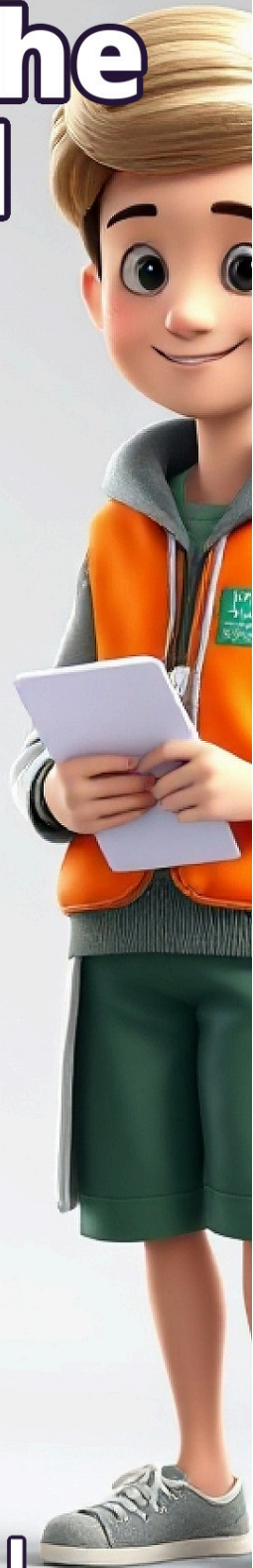


The Girl and the Rescue Owl



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Maya zipped up her yellow rain jacket and hugged her owl tote bag. Today was special: she was visiting the wildlife rescue center. She had waited all week, counting sleeps and drawing owls on every scrap of paper. Her curly puff hair bounced as she skipped up the path. Big dark eyes sparkled with excitement. 'I can't wait to meet the animals,' she said.



Dr. Lena met Maya at the door. She wore green scrubs and a white lab coat, and her wire glasses gleamed. 'Welcome, Maya,' she said with a calm smile. 'You must be our young helper.' Maya nodded, her round cheeks glowing. She pulled out a small notebook. 'I have lots of questions,' she said. Dr. Lena chuckled. 'Good. Questions help us learn.'



Sam, a tall volunteer with a ponytail, waved from the hallway. His orange vest was bright as a pumpkin. 'Hi, Maya! I'll show you around,' he said, clipboard in hand. They passed cages and tanks. 'Our rescue center helps hurt wild animals get strong again,' Sam explained. Maya listened closely. 'So you take care of them until they're ready to go home?' she asked. Sam grinned. 'Exactly!'



In a quiet room, a great horned owl sat on a soft perch. One wing was wrapped in a small blue bandage. His amber eyes blinked slowly. 'This is Hoot,' Dr. Lena said softly. 'He hurt his wing and needs our help.' Maya stepped closer. 'Poor Hoot,' she whispered. 'Will he be okay?' Dr. Lena nodded. 'With gentle, expert care, he will heal.'



Dr. Lena pulled on leather gloves and picked up a pair of long tweezers. 'First, we feed Hoot small pieces of meat,' she said. 'Owls are meat-eaters.' She offered a piece, and Hoot gulped it down. Maya watched with wide eyes. 'He eats so fast!' she giggled. 'Can I help?' Dr. Lena smiled. 'You can hold the bowl.' Maya felt proud to be part of the care.



Next, Dr. Lena carefully cleaned Hoot's wound. 'We must keep it clean so it doesn't get infected,' she explained. She used a soft cotton ball and warm water. Hoot stayed still, brave and calm. 'He trusts you,' Maya said. 'He's learning that we want to help,' Dr. Lena replied. Maya touched her owl tote bag. 'I want to help too,' she said softly.



Sam showed Maya the display room. 'We need new boards so visitors can learn about owls,' he said. 'Want to help?' Maya's eyes lit up. 'Yes!' She cut out pictures of owls and wrote fun facts in her neatest handwriting. 'Did you know owls can turn their heads far around?' she asked. Sam laughed. 'That's a great fact!' They worked side by side, happy and busy.



Each day, Maya visited Hoot. She helped prepare his food and watched Dr. Lena change his bandage. 'He's getting stronger,' Dr. Lena said one afternoon. 'His wing is healing well.' Maya clapped her hands. 'That's wonderful!' She drew a little get-well card and taped it to Hoot's cage. 'You're doing great, Hoot,' she whispered. Hoot blinked his amber eyes as if he understood.



At home, Maya told her family all about Hoot. 'Dr. Lena says wild animals need expert care,' she said. 'We must be gentle and patient.' Her mom smiled. 'You're learning so much.' Maya nodded. 'I want to help more.' She made a list of owl facts for the display board. Her small gap-toothed smile showed how happy she felt.



Back at the center, Maya helped Sam hang the display boards. They showed pictures of owls and tips on how to protect wildlife. 'Visitors will love this,' Sam said. Maya beamed. 'I hope they learn that wild animals need space and care.' She pointed to her favorite fact: 'Owls are important for nature's balance.' Sam gave her a high five. 'You're a great teacher,' he said.



One morning, Dr. Lena removed Hoot's bandage. 'His wing is healed,' she announced. 'He's ready to fly free.' Maya's heart thumped with excitement. 'Really? He can go home?' Dr. Lena nodded. 'Thanks to good care, yes.' Maya felt a mix of happy and sad. She had grown to love Hoot. But she knew wild animals belong in the wild.



They carried Hoot's cage outside. The sun shone warm on Maya's face. Dr. Lena opened the cage door. Hoot stepped out and stretched his wings. Then, with a soft whoosh, he flew up to a branch. Maya watched with wonder. 'Fly, Hoot!' she called. Hoot hooted once, as if saying thank you, and then soared into the trees.



Maya felt proud and happy. 'He's free!' she cheered. Dr. Lena put a hand on her shoulder. 'You helped him heal,' she said. 'And you taught others about owls.' Maya looked at the display boards through the window. 'Caring for wildlife keeps nature safe and full of wonder,' she said. Dr. Lena smiled. 'That's exactly right.'



Sam came over with his clipboard. 'Great job, Maya,' he said. 'You're our best helper.' Maya blushed. 'I learned so much,' she said. 'Can I come back and help more?' Sam nodded. 'Anytime!' Maya hugged her owl tote bag. She knew she would never forget Hoot, the brave owl who flew free again.



On the way home, Maya saw an owl shape in the clouds. She smiled. Her notebook was full of new facts and drawings. She couldn't wait to tell her friends about the rescue center. 'Wild animals need gentle, expert care,' she told her mom. 'And we can all help.' Her mom squeezed her hand. 'You're right, Maya.'



That night, Maya drew a picture of Hoot flying under the stars. She wrote at the bottom: 'Caring for wildlife keeps nature safe and full of wonder.' She taped it to her wall. As she drifted to sleep, she imagined Hoot out in the forest, strong and free. She felt proud to have helped, and her heart was full of joy.