

## Timothy and the Red-Winged Dragon

“Beep! Beep! Beep!” My alarm called out to me from across the room. “Beep! Beep! Beep!” It was relentless, but the warm comfort of my pillow and blankets was even more relentless. I rolled over and pulled the quilt over my head, hoping the added layer would muffle the blaring of my alarm clock.

“Beep! Beep! Beep!” It didn’t. A weak whimper escaped my lips and I knew I would have to get out of bed. Get out before someone got me out. “Beep! Beep! Beep!” the alarm called again.

“I hear you, I hear you,” I groaned, pulling myself out from under my covers and flinging my legs over the side of the bed. I yawned and stretched and blinked my eyes at the dark of my room. Though my mom often left early to go to my Grandma’s house, she would usually draw the curtains of my window to let the sun in. But, today seemed different. Today, my curtains were not drawn and my room was still dark.

I drew my curtains back, expecting to be blinded by the morning sun’s harsh light, but I was met with a morning full of dark clouds that promised rain, instead of blue skies and bird-chirping. It was definitely too dark a morning to do anything besides nestle back under my covers and into dreamland. I had turned my back to the window and was about to jump back into bed for a marathon day of sleep, when I remembered something that sent my heart straight into my stomach. I had signed up to help with the recycling effort at Green Shore Elementary that day for extra credit. The memory was crystal clear in the back of my mind: we had received grade reports for the end of the week and, instead of my usual standard, acceptable grades, a loss of motivation had caused my grade to drop to a C-. I was sure to be grounded.

That was when my teacher turned to face the class and said: “I see a lot of disappointed faces in the room after this news. I know some of you are used to earning better grades and I know others were really trying this quarter for better results. So, here’s what I propose--” She said that there would be a recycling drive at Green Shore and that, while extra credit was not something she particularly cared for, she would offer it to anyone who signed up and attended to help with the effort. I was saved!

I stood in my room, trapped between the prospect of a cozy morning spent blissfully unaware of the crummy weather outside and the promise I had made to the recycling effort. On one hand, I had promised and the opportunity for extra credit made the deal all the more important. On the other hand, I thought, a C- wasn’t exactly *terrible*. I was passing, which is more than I could say for some of my classmates. I was passing, but not by much. My parents would definitely be disappointed in my low grade, which was worse than being mad. I would catch trouble, all right.

I looked at my alarm clock. My heart sunk even further. I was officially running late. I grabbed a t-shirt and a pair of shorts and ran for the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and showered and ran for the door, trying my best to get dressed as I raced down the hall, tripping over the hem of my

shorts and nearly face-planting on the carpet, walking away with a nasty rug-burn on my left knee. I grabbed an orange from the kitchen and ran out the door.

“I’m going to the elementary school, Mom,” I yelled. “I’ll be back in a few hours!” I paused to see if she would yell back a “goodbye” and “be safe,” like she always did, but was only met with silence. Maybe my mom had left early that morning to help Grandma. It seemed strange that she wouldn’t tell me, but not all together unlikely. Dad, of course, was at his job at the tire shop. I was alone.

Letting out a short sigh, I took out a piece of paper from the kitchen’s junk drawer and left a note on the counter, just in case. I looked at the clock on the stove. It was even later than before, so I bolted for the door. My bike was waiting for me just outside the front door and I jumped on it like an expert cowboy in an old Western movie and zoomed off toward the school, pedaling as fast as I could.

Chesterfield Valley was a naturally gloomy town, known for its ghost souls that roamed the streets. Our local history was rooted in the supernatural, town lore being full of ancient legends about monsters and curses and ancient burial grounds. Throughout the county, we were known as the town that you had to be brave, crazy, or stupid to settle in and, in fact, many of us were. But, as I zig-zagged on my bike toward the elementary school, I couldn’t help but notice that the town was just a touch gloomier than normal. The resident darkness had settled heavily over the town and was almost tangible. Its near physical presence weighed on me as I rode my bike, making it difficult to pedal. No matter how much strength I used, my bike still struggled in slow motion toward the school. I pushed it out of my mind. Perhaps the heavy doom and gloom was a sign of the rain that would undoubtedly fall by that afternoon.

After considerable effort, time, and a little bit of sweat, I made it to Green Shore Elementary and parked my bike just outside of the gym, where Mr. Hiller told us to meet for the recycling effort. I entered the gym, gasping for breath, my legs shaking with exhaustion. I looked about the space, there were maybe three kids in the gym at most and it was quite clear that I made it as one of the first group. I was early. I wave of relief washed over me, and I let out an exhausted breath. I joined the others.

“Timothy!” a call came from the other side of the gym. “Hello, there! Glad you could make it!” Mr. Hiller walked over to me. He was a happy little middle-aged man, whom everyone called “Frodo” behind his back, on account that he was so short and, we imagined, had incredibly hairy feet.

“Hey, Mr. Hiller,” I responded.

He smiled at me, then moved up to the front of the group. “We will begin just as soon as the other students get here,” he announced. He then busied himself at a card table that had been set up for the occasion. It was covered with stacks of paper, random breakfast foods, and a metal

thermos, no doubt full of bitter coffee. All teachers carried the same load of papers and random items and Mr. Hiller was no different. He was my favorite teacher, though. He was nice and funny and always making up weird sayings like “On the count of three: one...two...three!” and “Best work makes, well, it work!” He also had this way of seeing straight through me. If I lied about anything, he knew. If I ever had any trouble or was upset about anything, he knew and he knew how to make me feel better. He was strange, though. He wore the same kind of clothes every day that always smelled slightly burned. Needless to say, he was an odd character, but he was entertaining.

Soon, the other kids got there and Mr. Hiller called roll. “Now,” he continued. “There is a great deal to clean up today and a short period of time to do it in. We must work together, folks! If one pair of hands is good, then more is better!”

Some goofball in the back of the crowd shouted “Yeah!”

“Uh...OK..” Mr. Hiller continued. “I will pass out your assignments. Please be careful and if you see anything that could be dangerous, don’t touch it. Please notify me.”

Mr. Hiller, then moved through the crowd of kids, passing out “To Do” lists to each, followed by a chorus of exasperated sighs and moans.

“Man, I didn’t want to do this!”

“Mr. Hiller, can I trade with someone? I don’t like my list.”

“Mr. Hiller, Joanna and I want to work together. Can we just have one list?”

The questions continued to follow him as he moved through the crowd. *Ha, I thought. I’ll take whatever he gives me. I won’t be like some of these other fools...*

Mr. Hiller then arrived in front of me with a list in his hand. “If you have any preemptive complaints, file them now before I hand down your fate.”

I smiled. “No, sir. No complaints!”

“Good, because they wouldn’t have done any good anyway, the lists are final.” I laughed and accepted the page from my teacher.

“Now, everyone, please stick to your lists. There will be no trading, not negotiating. I was up until two o’clock this morning finalizing them, so please do not deviate.”

“Ah, man...” the same goofball from before moaned.

I laughed to myself, feeling better than everyone around me, until I looked down over my list. My heart sank for the third time that morning. At the top of the list read: "Clean out the trash at the back of the school. Separate all recyclables and bag them for pick-up." This was quite possibly the worst task Mr. Hiller could have given me. The job was lonely, boring, and it smelled horrible back there. I looked around me to see if there was anyone I could trade with. Maybe if I approached Mr. Hiller with a willing candidate, he would reconsider his earlier speech. But, by then, everyone around me had broken up and headed for their respective jobs. No one would have wanted to trade, anyway. The back of the school was so horrible that the janitor didn't even go back there.

I scanned the rest of my list. The tasks seemed easy enough. It was clear that I would have to suck it up and do my job. I figured if I got it done quickly and correctly, I could move on and the rest of the day would be somewhat manageable in comparison. I took one long, heavy breath and headed for the back door of the gym.

The school was somewhat smaller than most schools in other towns, having only a few hundred students during any given year. My walk would be short, so I had to be sure to psyche myself up quickly so as to not feel so hopeless upon arriving at my job site. There was something about the wooded area at the back of the school and its resident swamp that could suck the optimism out of the most happy-go-lucky person. It was rumored that the swamp was the setting for one fateful day when a fifth grade boy fell in and was pulled down under the murky surface, never to be heard from again. It was said, too, that his presence appeared at the banks of the swamp just after the final bell to go in from every recess, his arms crossed and a look of defiance flashing across his face. I wasn't about to let this frighten me, though. I was old enough to realize how scary stories work and still old enough to be embarrassed by letting the task get to me in that way. I gathered up all the courage I had in me this early in the morning and left for the swamp through the back gym door.

As I said before, my walk wouldn't be long. The school wasn't really that big. But, my walk would be longer than everyone else's. I had to exit the gym, walk through the basketball courts and pass the lunch area, where most kids were surely goofing around, sorting through the garbage cans and bagging up all the recyclables, and cross the field where most kids spent recess playing pick-up games of soccer. The swamp was just past the field, blocked off by a chain-link fence with a lock to dissuade kids from slipping back to the swamp to goof around outside of the watchful gaze of on-duty teachers. What the lock didn't deter, however, was throwing all kinds of trash in the forms of food wrappers, unwanted lunch items, and flattened sports balls up over the fence and into the swamp. It would be my job to clean up the mess from years and years of dumping by kids and adults, alike and separate the recyclables from the non-recyclables. This would be a job that required speed and the ability to hold your breath for long periods of time. I thought maybe if I could just pick up the trash and throw it back over the fence to sort, it would take a lot less time and I wouldn't have to struggle to keep the collar of my t-shirt up over my nose.

When I arrived, the lock was undone and there was a box of big, black trash bags waiting for me at the fence. I lifted the latch on the door and dragged the gate through the grass, still wet from dew and sprinklers early that morning, and slipped through. The swamp looked filthy and there were mounds and mounds of garbage all along the perimeter. Because the garbage had been left for years and years, some of it had begun to rot and mix in with the muck, making it impossible to see exactly what was garbage, and what was mud. I wondered why Mr. Hiller hadn't given us gloves to use.

A rancid stench filled the air and I struggled to keep from gagging as I inched closer and closer to the swamp, looking for trash to pick up and throw over the fence. My tennis shoes sunk deep into the surrounding mud, I pulled one foot out, then the other, nearly vomiting with the smell and the wet sound of what I thought in the back of my mind was a living blob of muck and mire. The task seemed utterly hopeless to me and it seemed as though a better idea would be to let the garbage go, mixing in with the muck and the mire of the school's own personal no-man's-land.

That's when I spotted it: a pile of what appeared to be garbage, not yet mixed in with the rest of mire. I moved closer to my target. The items were in a pile alright. It looked like someone had dumped them over all together, though the items had little or no connection. Some of it looked stone hard, like pieces of concrete from someone's driveway or an art project. Other parts looked soft and squishy, like clothes, or a big bag full of stuffed animals. All of it was the same color: muddy brownish yellow.

I extended my foot toward them, thinking if anything was living in the pile, kicking it would get it to wake up and scurry off. I didn't think about what I would do if it turned out the whole pile was living, but it seemed like a good test at the time. I poked at the closest lump with the toe of my sneaker. It was solid and heavy, but also delicate. Nothing moved.

I looked around behind me. The field just beyond where I stood stretched out farther, it seemed, than anyone truly knew. The grass still looked like a wet blob of electric green watercolor against the grey of the sky. Nothing moved in the field but a gentle breeze and a few crows swooping overhead. In the distance, I saw two kids playing around in the lunch area. One of them was holding something in their hand and was chasing the other around the lunch tables, the object extended to touch the back of its victim. I desperately wanted to be there. I would volunteer to be either kid, even if it meant getting chased with garbage.

I turned back to my pile. It was still resting where I left it, but somehow seemed bigger than before.

"You're just imagining it," I whispered to myself. "It's only trash, you dummy."

But, it wasn't trash. I bent over to pick a part of it up, and as my hand brushed across one long piece that was jutting out above the rest, a familiar sensation flashed across my mind. I had felt this before.

Sunday nights, my mom made barbecue chicken and always only served chicken legs. The pieces of meat were always soft and moist and deliciously soaked with deep brown sauce, but the ends, where the bone was exposed, were hard and oily and had bits of skin still on them that had baked on when they were cooked. This is what this garbage felt like.

I gasped quickly and pulled my hand away in a panic. It was bone. It was all a big pile of bone, bone from something long dead, bone from something that wasn't human or animal. A chill ran down my spine and my breath quickened. My mind raced through the possibilities. They were too big to be any native animal we had in Chesterfield Valley. Maybe they were from a human? I suddenly thought of stories about notorious sixth graders, on the day after the last day of school, returning to compete against one another to see who could stick it out the longest and falling in, never to be heard from again. I thought of adults, working at the school, disappearing somewhere between the final bell for the day and the first bell the following morning. I thought of the rumors about the swamp and the strange draw it had on kids and adults, alike, who never returned from the outer limits of the school. All rumored, all hearsay, but so real to me at the time. I took a closer look at the pile of bones. Again, they were too big to be from any human, even an adult. I thought of pictures I had seen in books: Demons, their mouths gaping open, ready to swallow their prey; dragons, bent backward, blasting fire into the heavens; mythical creatures that were only half-human and giant and imposing all the same. My head began to spin with the noxious fumes from the swamp.

"Run," something hissed. "Get out of here."

I bolted across the field, frantically searching for someone I knew that could help: Mr. Hiller, or anyone, for that matter. The cool air whipped past my face, warming up my cheeks and cooling off the rest of my face. My breathing became heavier and heavier as a cool sweat began to bead down my temples. I stopped in the middle of the field, my sneakers drenched in dew and sprinkler water, my ankles covered in tiny pieces of freshly mowed grass. My muscles vibrated and I had the distinct feeling I that I could only breathe out, and not in. I doubled over and tried to steady my breath.

What had I just found? Were they bones or some figment of my imagination? Maybe they were large rocks that had been cast off during some near-by construction. I searched my mind's eye, remembering what they looked like, felt like, smelled like. No. They were definitely bones. And, boy, were they huge! I had not seen anything, human, animal, or plant that big in my entire life! My fear gave way to a wash of excitement. Maybe I had discovered something major! Maybe this was evidence of dinosaurs right here in Chesterfield Valley. Maybe it was evidence that they were still walking around among us, only slightly hidden by the fog by day and our inability to keep streetlights working at night. Images of newspaper headlines and television specials flashed across the back of my mind. Whatever it was, it was huge, and I discovered it. I headed back for the school.

I had reached the basketball courts when a shriek called out from the other side of the lunch area.

“Bobby! You better not touch me with that! You sicko!”

“Aw, come on Honesty! It’s just a little garbage. Don’t be such a girl!”

Honesty had always been a really good friend of mine. We were in every class together from Kindergarten through third grade and, because our last names were close together in the alphabet, we were always seated next to one another. I was always grateful for this because Honesty was super smart and good at school, which meant I got to be super smart and good at school, too. If anyone knew what beast the bones belonged to, it was Honesty.

I quickened my pace and jogged the short distance between the basketball courts and the lunch area. “Honesty! Honesty,” I called, near breathless again.

She turned around to watch me as I approached. Bobby, the boy she had a crush on, stood just behind her, arms crossed in front of him. Everyone knew that they liked one another...well, they didn’t know, but it was obvious to everyone else. I got the impression, too, that Bobby didn’t like me because I was Honesty’s best friend, but I didn’t mind. Bobby was a bit of a jerk, anyway.

“Timothy!” Honesty called back to me.

I came to a full stop in front of my friend and grabbed her arm. “Come on, you have to see what I found!”

Her eyes widened. “What?” she demanded. “You found something?”

I nodded and gripped her wrist a little bit tighter, tugging as I turned to leave. “Come on,” I demanded. “I’ve found something at the back of the school that you have to see. It’s amazing!”

Honesty turned and smiled at Bobby, who was obviously growing impatient. “Timothy, what’s gotten in to you?” she asked.

“You have to come with me. I was assigned the swamp and found something you won’t believe!”

A smile spread across Bobby’s face. “The swamp, eh? Did you see the ghost?”

“Better,” I gasped. “Come on.”

They both followed me across the field to the swamp. When we got to the fence, both of them stopped just outside.

“The gate is open,” I told them. “Come in. You have to see this close up.”

“I-I-I don’t know, man, it looks kind of creepy back there,” Bobby stammered.

“But you won’t be able to see from here.”

“We can see just fine, Timothy,” said Honesty. “Look, I can see the swamp and I can see the trees behind the swamp. Now, what is it you wanted me to see?”

I pointed to the spot where I found the bones. “There. Right there. What do you see?”

“I see a muddy, old swamp,” Honesty shrugged.

“And I *smell* a muddy, old swamp. Is that you, Timmy or the swamp?” Bobby leered.

I ignored him. “No. Look closer.”

“I am. And all I see is the swamp. What’s so great about that?”

I looked more closely at where I was pointing, where I had found the bones. This time, there was nothing there. Nothing but a pile of muck and random garbage. I rubbed my eyes and squinted, determined to find them again.

“I swear, Honesty, I was cleaning the trash out back here and I found this huge pile of bones! Huge bones!”

“A huge pile of huge bones?” Bobby looked at me and grinned with pity. If Bobby thought I was being stupid, then I was being stupid.

“Are you sure you found bones, Timothy?” Honesty shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

“It was a huge pile of bones!” I exclaimed. “And they were gigantic! Like from a dinosaur or a monster or one of those Greek half-man, half-monsters we learned about in history! They were right there!”

“Maybe it was just a figment of your imagination?” Honesty looked at me with pity. I could tell that she thought I had lost my mind.

I could feel myself getting frustrated. I lowered my voice. “No, I promise you, Honesty. There was a big pile of monstrous bones right there.” I pointed to the bank of the swamp, now empty of any possible uncommon objects.

A look of genuine concern flashed across Honesty’s face. *She thinks I’m crazy*, I thought to myself. *This is the last thing I need*. “Look, I know it seems a little crazy to you,” I said to her.

“A *little*?” Bobby scoffed.

“I know it seems crazy, but I swear they were there!”

“It’s not that,” Honesty admitted. “Sometimes my dad tells me these old spooky legends about ghosts and bones and stuff.”

“Yeah?” I recognized the look on Honesty’s face. This was the same look she got just before going on a new roller coaster for the the first time: a little bit of fear mixed with the dread of almost certain danger.

“So-- in these legends, seeing bones usually means that something is coming after you.”

“What, like a bear?” Bobby looked more fascinated than I had ever seen him when not on the verge of doing something crazy and stupid, like jump off a roof.

“No,” she said to Bobby. “I mean something not of this world. Something mythical and dangerous.” Then-- “Maybe you should come to the front of the school with me. It was stupid of Mr. Hiller to make anyone do this job, let alone you.”

I knew that if someone as smart as Honesty believed in this stuff, it was serious. All the same, I didn’t want to shirk my responsibilities, much less look like a coward in front of the whole team. “Nah, you go ahead, I’ll finish here and catch up with you later.”

“Are you sure, Timothy?” Honesty touched my shoulder ever so delicately.

“Those are just stories, Honesty. Besides, I wouldn’t want anything to get in the way of my extra credit.” I grinned, even though I was quaking with fear on the inside.

Honesty looked at me closely. “Alright, if you’re sure.” She turned around and headed back for the school, leaving Bobby standing, his arms crossed in front of him, a playful smirk spread across his lips.

“Bobby,” Honesty called behind her. “I don’t want to get in trouble with Mr. Hiller. Come on!”

“In a minute,” he called back to her. Then, to me: “Imma call you ‘Crazy Timmy’ from now on.” And, with that, he turned around swiftly and ran after Honesty, laughing. “Crazy Timmy, Crazy Timmy...Ha! That’s good!”

I returned to my work, anxious to finish and get out of the swamp. As I struggled to sift the man-made garbage out of the earth-made muck of the swamp bank, the sun struggled with the clouds, occasionally casting shadows from the small cropping of tress that bordered the farthest corner of the swamp and grew all along the back side of the fenced-in border of the school. The shadows

grew long at times and short at others and gave a haunting and mysterious tone to my task. The little hairs on the back of my neck bristled in a similar fashion, standing straight up at times, then relaxing, as if they were taking turns standing guard against possible intruders. Meanwhile, I worked frantically, trying to push my misgivings from the corners of my mind. There was nothing to worry about, nothing was coming to get me.

And yet, the sight of those bones were clear in my mind's eye, as if their presence had been burned to my memory. As far as I knew, nothing of this world had bones **that** big. Even the bear I saw on a camping trip several summers ago wasn't that big, and that thing was gigantic!

I finished my task in short order and, tying the last of the garbage bags closed and making sure recyclables were sorted based on material and further separated from the true garbage, turned and walked back toward school. Old Mr. Bates, the school janitor would be around after we left for the day to pick up the trash bags and dispose of them appropriately.

On my way back to the school, I took the crumpled list of tasks out of my pocket and reviewed it. Task one was complete: clear out the garbage from the swamp at the back of the school and sort it into recyclables and non-recyclables. Check. Knowing that I never had to go back there again if I didn't want to lifted a weight off my shoulders and I walked quickly. Next on my list was to let myself into the library and sort through the garbage cans and pickup any wrappers or bottles kids had left behind the day before. Ms. Stevens, the librarian, usually took care of cleaning up after school let out at the end of the day while she re-shelved all the returned books, but because the recycling effort was planned for this weekend, she welcomed the break and left early the day before.

The library was a bit bigger than most elementary school library, which was often boasted about by the principle and the school district. Because the Green Shore Elementary was nearly one hundred years old and was never in the habit of discarding old books, the collection in the library was big enough that even adults came to peruse and check out the occasional book. It was for this reason that the local public library had closed its doors and moved its stock to Green Shore, which meant that the library had to be expanded and included books of all kinds. It was no secret that Green Shore had the best library in the county.

I liked the library; I know that must be weird. It's difficult these days to find a kid who would rather be in the library than off playing video games somewhere or getting into trouble with some stupid stunt, like Bobby was prone to. The old library building had since been converted into storage and a new one was built just across from the principle's office at the front of the school. A big sign reading, "Green Shore School and Public Library" with "The Pride of the Valley" painted bellow, was bolted to the front, just above the massive glass doors, facing the parking lot.

When I arrived at the front of the school, one door was propped open at the side entrance, used by kids during school hours. This was a heavy metal door that lead directly to the children's

section. I grasped the door handle and pried the door open just enough to slip through. On the desk was another box of trash bags and a pair of leather work gloves, laying at the side. Laughing to myself, I grabbed the work gloves and pulled two trash bags from the roll in the box. I would start in the back and work my way forwards. People always made bigger messes where they thought they were hidden from the knowing gaze of Ms. Stevens and it would be a bigger task to complete at the end of the day than at the middle.

I lurked about the dark labyrinth of book shelves, weighed down by texts ranging from early scientific discoveries to modern philosophy and popular fiction. I came across the first trash can I would have to sort through, crammed in the back corner in the mythology section. It was bigger than your standard school building garbage can, just tall enough to reach the waistband on my shorts, and packed full with crumpled up paper, soda cans, and food wrappers. I set to work, sorting the recyclables from the garbage and before I knew it, had reached the bottom of the can. Toward the end, I had to stand on my tip-toes and bend forward so my entire torso was in the can and was lifting the final piece of garbage out of the can when a cool breeze blew across the back of my neck.

I gasped and spun around, dropping the piece of garbage on the floor in front of me, and tripping over my untied shoelaces. I flailed for a second, trying to regain my balance, but fell backwards all the same, up against one of the library's massive back bookshelves. The shelf shook with the shock of my weight and for a moment, I was worried that it would fall over on me, sending me into a different kind of disaster. My fears became unfounded, however, as the bookshelf soon settled, sending a single volume off the top shelf and onto the floor with a thud.

I stepped toward the book. It was leather bound and had gold lettering across the front reading, *A History of Our Land and Its Native Beasts*. Stopping to check that no one was coming into the library first, I knelt down in front of the book and began rifling through its pages. I knew what I was doing wasn't allowed. It would have been better if I had stopped and put the book back in the now empty spot it came from. But, my curiosity got the better of me. I had to look in the book's contents, convinced it would give me some sort of hint as to what I saw that morning. To my dismay, the book was full of all kinds of colorful images of ancient, looming beasts, stalking across the countryside, but nothing about bones or what these creatures looked like on the inside. I flipped back to the table of contents, thinking I may have missed something. In addition to listing the topics covered in the volume I had, it also briefly listed topics covered in the second and third volumes. I stood up and grasped for the other volumes, pulling them down from the shelf with considerable effort.

I sat down cross legged in front of the bookshelf, my back to the rest of the library and flipped through the other books. I was buried, deep in the pages of the third volume of *A History of Our Land and Its Native Beasts*, flipping frantically through the pages, scanning the colorful drawings of various creatures with ancient origins when I saw it: drawings of bones that looked exactly like the ones I had seen at the swamp, only hours before. They were quite large, each reportedly weighing fifty pounds and looking about as big around as a modern day street light.

No accurate depiction was available to include in the book, but there was an artist's representation from the early 1400's of a beast, looming over a huddled group of peasants, gripping a man in a crown in its talons. The beast's mouth was wide and gaping, showing several razor-sharp teeth. It stood on its hind legs, though notations suggested that it was able to crouch on all fours, should such a stance be necessary. Its spine was lined by triangular fins, and perched right where you would expect there to be shoulder blades, was a set of expansive wings. The description said that common belief was that these wings were deep crimson and the beast's only identifying marker. It was thought that the beast was a descendant of a particularly evil, malevolent prince who was about to succeed to the throne when his brother usurped him in a famous, violent battle. The prince disappeared into the forrest, where he vowed to destroy every heir to the throne until he was restored to his rightful place as king and sovereign. This beast's name was Gaizra or, as he was more famously known in legend and folklore, The Red-Winged Dragon.

Suddenly, I heard the side door of the library creak open and footsteps approach on the tiled floor. I froze, hoping it wasn't Mr. Hiller or some other adult, coming to check my progress. I had only managed to sort through one trash can and there were about a million left to go. The footsteps stopped somewhere in the middle of the library. I slowly shut the book and scooted the whole collection over to just below their space on the shelf. Moving quickly, I rose to my feet and grabbed for the trash bag. Then, I swiftly tip-toed over to the next trashcan and began sorting through it, fighting the tremor of impending punishment.

"Timothy?" Honesty's voice rang through the library, startling me. I lifted my head but not before slamming it up against the wall of the trashcan.

"Ow!" I called out.

"Timothy, are you ok?"

"I'm fine..." I replied, pulling myself out of the trashcan and rubbing my forehead where I had hit the inside wall.

"Where are you?"

I looked around. "Uh...Come toward the Natural History section."

The footsteps started back up and, before long, Honesty rounded the corner where I had first began working. "My goodness, Timothy! You aren't very far at all!"

"Yeah, I guess I got all the big jobs."

"Mr. Hiller probably gave them to you because he knew you could do it. Anyway, I'm done with all my tasks and have come to help finish yours."

“What happened to Bobby?”

Honesty sighed in disgust. “He’s in the gym with his friends, doing stupid stuff and getting into trouble with Mr. Hiller. He’s on the verge of taking their extra credit away.”

“Man, I’m sorry.”

“That’s ok. This is why you’re here and I have come to help!”

With Honesty’s assistance, the task went by swiftly. We were tying up the last of the trash bags when she opened her mouth, “This wasn’t that hard at all, Timothy. What was taking you so long?”

“To be honest, I was doing some research,” I replied sheepishly.

“Research?”

“Yeah, I kept thinking about those bones I saw in the swamp. I wanted to see if I could find what kind of beast they came from.”

“Well, you know the rumor, don’t you?” Honesty inquired. “They say the school was built over the remains of an old natural history museum where they used to keep all kinds of old bones that supposedly belonged to a whole load of ancient beasts.”

“Yeah, I heard,” I replied. “But that still doesn’t give me the answers I’m looking for.”

“Well, what books were you looking at? Everyone is about to go home, maybe we can take a loo--”

“Hey!” A booming voice interrupted Honesty’s proposal. “What are you kids doing here?” It was Mr. Bates, the janitor.

Honesty and I both jumped and bolted for the door, but not before hearing: “Punk kids. I wouldn’t have to work on a Saturday if someone hadn’t decided to hold this ‘recycling effort.’ My God, how stupid can you be?”

Outside the library, Honesty and I both turned down the hall and toward the parking lot. I gave Honesty a quick hug and jumped on my bike for the second time that day. “Catch ya later!” I shouted over my shoulder as I pedaled away. As I rode my bike, headed for home, the clouds grew more and more dark. A swift wind began to blow and I swore I could feel the light sprinkle of rain dropping on my shoulders. I quickened my pace, determined that I wouldn’t arrive home soaking wet and chilled. The wind picked up speed, blowing twigs and leaves across my path. I

swerved to miss the bigger sticks in my way, my heart beat quickening. This wasn't an everyday storm. This was something more serious. The little droplets of rain from before became bulbous and heavy, smacking me in the face as they fell diagonally to the ground. The weather didn't seem like it would let up anytime soon. If anything, it got heavier and more destructive, bending nearby trees almost horizontal, but somehow not breaking.

By this time, the sky was the darkest grey I had ever seen, almost black as ash from a fire and the looming clouds were nearly on top of me. Then, behind me, there came an overwhelming rumble, then a sonorous crack and an almost electric crash. I stopped pedaling and peered over my shoulder to see a young tree blowing from its broken stump across the street and into the phone lines. The whole mess then was whipped up in a blender of wind and that's when I knew: I was about to be swallowed up by a cyclone.

I remounted my bike and began to pedal harder than I ever had before, determined that I would outrun the massive wind storm. Behind me, I could hear the creaks and cracks of trees, telephone poles, and lawn decorations break from their resting places in the ground and get whipped up in the whirl of wind and rain that now was on my tail and coming fast and strong. I couldn't stop. I wouldn't let the destruction behind me break my resolve, but I somewhere I knew I wouldn't be able to pedal fast enough, that I was a goner. Before I knew it, I was pedaling at the wind, floating several feet above the ground, cycling in the storm. Then-- in a matter of moments, I was on my back, flat on the ground. A moment's peace, but I was only in the eye of the storm. I would soon be swept up again and I had to protect myself. I huddled on the ground, my arms over my head. I was back up in the air again in no time at all, whirling around with the force of the wind, my short life flashing before my eyes.

Then-- I found myself floating in darkness, without sight or sound. I could feel my tears and sweat streaming down the sides of my face and I could taste their salt on my tongue. But, other than that, I saw, heard, and smelt nothing. I was completely alone and desperate to get home and trying not to believe that I never would.

Soon, the darkness gave way to blinding light and I had the distinct impression that I was back on the ground. I blinked at a sun that was brighter than I had ever experienced in Chesterfield Valley. I pried my eyes open with great difficulty. Crust not unlike the sleepy that forms in the corners of your eyes over night had sealed my eyes shut and the sudden brightness made it impossible to keep my eyelids open. I lifted myself gingerly on to my elbows and blinked several times, trying to get used to the light. It felt like I had spent the last five hours in a dark movie theatre and had just been released into the sunny day. My head felt groggy and my surroundings, though I knew they should be familiar, weren't the same surroundings I had left some time before.

I struggled to a full sitting position. It took a while for my brain to recognize what I was seeing in front of me. Where I had expected the house on the corner of Main and Fifth streets was a large, sprawling stone castle that looked like it was breaking free of the underworld's grip and

stretching for the sky from bellow the earth's surface. Around the castle was a moat of clear, crystal blue water. The sun behind it cast a shining arc about the towers and turrets at the top and it flew a very distinct flag that I had never seen before: bright blue background with purple stars and a golden lion. The scene was like something from a story book and I had to pinch myself to be sure that what I saw wasn't part of some inventive dream.

I looked down at myself, certain I wasn't really there and saw my same torso, my same legs, my same hands and feet, clothed in fine velvet and silk the colors of royalty-- deep purple and midnight blue. I grasped at the lapels of my jacket and straightened it around my neck. Everything fit me like a glove. I examined the state of my pants and the shoulders of my jacket, brushing any stray dirt or dust off and headed cautiously for the castle.

The drawbridge had been lowered over the moat, but the gate was guarded by two men in official-looking uniforms in the same colors as the flag at the top of the castle. I could see they were both armed with swords that glinted in the bright light of the sun and they both wore a look of menace across their faces. I slowly stepped over the bridge, hoping the two men wouldn't notice me and come charging with their swords drawn and orders to throw me in a dungeon somewhere. As I moved closer, my nervousness increased, convincing me that I would soon be spending the rest of my days in a fairytale dungeon, dining on bread and water, and whistling for a dog with a set of keys around his neck. I hesitated at the gate, but nothing happened. In fact, the guards appeared to be more relaxed than when I first set foot on the bridge. I walked swiftly through the gate and into the courtyard on the inside.

The courtyard wasn't very big at all and it was powdered with fine sand and tiny cobblestones, but the doors to the castle were, indeed, quite large. Through the doors was a massive entry hall and a grand staircase the stretched to gallery after gallery and on through forever. Rays of sunlight broke through the skylights above my head and danced with floating flecks of dust. The inside of the castle seemed somehow larger and far more grand than the outside. I knew I should have felt overwhelmed by the majesty of the castle, but felt oddly at home in these walls. I felt far more comfortable in the castle than I ever did at home in Chesterfield Valley.

Beyond the staircase was another, slightly smaller, but just as impressive set of double doors, guarded by four men in the same uniforms as the guys outside. I sauntered over to the door and knocked with three raps and, to my surprise, the men all bowed and two pushed the large doors open to make way. I wondered at how quickly all the palace guards seemed to move to make way for me and respected me.

*But why? I pondered. Who am I to all these guys and why does this place seem so familiar?*

On the other side of the doors stood a man in blue velvet that was of a slightly lesser quality than mine. Clearly, he was some sort of nobleman at court, but he looked humbled by worry. A spark of animated poise glinted in his stance and twinkled in his eyes, but care and concern had broken him a little. As I entered the grand room, his whole face pricked up and he came rushing for me.

“Oh, Prince Timothy!” He kneeled in front of me. “Praise the gods! The prophecies said you would return.”

“Uh...what?” I stammered.

He peered up at me. “The prophecy? You have come to save the day!”

“Save it from what?”

“Haven’t you heard? Your parents have gone missing!”

“Missing?!”

“Yes--ah, may I stand, Your Majesty?” he inquired.

“Uh, sure...”

“The royal attendants went to fetch them this morning, only to find their rooms in disarray, as though they had been taken forcibly in the night.”

I didn’t know what to say. I remembered how empty my house was that morning and though this all seemed like some crazy dream, I couldn’t help but feel that they had truly been taken from their bed by some monster in the night.

The man continued: “Prince Timothy, you must find them! Only you can save the kingdom and only you can restore your parents to their rightful place on the throne!”

“What about the guards?” I inquired. They all seemed strong and capable enough. Heavens, I was only ten!

“I cannot send the guards! They hardly know what has happened and they cannot know! There would be chaos in the streets if word got out that the King and Queen were missing! No. No one else can know!” He frantically began wringing his hands and looking about him as if he had just shattered a priceless lamp with a baseball bat. He began to pace.

“They could not have been kidnapped. The guards would have been alerted by a distress call. Unless maybe they were smuggled out a window? No! That is no good! The thieves would have had to climb down hundreds and hundreds of feet and, let’s face it, your father is not at the weight he used to be...forgive me.”

I forgave him. Something in me told me that I had to, or else he would have a total melt down. “What about the dungeons?” I stammered again.

“The dungeons?”

“Yeah, this place has dungeons, doesn’t it?”

“You know as well as I do that it does. They’re the most terrifying dungeons in the land!”

“Why don’t we start there? Then continue to search the palace from the bottom up? If they are still here, they can’t be hard to find.”

“Yes! Oh, Your Majesty, you are a genius through and through! But, you should be the one to search. Only you can rescue them as only you have been touched by destiny!”

“Yeah, I guess I could do it.”

“But, please be careful! There are so many passage ways down there and you can’t begin to imagine the frightful things lurking in them!”

“Okay, okay.” I smiled at the man, though underneath it all, I was terrified of failing, terrified of running in to what might be lying in wait in the dungeons. My stomach churned and gurgled and I felt that maybe I would vomit. I didn’t directly know the King and Queen, but I felt that failing would be the biggest disaster of my life.

“Here, you will meet a great deal of danger on your hunt, take these.” He thrust a shining silver sword with jewel-encrusted handle with a strap with strange hieroglyphics burned into the leather and heavy gold key into my hands. “Your father entrusted these to me and assured me that you would know how to use them if ever the worst should happen and the need presented itself.”

I thanked him and turned to go. “Be safe,” he called out. I looked over my shoulder at the nobleman. He was sniffing just a little and I got the distinct impression that he was just as terrified, if not more, as I was. I couldn’t tell straight away, but he almost looked like Mr. Hiller, my old teacher back in Chesterfield Valley. I waved, my heart beating with anxiety and empathy for the man I was leaving behind.

The dungeons were located in the basement of the castle, many feet bellow the ground floor and were accessed by one creaky old staircase that got dirtier, darker, and dingier the farther down a person travelled. It was clear that the dungeons had not been used for many years. They were quiet and desolate, save for the family of rats that ran to and fro across my path and between my feet. Several times, I stumbled in the dark and braced myself with the cold, damp stone walls, anxious to make it to each subsequent lighted area, illuminated by the occasional greasy oil lamp.

Some door or chest or coffin slammed shut in the dark expanse of the hallway and echoed back to me. I jumped, terrified that I might soon come in contact with a being I did not want to encounter. I drew my sword and continued moving forward. I squinted to see what was coming up for me, but could barely make out each rusted oil lamp's revelation of stone wall and dirt floor. I grasped the wall, though doing so felt like I was caressing the cheek of a cold, dead sea lizard. Swallowing my fear and puffing my chest with determination, I journeyed forward. No dark or creaky door or slimy, smelly fish beast would throw me off my path. This would be my moment.

As I ventured down the hall, I noticed my sword begin to glow a pale electric blue. It was bright, however faint, as if it were picking up some distant signal. The sword illuminated the hall in front of me, like a broken flashlight and I was able to see, if only vaguely, what was before me. I began to notice things like how long the corridor appeared to stretch and that, every so often, there was a door that undoubtedly led to some other alcove or expansive hallway. More importantly, though, was the floor. In the light of my magical glowing sword, it became clear that the previously all-dirt floor of the corridor was littered with bright red slivers of...something... the size of my hand. I bent closer and brushed my fingers over the one just in front of me. It was cold and slimy like the walls and had a slight iridescent quality. It appeared to be the scale off of some lizard creature's back. In the blue light, it glistened almost purple. This didn't belong to any lizard or fish I had ever seen. I let out a faint whimper, betraying the anxiety that bubbled up in me.

I swallowed hard, knowing that coming this far meant I would have to see this thing through, but wishing to be back with Honesty and Bobby and Mr. Hiller at Green Shore, all the same. *If this is what's required of me to earn extra credit*, I thought, *I better get 100 extra points*.

Suddenly, the blue light from my sword began to flicker and grow stronger. I was then able to see the darkened hall more clearly and notice that the scales led in and out of only one door and didn't travel all the way down the rest of the hall. I stopped and looked at the door. Whatever had made those scales was behind that door. My better judgement told me to keep walking, that I didn't want to see what was just beyond opening the door. But, as I proceeded past, the blue light became fainter and fainter until it almost disappeared. I turned back around and the light grew a little stronger. I swiveled to face the direction I was originally headed in and the light flickered and became dim. I turned back around and stepped toward the door and the light flickered on close to full blast. I took a few steps in the opposite direction and the light blinked off.

"You don't have to be a genius to figure this one out, Timothy," I whispered to myself. I turned back around and strode with confidence to the door and tried the handle. The door was locked. I kicked at it; it did not budge. With a sigh, I reached for the heavy metal key that the nobleman had given me. If I was to figure out how to use it, I'd have to try it on every lock I found.

Miraculously, the key worked in the first lock I tried. It slipped in like melting ice cream and cranked right like the door had never been locked in the first place. I pushed the heavy plank

wood door open just wide enough to fit through and tiptoed in. The room on the other side was lit by an oil lamp every couple of feet and featured a winding staircase in the back corner that lead down in an opening just big enough for one man to fit through. At the base of the stairs was an old steel chest with a huge padlock and ancient leather straps that wrapped around it. As I approached the chest, my sword became brighter and more animated, dancing in my hand with excitement. I knelt before the chest and slid the key in just as easily as the lock on the door. A simple jerk and the chest popped open to reveal mounds and mounds of gold, rubies, and sapphires. Buried amid all this finery was a simple cork. I grasped for the cork and pulled out a mysterious green glass bottle, housing a nondescript liquid. I wondered how useful a bottle of this nature would be in my quest to save the King and Queen and considered putting it back in the chest, but instinct made me think better of it, and I hooked the neck of the bottle under my belt.

I started down the stairs, gripping my sword tightly, ready for anything. As I descended, the glowing blue blade became more and more radiant. Soon, I had to shield my eyes just to block the bright light. As I closed in on the bottom of the stairs, I felt the blade strengthen in my hand, as if it was preparing for the worst possible scenario. I prepared myself, too, thinking of the scales and the banging and slamming that had rocked the whole dungeon just moments before.

Then, as I neared the final step, I heard a strong, familiar voice: “You can’t hold us here forever, Gaizra!”

The response was just as strong, however leathery. I was reminded of the hiss of a snake, but wasn’t sure why: “I can do as I please, King Jacob,” it retorted. “I will hold you here until nothing is left of you but bones. And when that happens, Your Majesty, I will use them to pick my teeth as I lounge on the throne that is RIGHTFULLY MINE!” The voice degraded into dry, raspy cackles.

“That throne is mine, Gaizira,” the first voice shot back. “You know I won it fair and square and you know the citizens of this kingdom will never let you get away with usurping it in this vile manner.”

“That’s IF they ever find out,” the second voice countered. “I will tell them that you were a sick man, that you tried to fight your disease to the very end, but there was nothing to be done to save you. And, with your son, the Prince, nowhere to be found, I merely ASSUMED the position out of loyalty and allegiance to your memory, my dear friend.” The second voice dripped with disdain and sarcasm. A chill ran down my spine.

“My suh--My son! My son will come for us!” the fist voice shouted.

“You can carry on all you want, no one will ever hear you from way down here...”

“And the fiery serpent was slain by the prodigal son! The town’s people rejoiced, for they had been saved from a fate worse than death!” The familiar voice struggled to be heard.

“Your prophecy will do you no good, King Jacob! What good is a story in deciding one’s fate?”

Unable to contain myself, I jumped to the foot of the stairs and ran into the room. “Halt!” I screamed. “Move no further. Your time has come!”

That’s when the reality of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks. I glanced about the room, taking in my surroundings. I saw both my parents chained by the wrists to shackles in the wall, their clothes torn and soiled. My mother was passed out, no doubt from terror and exhaustion, and my father struggled against his chains. To the side, leaning against the wall, was a bright crimson dragon, the size of three football players. A stream of smoke trickled from his left nostril he looked both enraged and bored at the same time.

“Well, look who we have here!” the dragon laughed. “And I thought you had disappeared for good into the ‘Other World.’ And here, you are, back again.” Gaizra possessed a near astonished look in his bright yellow eyes. “Of course,” he continued. “I’m not terribly surprised. After all, I did send my demons after you. Well, after your parents, first. They apparently didn’t put up much of a fight.”

“You monster,” I hissed. I glanced at my parents, chained up against the wall of the dungeon. My mom was still knocked out cold, but my father was very much awake and very much delirious. His eyes rolled about in his head and his mouth drooped open, like he had been drugged.

“I’m the monster?” Gaizra cried. “I’m the monster? I am the heartless beast when you were the one, noticing that they were absent this morning, decided to think nothing of it, and went on your merry little way to play with your friends in that disgusting swamp!”

I felt the blood drain from my face. Had I taken my parents for granted? Was I inconsiderate enough to think that nothing was wrong when, clearly something was? My mind raced for clues from that morning that suggested something out of the ordinary.

“Don’t listen to him, son,” my father whispered feebly. “It’s a dirty trick. He only wants you to question yourself so he’ll win.”

“Shut up!” Gaizra screamed. My father flinched, gripping his eyes tight. For the first time, I saw my father’s weakness and it sent a stream of terror mixed with compassion down my spine. I was too young to witness this, too young to be thrown into this situation, but I had to be brave. Brave enough to save my parents who needed me more at this point than I ever wanted to admit I needed them.

Gaizra continued: “You see, it was you I really wanted. Your parents are old and will probably die soon. Besides, they’re easy to destroy. But you, you I had to lure you into my realm. You, I will fight. You will be my greatest victory.”

“You lured me here?”

“Yes, I lured you here. Don’t you think it’s a little strange that only you could see the pile of my bones out there in the swamp? Don’t you think it’s strange how quickly that cyclone picked up and don’t you think it strange that you somehow, miraculously survived?” he demanded. Again, the realization came like a pile of bricks. I took a step back. “Yes, my minions deserve a raise don’t they for bringing you here so unsuspectingly!”

I mustered all my courage, opened my mouth and shouted once more, “You-- your time has come, Dragon! I have come to free my parents and send you into the great beyond!” I aimed my sword straight at him and charged. The blue glow of the blade danced across his red hide, making them look as though they were on fire. In a moment, Gaizra jumped from his relaxed position on the wall to a defensive stance, inhaled deeply and exhaled a fireball the size of two suns. I ducked behind a nearby pile of boulders, but he followed me, gearing up again to expel another fire ball.

“Timothy! The shield!” my father called across the room. I stopped and looked up. “Use the shield, son!” He motioned to a pile of silver armory in the corner of the room. It had been rusted over by years of neglect, but they were all seemed useable. I ran as fast as I could toward the shield, plucked it from its place on the pile and ran at Gaizra, shield in front of me, sword drawn and held above my head.

Gaizra blew another fireball, this one bigger than the last. It propelled forward, its power and light overwhelming the whole room. As it struck my shield, however, it dissipated into smoke, dusting me with grey ash.

“Cute trick, young man,” Gaizra laughed. “But will your tricks and games save you from this?” He stomped his foot on the ground and a tremor ran through the room. For a moment, all was still. Then--as if propelled by Gaizra’s specific instructions, a crack ran from just in front of his feet straight to the space on the ground where I stood in wait.

Then-- the crack shifted and half the floor dropped out, creating a giant gorge, and sending me spiraling into the darkness. I flailed as I fell, losing my key the shield and sheath for my sword. This time, I was sure to be a goner. It was over. I screamed as I tumbled further and further.

In a moment’s panic, I swung my sword around, and jabbed it into the side of the cliff, where it stuck, dangling me off the side. For the time being, I was safe, but how long could my grip last?

Gaizra took a powerful step to the edge of the cliff, causing more rubble to break free and fall on my head, weakening my grip on the sword. He laughed heartily. “Is this the prodigal son so prophesied? The one who will restore peace and order to the kingdom? I think not!” He stamped once more on the edge of the cliff, sending a quake through the dungeon floor. Then, he reared up and shot a fireball into the ceiling. “Next one’s for you, buck-o!” he called down to me. He lifted his head once more and inhaled deeply.

That’s when I remembered the bottle and the label on the bottle and a picture from one of the books I looked at in the library. This was not nondescript liquid, but the liquid that would bring total annihilation to evil. I was not the one to bring peace and stability back to the kingdom. It was this bottle.

I unhooked the potion from my belt and uncorked it with my teeth. A sweet aroma of lilies of the valley and amber seeped from the bottle lip and the liquid inside began to fizz like fresh soda pop. I knew this bottle would bring freedom and peace and prosperity. I knew it would save the kingdom and elevate me to hero. I looked at my grip on the bottle and summoned all the energy I could. I would have to make the shot a good one if I was going to destroy the dragon. One misaim or underestimation of distance would destroy me forever. With the bottle neck gripped tightly in my hand, I wound my arm back and lobbed it over the edge of the cliff. It crashed right at Gaizra’s feet, spreading the liquid through the dirt and straight for the spot where he stood, where it began to eat away at his fire red talons, moving up his legs, reducing his powerful presence into ice blue smoke. “I will get you for this boy!” Gaizra screamed over the side. “You have not seen the last of me, yet!” An inhuman scream filled the dungeon and I knew that I had destroyed the evil beast that had been chasing me the entire time.

I hoisted myself up over the side of the cliff, grabbing for handholds along the way. At the top, all that was left of Gaizra was a charred, black smudge on the spot where he stood and a single waft of smoke.

“Timothy!” my father called out to me from across the room.

I ran toward my parents to free them from their shackles. Without the key, I knew I would have to perform some miraculous feat, but found them to be brittle, their strength weakened by the tremor. I quickly broke my parents free and they fell on me with hugs of gratitude.

Peace had been restored to the kingdom. Gaizra was dead, his dastardly plans thwarted. And all occurred without the knowledge of the townspeople. The crisis was averted. The prophecy had come true. The extent of the prophecy, however, I was still unsure of. Truth was, there were still questions I had not had the time to address, still confusion. I had woken up that morning in Chesterfield Valley and would be going to sleep in a strange land, the heir to a strange fortune, dictated by a strange prophesy. I decided I would have to broach the subject somehow, sometime. That time was on the tail end of the gigantic battle of which I was the victor, after my parents had had a chance to recover.

“Uh...father?” I inquired. We were sitting in the King’s grand study, relaxing after thwarting impending disaster.

“Mm...yes?” he replied, not putting down the book in his hands.

“Where did I come from?”

He peered at me over his spectacles, inquisitively. “Timothy, I hardly believe you are old enough to have this discussion.”

“I mean, I woke up this morning in Chesterfield Valley. You and mom weren’t there, so I left for the school aaanndd...”

I looked at my father. His expression had changed from shock to genuine concern. “Timothy, are you feeling well? Should we call the doctor?”

“No. Dad, I-- I am trying to ask you something important!”

“I see that, Timothy, but I have to tell you I am rather perplexed! Where is Chesterfield Valley? Why were you going to school?”

“We live in Chesterfield Valley, Dad!”

“No, Timothy, we live here. I am the king of this land and you are crowned prince. Now stop with this nonsense!”

“I’m just trying to figure out how all this happened!”

My father regarded me for a moment, then: “You want to know how all this--” he motioned all around him-- “came about, eh?”

“Uh, yes,” I replied.

“Well, son, that’s quite a long story,” he admitted. “You see, I’ve known Gaizra all my life.”

My eyes widened. “Has he always been this evil?” I asked.

“No. In fact, we were best friends as young boys. Except, back then, he was human like you and I and ‘Gaizra’ was nothing more than a legend. You see, it’s prophesied that of two young men of noble birth would compete for the crown, one would come by it honestly, the other would go down the path of evil. And, from that path, the evil would spawn a fearsome beast, Gaizra.

“As children, we Gaizra--only then, he was known as Prince Fredrick Duke--were inseparable. We were educated together, pursued sport together, spent every waking moment together. And, as it was prophesied that one of us would become evil and the other would achieve righteousness, we neither of us were left unattended.”

“But,” I interjected. “If it was prophesied, what could supervision accomplish?”

“Ah, you see, it was understood that evil would spawn in an instant and when that happened, the attending nobleman would spring into action and destroy the evil one with the very potion you used to destroy Gaizra.

“Trouble is, we soon became weary of such constant supervision. Sure, we were not limited by the supervision. As we were royals, we could do as our heart’s desired, but you can imagine how tiresome it got, having a person constantly walking two paces behind us. And the people engaged in the task, they were bloody bores, the lot of them.”

“So what did you do?” I was not unsympathetic to my father’s troubles as a young boy. I knew all too well the pain of constant adult supervision and the threat of punishment. Especially seeing that I wasn’t what adults called “a troubled case.”

“Well,” Father continued. “One day, Freddy and I got it in our heads that we would evade our chaperone and explore together, which wasn’t difficult. The man they had engaged at that time was clueless and stupid and was always falling asleep during whatever post he was assigned. So, we lead the man out to a sunny field, with the pretense that we wanted to practice archery, or some other nonsense, waited until he fell asleep in the afternoon sun and scampered off in search of adventure.

“Now, it was a well-known fact that in the forrest just past the castle gardens stood an ancient, enchanted well with some of the most beautiful crystal blue water one could ever lay eyes on. Legend had it, however, that whomever looked into the well would see the most beautiful thing in the world and become so transfixed that they would fall into the well and be turned into the most ugly thing in the world.

“Well, adventure is always in short supply when you are limited by the privilege of royalty, so Freddy and I decided we would scope out this well and see if the legends were really true. It wasn’t hard to find.”

“Did you look into the well?”

“We did. And it was true, the reflection in the water was so beautiful that each of us almost instantly fell into a trance so strong we could barely remove ourselves. We somehow managed, however, and that’s when an idea hit me.

“In school, we were taught something called ‘the Philosopher Games.’ These were games that were designed to challenge one’s psychological power more than any battle or physical competition ever could. I bet Freddy that I could best him in three areas: Mental Acuity, Observation, and Calm. We both of us had been celebrated as high achievers in each of these categories and--as I was highly competitive as a young man, and Freddy was, too-- we both desperately wanted to see which one of us was superior, if only slightly. We set the stakes: the loser had to relinquish his most prized possession to the winner and would be subjected to wearing a sign that said ‘Mentally Inferior in Every Way’ for one whole week.

“We set off, challenging one another’s mental strength and dexterity. But, the oddest thing, every challenge came out as a tie between the two of us. Neither boy was mentally superior, neither boy was inferior. By the end, we were frustrated. Something like this never seemed to happen during organized games. So-- Freddy suggested the final challenge be one of great challenge, even for the wisest men in the kingdom. We would both stare into the beautiful, shining waters of the enchanted well and whomever could stare longer would win our game.

“I didn’t last very long. But Freddy, he was not content with staring into the water longer than I. No, he had to stare the longest of all. I jumped down after a few moments, ready to relinquish a small golden statue of King Arthur, my most beloved possession of all. Freddy stayed, however. He stayed perched on the lip of that well for near thirty minutes before I had to pull him from the side. If I hadn’t he would have been taken forever.”

“So he was ok?”

“Not exactly,” my father admitted. “He was never quite the same. He seemed locked in some kind of daze that was hard to break through. When I did, he would get angry with me, saying he was on the verge of greatness and that I, like always, ruined it for my own personal accomplishment. He said he never wanted to see me again, that I had ruined our friendship and that I should just leave him alone before I destroyed anything else.

“I wasn’t about to give up that easy, though. I knew something was wrong with Freddy and I knew he really didn’t want to end our friendship. So, one morning, I woke up early and waited for him in the park just outside of his wing of the palace. I had been sitting there for almost an hour when Freddy finally emerged from his room and walked, in a trance toward the forrest.

“Naturally, I followed him--right into the forrest and straight to the well. He knew the way well, even though we had only been out there once and even though it didn’t seem like he was paying much attention to where his feet were taking him.”

“Was he hypnotized?” I asked.

“I don’t doubt it,” my father laughed sadly. “His movements were so stiff and automatic that it seemed like his mind was in another land and some other creature was guiding him toward the well.

“At one point, I thought I had lost him. He was moving so swiftly, and though I had been training just as much as he had in preparation for the Philosopher Games, I could not keep up with him. He turned a corner and was gone, as if he was trying to escape me. A series of twists and turns and I made it to the well where I found him, standing on a boulder, just next to the well, staring into the waters bellow. I watched, afraid to speak to him, afraid of what he might do if he found out that I was following him. I watched as a single fire-red demon paw reached up out of the well and pulled him in by the neck. I was terrified.”

“What did you do?”

“I did nothing. I thought of running to find our chaperone, but was afraid of the consequences of our actions. I most certainly couldn’t dive in after him, either. So, I stood there and stared as he gave in to the creature bellow the water. And I stood there and stared as he changed into the most fearsome beast in all the land: Gaizra, the Dragon, and shot from the mouth of the well into the sky as if shot from a cannon.”

“And then what happened?” I was riveted. I had always enjoyed a good story and my father told them well.

“I became the sole heir to the throne. Gaizra flew away to the distant mountain regions and I was certain that I would never see him again. Life went on, I married your mother, we had you. That was the end of it. Or so we thought, you see, you cannot expect the evil to forget the wrongs he believes were done him and Gaizra was no different. I believe he harbored his resentment for a very long time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike, destroy me, and ascend to the throne like he believed he was destined to do. This is where you came in.”

“That still doesn’t explain why I was gone for so long,” I countered. “Why did I leave? Where did I go? How did I get back?” It didn’t seem possible, but I was more confused than ever, and more convinced that only one of my realities was true, but not sure which.

“That, my son, is a topic for another day. You look tired, as well you should be. We have had a long day. I think it’s time for bed.”

“But know this,” he continued. “Gaizra is not gone. Unfortunately he won’t be until a hero that is truly worthy defeats him in the Philosopher Games. That hero is you, my son. You will see him again, when you least expect it. He will try to best you in wits and power, but you must stay strong.”

“But, what are the Philosopher Games, exactly?” I demanded, feeling like I was about to take a test on something I did not know.

“Just as I said--” my father cleared his throat. “They are a competition that tests your mental and physical wits. You will know them when you encounter them. Now, to bed, Young Prince. You will succeed, as it is prophesied.”

“But, Dad---”

“To bed, Timothy. It’s late.”

Indeed, the bright sun had since sunk bellow the horizon, showering the castle in dark, velvety night, the most enchanted darkness I had seen in my life. Something about this life as a prince, heir to a royal fortune, and powerful beyond my wildest dreams was more attractive than Chesterfield Valley, though I knew staying here meant leaving my old life behind.

I still had many questions and wasn’t sure my father could answer them. He knew legend and prophesy, but when it came to hard, cold fact and physics, he was utterly lost and confused. I would have to take my questions to someone else. Someone wiser, more powerful. But, as my father said, that was not a task for that evening. My only task was to get a good night’s sleep and resume my search the next day.

My royal bed was something truly to behold. It was grand and fine and bigger and more comfortable than my twin bed in Chesterfield Valley. As I waited for sleep to overtake me, I looked at the walls of my room, where tapestries depicting famous battles and legends and royal accomplishments were depicted. I saw King Arthur pulling the sword from the stone, Alexander the Great trumpeting across unknown territories, Saint Constantine giving up his crown to become a monk after many years of tyranny. I wondered what I would become as king, if stories would be told about me, slaying Gaizra or if I would fade into the background to make room for more important royalty.

But, maybe I wouldn’t maybe I was destined for greatness as was prophesied. Maybe I would lead the way into a new era of peace and prosperity for the kingdom. Maybe---

I felt my eyelids drooping under the wait of exhaustion. These were all questions for a later time, but for now, I felt my destiny stretch out before me. Maybe I would never make it back to Chesterfield Valley, but I didn’t mind. If faced with the option, I would take Timothy the Scholar over Crazy Timmy, any day. I lowered my head into the soft embrace of my pillow, let a yawn escape from my lips, and settled in for a long, restful night. The last thing I remember, I was bathed in the darkness of my closed eyes, awaiting sleep.

Then--it came quickly: a black void of rest. I floated in a space between wakefulness and dreams, questions and answers, uncertainty and destiny.

Sometime in the night, I was jostled awake by what felt like a gigantic earthquake. I sat up quickly and surveyed the room around me. It was pitch black--the fire in the fireplace had gone out--and I saw nothing.

“Hello?” I called out, more afraid that there would be a response than if there wasn’t. I stared into the dark. It had to be a dream, I was sure of it. It was a dream, just another figment of my overactive imagination. Honesty would be so disappointed in me.

Just then-- I saw two floating gold orbs, hovering above the foot of my bed. They seemed to be moving together, as if they were two parts of an even bigger whole. They began to get bigger and clearer in the dark--as if they were lighting themselves and the space around them. I started to wonder, as time drew on, whether they were staring back at me. It seemed that the longer I stared, the more intensely they stared back. Panic ran through my veins. I couldn’t tell exactly what they were, but I knew in my soul that they were not good. They were magic, but not the enchanted magic I had read about in storybooks that helped the hero defeat the villain, but the dark magic that helped the villain fight the hero. I slid back up against my head board and drew my knees up under my chin. I thought if maybe I made myself small enough, the orbs would go away.

They didn’t however, blinking in amusement at my feeble attempts to hide. “Teeheehee!” A giggle cracked through the darkness. “You think you can escape me? Think again, young prince!”

Shapes began to form about the yellow orbs, framing them and creating the face, neck, and body of a squat, little, scaly monster, hovering just above my bed. It rolled in space with laughter. “I am the little monster that fetches things! I have never failed a task once, I don’t expect to fail with you!” The monster reached two gnarled paws at my ankles and pulled me up closer to him, until I was face to face with his foul breath. I coughed, turning my head to avoid inhaling the stench of rotting swamp.

“You thought you were victorious this afternoon, eh?” the monster sneered. “Well, master has news for you. Master bid me fetch you. I have never failed a task in all my life!” I wasn’t about to ask him how long his life had been, figuring by the stench and the withered paws, he was on something like his third century of life.

“Look at me!” he demanded. “Look at me straight in the eyes, BOY!” He shook me by the shoulders and stared straight into my eyes. I quickly clapped my eyes shut, trying to avoid his magical gaze, but something snapped them open and he gripped my gaze tighter. I could feel myself drifting away. The room I had fallen asleep in slowly faded away and in its place, rose great, frigid stone walls.

I fell to the dirt ground with a thud, right on top of a pile of some sort of stone or-- I looked behind me at the place where I landed. There I recognized on account of the human skull resting just inches away.

“Uhhh...” I cried and scampered to my feet. This was the place of my nightmares, I was sure of it. The room was frigid like a basement, though I was certain it wasn’t any basement I had seen in my long 10 years of experience. Besides, there was no ceiling, just a black void straight above my head. The stone walls were decorated with chain shackles, restraining those who had long since gone from the world of the living. These were alternated with flickering candle sconces, making the ghastly sight just visible enough to strike the beginnings of a wave of terror in my heart. A tiny whimper escaped my lips without hesitation.

“What, afraid of my decorating scheme? Haha,” a voice hissed behind me. It was a voice I had heard before. “Did you think you could defeat me with your potion?”

I spun around to face him. There--Gaizra as strong as he had been when first I encountered him. “I have to say, it was cute the way you came steaming in to save your parents, but it wasn’t good enough-- not by a long shot!” Gaizra bellowed a thunderous laugh, crouching to save his breath.

I mustered all my courage and strength: “I was just getting warmed up, Dragon!” I shouted across the room, ready for a fight.

“Don’t make me laugh, boy!” Gaizra shot back. “You may be quite skilled with your cute little potions, but can you survive MY dungeon without them? I think not!” He whirled around and stomped toward the heavy metal door he came in by.

“Running away so soon?” I called out, hoping my uncertainty and fear could not be read on my voice.

Gaizra spun back around and, in an instant, was a mere inch away from me, his overwhelming presence encroaching on mine. I coughed at the stench of his breath. It smelled like a million barbecues, grilling rancid meat.

“Do you really think I want to kill you now?” he demanded. “Where’s the fun in that? No, ‘Heir to the Throne,’ I am going to keep you here until you rot like those who came before you.” He motioned at the skeletons around us.

“That’s lazy,” I whispered. “My father will come looking for me. He and his men will save me and you’ll be sorry.”

“Oh, I doubt it,” Gaizra sneered. “As we speak, your parents are at home, asleep in their comfy feather beds, completely unaware of your peril. And, you’ve disappeared before, they won’t give a moment’s thought to searching for you, rascal! All I really have to do is wait. Their

memory of you will rot faster than your body, then when I next storm the castle, they will be helpless little doves. Destroying them will be a walk in the park and I will be king forever!”

With that, Gaizra spun back around and disappeared through the heavy metal door, which slammed shut with a clang and I was alone. I surveyed my surroundings: nothing but brittle bone and rock was left me. None of which was strong enough to break open any entrance to the dungeon, door or window. I was stuck.

I approached the wall where a skeleton was shackled with heavy chain and handcuffs. The arms were extended straight up, pointing toward the ceiling; the skull drooped down on to the ribcage, the jaw slack as if mid-scream when the person had died. The look of the skeleton and the thought that this was once a person sent a shiver down my spine. I moved on, examining the stones that constructed my prison, each carefully placed and secured by thick, centuries old mortar.

My hand landed on a stone that was not so neatly encased in concrete. I grasped it, curling my fingers around its shape. From there, I looked up. It seemed as though every so often was a similar stone, creating a rock climbing wall all the way up to a single small window that let the sun’s light wash over just a small corner of the room. I recognized the effect from Jimmy Sisto’s ninth birthday party at the rock climbing place. Each of the party guests were given harnesses to wear that were clipped to a long rope, leading up to a pulley at the ceiling. The other end of the rope was attached to the harness of an employee so none of us would fall. Being so young, only a couple of us were able to get higher than a few feet. I was one of the unlucky ones at the start, grasping the bottom stone, putting the toe of my tennis shoe in the one just below it, and lifting myself up a couple feet before my arms and legs gave out, causing me to hang in mid-air while my attendant slowly led me down to the ground. It was discouraging to say the least and each kid was only given a few minutes to play around. I remember watching Jimmy and couple other boys finally get the hang of it and climb to the very top of the wall. I figured I would never have to do this again, if I didn’t want to.

I grasped the stone a little harder and tensed my bicep, hoping that I could lift myself up off the floor. The next stone up wasn’t too far away and I thought if I could swing my other arm upwards, I could grasp it.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you,” a familiar voice hissed. I let go of the stone and swung around. There, across the room, hovering a foot off the floor was the demon that had brought me to this place.

He looked a little bit like Gaizra, though he was much smaller with a paunchy, little round stomach, feet that were too big for his height, and tiny little wings that flapped quickly, trying to support his weight. It was as though he were the rough draft of Gaizra, like something didn’t turn out quite right and whomever had created him had to start over.

He came closer. “Master doesn’t like it when you run. He says it’s no fun to chase, only to play.”

I backed up against the wall, sandwiching the hanging skeleton with my back. Terror gripped at my stomach like a rotten piece of food, but I didn’t dare scream. I reached behind me. My fingers brushed across the poor soul behind me and then something cold, rough, and slick. I gripped it with all my strength. One quick tug and the chain pulled from the wall, dislodging a few stones. I slipped out from in front of the demon and, swinging the chain over my head, let it go.

The chain soared through the air, carrying the skeleton with it, and hit the demon over the head, knocking him from his labored spot mid-air. He fell to the ground with a thud, knocking his head on a nearby pile of rocks.

“You fool! You in for it, now!” he screamed from the ground.

I whipped the chain back to me, dislodging the the skeleton, which flew back behind me, coming to rest against the far wall. I took hold of both ends and rushed up to just behind the demon, who was still struggling to get up. I kicked him in the back, sending him forward to where I could loop the chain around his thick, little neck like a scarf, and pull. He grasped at the chain around his neck, desperately trying to wriggle free, but I tightened my grip. I wasn’t about to let this one win if I could help it.

I pulled the chain tighter and the demon let out an ear-piercing scream to the heavens. I pulled tighter and tighter until I felt something give and the demon went limp. He slumped to the floor in a heap and I gingerly stepped over his body. I never knew I had this strength in me!

I turned back to the wall with the loose stones and, tipping my imaginary cap to the skeleton whom I had set free and who was now sitting sentient in the opposite corner, began to scale the wall toward the window. Stone by stone, I hoisted myself up the wall, remembering my father’s age old wisdom to not look down, nor up while your climbing a great height, unless you want to become very aware of the actual height you are ascending. I was careful of my breath, praying that none of the stones would give way to my weight, knowing that this was yet another thing I had never accomplished before this day.

I was more than three-quarters of the way up the wall, on the home stretch toward the window and my freedom when the metal door swung open on the other side of the dungeon. It was Gaizra, alerted by the screams of his minion, coming to destroy me, I was sure of it.

He burst in and, extending his wings, flew toward me right at my height. “Fool! I was going to be benevolent and let you live a few days more before destroying you, but I have changed my mind!” he bellowed. Gaizra reached out and clenched his massive scaly paw around my midsection, pinning me to the wall. “Little boys do taste good on a barbecue!” he laughed.

I clutched the loose stones in my reach and struggled to free myself from his grasp. “Goody! A fight!” Gaizra screamed.

“Yeah, and one you won’t win, Gaizra!” I called out to him. I pulled and pulled, to no avail. As I struggled, Gaizra began to laugh, more maniacally than before. To him, my efforts were hysterical. He reared back and let out a massive fireball toward the ceiling in glee and also preparation for my vanquish. Mine would be a death by fire. The fireball swirled up and up into the rafters, setting the exposed wood beams ablaze. They charred and popped under the heat and soon, the whole roof of Gaizra’s lair was on fire. In haste, I bared my teeth and clomped on to his paw. He let out a blood-curdling scream and let go.

I had just enough time in my fall to grasp on to one of the stones in the wall, jimmy it loose and chucked it at Gaizra’s head, right between his eyes. The stone made instant impact, knocking Gaizra off balance, sending him flailing toward the dungeon floor. I grasped another stone, this one larger than the first and pried it out of the cracking mortar. By this time, the flames had destroyed all the wood in Gaizra’s ceiling, sending it hurtling down toward the floor in nature’s interpretation of flaming arrows. One managed to pin Gaizra’s crimson right wing to the dirt floor while still others continued to fall, aimed straight for the spot on the ground where the beast lay, wounded and unable to move. I held my selected stone loosely, like they taught us in little league and lobbed it straight for Gaizra’s head, knocking him completely unconscious. This gave me ample time to scramble up the wall and out the window, where I pitched myself off the side and into a sparkling blue pond.

On the opposite bank, I watched as Gaizra’s lair burned down, stone by stone, creating a molten pile of rubble. As the stones charred black and crumbled, they each let loose a lost soul, each of passed kings and princes who had been captured by Gaizra’s evil minions and tortured until their final days. They were gone, but I had vanquished the evil beast who was well on his way to the depths of the underworld for all eternity: a fire starter tortured by fire. There was a bit of poetic justice in that.

I lay my head back and pointed my face to the sun and wondered how I would be remembered in history. Would I be Timothy the Scholar? Or, better still, would I be known as Timothy the Resourceful? The sun shone brightly, warming my face and drying my clothes almost instantly. In short order, I drifted to sleep, victorious and celebrated in my dreams for the future.

“Beep!...Beep!...Beep!...”

“Timothy, dear, you’ll be late!”

“Beep!...Beep!...Beep!”

My door swung open and Mom strode swiftly into my room. She quickly drew back my curtains, letting the morning sun burst through the window.

“Timothy, dear. You need to get up and get a move on. Remember, you promised you’d help with the recycling event at the school today. You have to get up now and get a move on!”

I let out a labored moan. I had just fallen asleep and now it was day, again. I rolled over to face my wall.

“Timothy, I’m going to count to three,” I heard my mom say. Somehow I knew she was standing at the edge of my bed, her hands on her hips, a stern expression in her eyes, like she always did when she was peeved like this.

“Ten more minutes, please,” I mumbled.

“No. Now. Get up, get out. You will be late and, what’s more, you’ll make me late. You know I promised your grandmother I would be to her house at ten o’clock this morning. Now, I will have none of this lazing around! This is the exact attitude that earned you that C- to being with!”

I moaned again. The morning sun shone right through my window and broke into my eyes. I wouldn’t be able to stay asleep for much longer.

“My goodness, I don’t have time for this,” Mother sighed. “Get up. I’m leaving. You can get your own breakfast. I’ll see you later this afternoon. Be sure to say ‘hi’ to your teacher for me!”

And with that, she was gone. A bit later, I heard the front door slam, her car start and peel out of the driveway, gunning down the street. Mom always drove a little bit too fast when she was afraid of being late.

I pulled myself up on my elbows, then to a seated position.

“Beep!...Beep!...Beep!” my alarm called out, ensuring that I would be awake, now permanently. I swung my feet over the side of the bed and got up to turn my alarm off. Standing in the middle of the room, I stretched my arms up over my head and surveyed the humble bedroom I had lived in for the past ten years of my life. I had decorated the walls with posters of famous baseball players and other athletes, a theme that was reflected in my sheets, decorated with sports balls of all kinds. This was a far cry from the royal bedroom of my dreams, but it was home. I stepped over the dirty clothes that littered my floor toward my dresser where something new was resting: it was a stuffed toy dragon with bright red fur and yellow eyes. Its smile was wide and gaping and betrayed only a few white felt teeth, just vicious enough to be a dragon, but not so many to make it terrifying. On its lap, there was a white note card that read:

To Timmy, from Grandpa Jake.  
Good luck today!  
Love, Dad.

Smiling, I pulled open my dresser drawer and selected a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. Today would be a good day.