’t need the third piece to start.”

The gap still waited between the papers, but it no longer looked like a dead end. Lina pointed to rosemary, the first marker they could read.

“We follow what we have,” she said, “and keep watching for what we lost.”

Eli placed the two guide pieces together in his palm. The torn gap bothered him. It was like a puzzle with several missing pieces—except the puzzle smelled of herbs and might blow away again.

“One step at a time,” he said.

Rosemary came first. Its narrow leaves brushed Lina’s fingers as she found a green dot painted on a low wooden post. Eli compared it with the guide.

“Green dot, then three pinholes curving left,” he said.

They took the left-hand bend. Warm stone gave back the day’s heat through their sneakers. Bees drifted among small flowers beside the path, and somewhere in an open apartment a spoon clinked against a glass.

“Mint!” Lina called from ahead. She did not dash around the corner. She waited, pointing to a blue mark on a label.

Eli checked the paper once. The crushed mint scent rose cool and bright from the leaves. “That’s it.”

The next smudge was softer and sweeter. Basil grew in thick green bunches beside a path that curled like a question mark. Lina found its yellow dot; Eli matched it to a faint mark hidden near the torn

edge. After that came lavender, purple-tipped and humming with bees.

Then the path split.

The right branch was wider and seemed to bend toward the far end of the garden. The left was narrow, with no obvious marker. Eli studied both guide pieces. He could check every nearby label, count the paving stones, and trace each curve twice—but the sun had already turned the courtyard walls honey-gold.



“There,” Lina said quietly.

A purple dot no bigger than a freckle marked the side of a stone on the left branch.

Eli looked beyond it. The paving stayed outside the low border around the planted bed. No signs blocked the way.

“The path is allowed,” he said. He folded the guide safely instead of checking the right branch too. “Let’s trust your dot.”

They followed the narrow curve together. Lavender scent faded behind them, and broad green leaves appeared ahead. Then the path opened beside a row of sunflowers, tall enough to look over Eli's head. Their golden faces caught the lowering light.

Lina grinned at him. "Our map works."

"Our map works," Eli agreed, and this time the missing section felt less like a wall than a door they had not reached yet.

The sunflowers nodded above them, their leaves whispering in the warm breeze. Lina searched among the stems for another colored dot. Instead, a flash of white winked from behind the sunflower information sign.

"Wait." She crouched and peered around the sign without stepping off the path.

A square of paper rested against the wooden post, held safely beneath a green volunteer clip. Its torn edge looked wonderfully familiar.

"The third piece!"



Eli hurried over. Lina unclipped it, and for one bright second she expected the whole guide to become a finished map.

Eli spread all three sections across the flat top of the sign. He matched one ragged edge, then another. They fitted—but the dots made a jumble, and the words stopped halfway through.

“That cannot be right,” he said.

Lina rubbed the yellow hair tie on her wrist. Along the edge of the

new piece were three tiny printed shapes: a sunflower, a sprig, and a wheel.

“But we started at the bicycle racks,” she said. “The wheel should come first.”

Eli turned the joined guide around.

Now the symbols ran wheel, sprig, sunflower. The words lined up too. They had been reading the pieces backward.

Lina leaned close while Eli read: “When flowers stretch their shadows long, let the low sun point beyond.”

Below the rhyme was a little drawing of sunflower shadows touching a hidden marker.

“So we found the piece,” Lina said, glancing at the still-short shadows. “But now we have to wait?”

“Not too long.” Eli looked toward the golden sun sinking between the buildings.

The breeze stirred the sunflower heads again. This time Lina did not race after the first shadow she saw. She stood beside Eli, watching the garden slowly prepare their next clue.



Where the Shadows Point

Eli studied the joined guide again. “We should restart at the bicycle racks and follow everything in the correct order. Then we’ll know we haven’t missed a shadow marker.”

Lina stared back along the winding paths. The bicycle racks were far beyond the herbs. By the time they returned, the sun might already be behind the apartments.

Then something flashed beyond the sunflower bed—a small yellow mark on a low wooden post.

“There!” Lina cried. “That has to be it.”

She darted toward the nearest gap between the sunflowers. One sneaker left the path and hovered over the dark soil.

Beside her knee, a garden sign showed a boot crossed out in red: PLEASE STAY ON THE PATH. Tiny green shoots curled beneath the tall flowers. One careless step could squash them.

Lina pulled her foot back so quickly that she wobbled. She caught the signpost instead of stepping into the bed.

Eli reached her with the guide held tightly in both hands. “You stopped.”

“The plants can’t move out of my way,” Lina said. The yellow mark seemed terribly close and completely unreachable. “But we can’t go all the way back either. Look at the light.”

Golden sunshine had climbed halfway up the apartment walls. The sunflower shadows were lengthening across the soil.

Eli looked from the guide to the distant paths. His fingers began straightening the paper edges, then stopped.

“You’re right,” he said. “Restarting would take too long, and it still might not tell us where to stand.” He folded the guide once, carefully, without putting it away. “No shortcut. No full restart.”

Lina rubbed her hair tie. “So what’s the third choice?”

Nearby, garden tools clinked beyond the sunflowers. The cousins turned toward the sound together.



Mrs. Patel was returning hand tools to a cart beside the outer path. Eli nearly called, “Where is the clue?” The question rose right to his lips.

But that would hand over the puzzle. They did not need the answer. They needed to know where they were allowed to look.

He and Lina hurried over together.

“Mrs. Patel,” Eli said, showing her the guide, “does this marked

path go all the way around the sunflower bed?”

“And were the people who hid the clues allowed to go inside the bed?” Lina added.

Mrs. Patel rested a small trowel in the cart. “Those are useful questions. The outer path circles the whole bed, though it bends behind the tool shed. And no clues were placed where visitors must step among the plants. Everything can be reached—or seen—from a public path.”

Eli felt the tight knot in his thoughts loosen. Asking had not spoiled anything. It had removed one wrong possibility.

Mrs. Patel glanced toward the apartment buildings. “Observe carefully before the sun slips behind that roof. Shadows do not wait.” Then she returned to sorting the tools.

“Seen,” Lina repeated. “Maybe we don’t have to reach the yellow mark.”

They followed the outer path. Eli checked each bend against the garden border, while Lina watched through the sunflower stems. Beyond the tool shed, the path widened beside a low herb planter.

“Stop,” Lina whispered.

Eli stopped.

From there, the yellow mark was no longer hidden. A sunflower’s long shadow touched it. Another shadow stretched from the

information sign and crossed the first. Farther ahead, a third dark line pointed toward the winding path.

Eli shifted one step left. The lines broke apart.



He stepped back. They joined again.

“This is the viewing place,” he said.

Lina grinned. “And we found it without flattening one leaf.”

Together they faced the golden garden and waited for the shadows to show them more.

At first, nothing happened.

Lina rubbed the yellow hair tie around her wrist. The sunflowers nodded in the warm breeze, and their shadows wobbled across the path like long, dark ribbons. What if the sun vanished behind the roof before the clue appeared?

Then the tip of one shadow slid over the yellow mark.

“There!” Lina whispered.

The information sign cast a second shadow across it. For one bright moment, the two shadows made an arrow with a sharp golden center.

“It points right,” Lina said.

Eli looked down the path instead of into the flower bed. “Right is clear. Next bend.”

They hurried to the bend and stopped beside the border stones. Lina searched the shifting shapes. A sunflower stem, a plant label, and the corner of a bench slowly joined on the ground.

“Another arrow! Toward the tool shed.”

“Public path goes that way,” Eli confirmed. He touched the sections of the guide in order to keep their place. “That’s two.”

Lina darted ahead three steps, then waited while he checked the bend. Eli caught up, and this time he moved first, leading them safely behind the shed. Lina watched the earth rather than his feet.



“Stop!” she cried.

He froze.

A thin signpost shadow stretched between them. As the sun lowered, its point crept over the path, crossed a patch of gold light, and touched a small green cabinet tucked against the shed wall.

“The last arrow,” Lina breathed.

They followed it together. On the cabinet door was a painted symbol: two small fists, side by side, with two golden lines beneath them.

“Tap twice,” Lina said, smiling.

Eli lifted his fist. They tapped once, twice.

Only then did Lina notice the neat white sign below the symbol.

GARDEN STORAGE. COORDINATOR’S KEY REQUIRED.

Her eyes flicked to the cabinet latch, then toward Mrs. Patel’s cart on the far path. Eli folded the guide instead of reaching for the door.

The shadows had brought them to the right place. The key was not another puzzle.

“Mrs. Patel?” Lina called.



The Room Without Walls

Mrs. Patel looked up from her cart. “Found something?”

Lina held up her wrist. “Maybe my hair tie could hook the latch.”

Eli pictured the thin yellow band snapping into the lock—or the latch getting stuck. For one worried second, he wanted to race back to their grandparents and ask them to explain everything. The sun was sinking. The picnic would begin soon. A complete answer would be easier.

But then it would not be their hunt anymore.

“The sign says we need the coordinator’s key,” he said. “Not a trick for opening it.”

Lina rubbed the hair tie with her thumb, then let her hand drop.

“Right. And we already found the clue.” She pointed to the painted fists. “This symbol brought us here.”

Mrs. Patel came along the path, carrying a small ring of keys. Eli showed her the guide sections while Lina explained how the shadows had lined up.

“We think the next part is inside,” Eli said. “Could you open it for us, please?”

“Opening garden storage is my part,” Mrs. Patel said. “Solving what you find is yours.”

The key turned with a firm click.

Lina leaned forward. Eli expected the camping lantern to shine from the cabinet shelf.

It was not there.

Instead, beside a coil of twine and some clean plant pots, lay two narrow paper strips. Mrs. Patel handed them over, then stepped back.

One strip held scattered letters. The other held broken lines and dots. Neither made sense alone.

Lina looked at Eli. Eli looked at Lina.

They had been given access, not an answer.



Lina turned the letter strip upside down. The letters remained stubbornly scattered.

“Maybe it’s a sentence after every third letter,” Eli said. He tried the dotted strip beside it, above it, then below it. Nothing joined. His hand moved toward the backpack pocket where he kept his checklist.

Disappointment prickled through Lina. They had followed herbs, found the lost guide, waited for golden shadows, and reached the

cabinet before the sun disappeared. Surely the last clue could not be nonsense.

She crouched beside the open door and hummed under her breath. The yellow hair tie slid against her wrist as she tilted the dotted strip. A spark of sunlight flashed through it.

Not dots, she thought.

Tiny holes.

“Wait.” Lina bent closer. The pinpricks made a crooked row, and the letter strip had faint pinpricks too. Her first urge was to snatch both pieces and twist them together. Instead, she held one out to Eli.

“Can you keep this completely still?”

Eli’s fingers paused at his backpack. Then he let the checklist pocket close.

“One step at a time,” he said, but this time it sounded like an invitation. He held the letter strip steady between both hands. “You guide.”

Lina laid the second strip across it. “A little left.”

Eli moved it.

“No—back half a finger. Now turn the top corner toward the sun.”

Mrs. Patel stood quietly beside the cabinet while the cousins worked. The lowering light slipped through one hole, then three. Bright specks danced over Eli's shirt.

"Hold it there!" Lina whispered.



She rotated her strip slowly. Broken lines met scattered letters. More pinpricks aligned, pouring tiny golden beams through the

paper until hidden words appeared in the gaps.

Together they read, “MAKE A ROOM WITHOUT WALLS. UNROLL THE ROOF BROUGHT FROM HOME.”

Lina’s humming stopped. “The blanket!”

“The roll we delivered to the setup basket,” Eli said.

The answer was not in the cabinet. It had been waiting near the garden all afternoon.

Lina carefully separated the strips and gave one to Eli rather than racing off with both. He tucked them safely into the guide.

Then they hurried down the public path together, fast but side by side, toward the rolled blanket and the last warm patch of sun.

The setup basket waited beside a pile of cushions. Beyond it, their grandparents were arranging books for the picnic. They looked up as Lina and Eli arrived, but only smiled. No hints.

Eli reached for the blanket roll, then stopped. After following shadows and rebuilding clues, it would be silly to spoil the last step by rushing.

Lina held out her fist. Eli tapped it twice with his own.

“Room without walls,” she said.

They chose two chairs and a low wooden bench. Lina quickly

tested where the blanket could stretch between them. Eli checked that the chairs stood firmly on the flat path and would not block anyone walking past.

“This way leaves a wider door,” Lina said.

“And this corner needs another cushion,” Eli replied.

Neither said who was leading.

They built together. Lina tucked cushions along the bench while Eli steadied a chair. Eli tied one blanket corner, but when he began making a second careful knot, Lina pointed to the darkening garden.

“One knot is enough there. We still need the roof.”



He gave it one firm tug. “Enough.”

Soon the shelter stood open on two sides, small and snug beneath the gold evening sky. Mrs. Patel came along the path carrying a basket and nodded at their work.

Only the thick rolled blanket remained.

Eli lifted one end. Lina took the other. They raised it above the shelter and unrolled it slowly.

Something hidden in the middle gave a soft bump.

A bundled shape slid down the blanket and landed safely in the waiting cushion pile.

“The lantern!” Lina cried.

Eli laughed with relief. All afternoon they had searched courtyards, racks, paths, and clues. Yet the lantern had travelled to the garden with them at the very beginning.

Their grandparents came closer as Eli unwrapped it. There was the familiar little camping lantern, undamaged and ready.

Lina put one hand on its switch. Eli placed his hand over hers.

Click.

Warm light filled the shelter, glowing against the cushions and shining onto both their faces. Early-evening shadows gathered among the herbs and sunflowers, but the little room without walls shone brighter.

The first picnic guests appeared along the winding path, carrying books and baskets. Eli looked at Lina. She was already looking back, proud and breathless.

The welcome light was ready.



Home by Lantern Light

Soon the garden filled with the rustle of pages, the clink of cups, and voices settling into quiet corners. Children squeezed inside the blanket shelter to choose books. The lantern made a golden circle on the cushions, while mint and lavender scented the cooling air.

Lina sat beside Eli, tired in the pleasant, heavy way that came after a real adventure. Their grandparents brought them each a drink and sat nearby.

“So,” they said, “how did our clue hunters find the light?”

Lina sat up. “First there was the crooked yellow mark—and the bicycle racks—and then I became Cushion captain again—”

“And the rack under repair didn’t count,” Eli added when she

paused for breath.

He did not tell the story over her. He only fitted that missing piece into place, as neatly as he had fitted the paper guide together.

Lina continued with the gust, the blue basket, and the herb path. Ms. Chen smiled when Lina explained how asking one useful question had helped them find where to search. Mrs. Patel laughed softly at Lina's imitation of the long sunflower shadows.

"Then we reached the cabinet," Lina said. The best part waited on her tongue: the strips, the secret message, the lantern tumbling out. Once, she would have hurried to claim it all.



Instead, she turned to Eli. “You tell the ending.”

Eli blinked, then smiled. “Lina noticed the pinpricks. I held the strips while she turned them toward the light. The message sent us back here, and when we unrolled the roof—”

“The lantern was inside!” they finished together.

Their grandparents laughed, and Lina leaned against Eli’s shoulder as the welcome light glowed between them.

Later, back at their grandparents' apartment, the board game still waited on the table exactly where they had left it. Eli checked that every piece was there. Lina gathered cushions and draped a blanket between two chairs.

Soon they were tucked inside a loose, lumpy shelter. The camping lantern shone beside the board, turning the blanket roof honey-gold. Beyond it, their grandparents moved quietly around the apartment. Cups clinked in the kitchen. Home felt close on every side.

"One step at a time," Eli said, considering his next move.

Lina hummed and rubbed the yellow hair tie on her wrist. "You have exactly one step left before I win."



Eli reached for his game piece. His shoulder nudged the shelter wall. A cushion tipped from the chair, slid down the blanket, and landed squarely on his head.

Lina became very still. Then she sat up as straight as she could beneath the sagging roof.

“I hereby name you,” she announced, “the new Cushion captain.”

Eli tried to look dignified under the cushion. It slipped over one

eyebrow.

That finished them. Lina's laugh came out in squeaks, and Eli laughed until the whole shelter trembled. Even their grandparents peeped in, smiling.

At last Eli set the cushion safely beside him. He and Lina raised their fists and tapped twice.

Then they took the next turn together beneath the blanket, with the board between them and the lantern glowing warm and steady beside them.